

Marcela Méndez

# Mirella Vita

The indefatigable seeker

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## Preface<sup>1</sup>

In writing the preface to this book by Marcela Mendez on Mirella Vita, I cannot help remembering (with a smile) Mirella's words: "What a shame that harpists never read prefaces!"

Maybe this was true some years ago, but I think things have now changed.

My thanks go to Marcela (also on behalf of all her students of course) for this marvellous book, dedicated to a great woman who apart from being an excellent teacher was also an essential point of reference for all those who wished and still wish to gain awareness of the vast extent and beauty of harp repertoire.

Indeed, it is thanks to the meticulous work of Mirella, who truly devoted her life to researching and reinstating totally unknown harp music, that all of us harpists can be proud of our repertoire.

ANNA LORO

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<sup>1</sup> Originally written in Italian.





## Introduction

It was 2003 when I went to Italy for the first time. I did not know that this trip would be a turning point in my whole life.

One afternoon in October I visited Clara Rocco's store "Musica d'Arpa". I was looking for a place with a harp to practise on, because I had planned to stay three months in Milan. Clara, with her usual generosity, told me that she knew a great harpist who would be happy to help me. And so the next day, I went with Clara to via Lomellina to meet Mirella Vita in her apartment. It was a beautiful meeting, and I felt an instant connection with Mirella.

Mirella immediately consented to allow me to study on her Wurlitzer harp which had belonged to Carmela Appiani who was the harpist at La Scala and who died in 1972. Mirella inherited this harp and she was very fond of it.

The next day I went to study at her house, and I did so every afternoon for the duration of my stay in Italy. I saw from the corner of my eye that when I started studying, Mirella discreetly put a chair near the door and listened. Several days went by, until one afternoon she said "You play very well, but we could work to make you play even better and make your technique cleaner, if you like I can help you". And so it happened – for almost three months I worked every day with Mirella so as to perform what she called "il bel suono dell'arpa" ("the beautiful sound of the harp") and I had the great honour of being her last student.

The work we did together was one of the most wonderful gifts that life had prepared for me. With Mirella and her very exact ear I was able to reach a state of deep reflection on the harp, and at the same time a much deeper reflection on life itself, on art and on music.

We shared another passion: research and books. It was a synchronic meeting with a great artist and teacher, with an inspiring person, a very special human being. I travelled to Milan in 2003 without knowing that this meeting was awaiting me and that it would leave me deeply connected to Italy.

This study is not a comprehensive biography of Mirella Vita, but rather a collection of documents related to her life and work. She was a singular and unique woman. It is important that her legacy should be made known to younger harpists. This book provides an insight into the personality of an artist who as a performer, teacher, writer and researcher has already substantially influenced this generation of harpists and musicians.

MARCELA MÉNDEZ

Parana, Argentina

March 2019

## “Omissis dal Curriculum”<sup>2</sup>

The American writer Lee Masters, author of that fine book “Anthology of Spoon River”, tells us that the strangely named small town of Spoon River has an unusual cemetery where the inscriptions on tombstones tell the truth about the persons buried there instead of the usual hypocrisy.

I wonder what would be written on my headstone if I were a citizen of Spoon River.

Now that my career as a harpist has been over for a while, I am happy to look back on it with a smile. I have also enjoyed sculpting the words for my tombstone, as follows:

**MIRELLA VITA (1919-211?)<sup>3</sup>**

**HARPIST**

**NEVER HELD MASTER CLASSES  
OR SUMMER COURSES**

**NEVER SAT ON AWARDS COMMITTEES  
FOR COMPETITIONS**

I would like to have added “NEVER WON COMPETITIONS” but I wouldn’t be telling the truth required by this imaginary cemetery because when I was very young I won a prize competition awarded by a committee my teacher sat on.

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<sup>2</sup> Unpublished article by Mirella. The original in Italian is found at p. 13. I came across this piece of writing among the documents in Mirella’s archive. Not only does it illustrate her fine sense of humour, but above all it expresses what Mirella thought fundamental for harpists to pursue their musical career.

<sup>3</sup> The date she wrote for her death is another indication of her fine sense of humour.

But miracles only happen once. I entered competitions for RAI Turin, La Scala Milan, Turin Conservatoire and Verona Conservatoire. I didn't win them, but I didn't lose them either, maybe because a competition enables you to be heard by “Maestros” so that, with a bit of luck and talent, you can bypass the underhand tactics often used to gain a place.

In subsequent years, RAI Turin offered me a post unconnected to a competition and I could allow myself to refuse it. I played at La Scala on long and short term contracts as well as last-minute calls to play, without even rehearsing. I taught for ten years at the Turin Conservatoire, and a further twenty five years at Verona Conservatoire.

(Naturally I was on examination committees when I taught at the Conservatoires, but that was a different matter, involving normal evaluation of students.)

Once you have found a way of earning a living, it's a good thing not to rest on your laurels but rather to push ahead into the brighter part of your career, and enter into the world of concert soloists. It's certainly not an easy world because, as we well know, nothing is easy in music. But we can count on a powerful ally: our audience, which consists of people who are far from stupid. People who love good music and love the harp.

MIRELLA VITA

## *Omissis dal Curriculum*

*Secondo Lee Master, lo scrittore americano autore del bel libro “Antologia di Spoon River”, la piccola città dallo strano nome – appunto – di Spoon River ha uno strano cimitero le cui lapidi raccontano la verità invece dell’ abituale ipocrisia.*

*Che mai direbbe la mia stele, se io fossi una cittadina di Spoon River?*

*Ora che la mia carriera di suonatrice è finita da tempo, mi volto volontieri indietro con pensiero e me la ricordo con un sorriso. Mi sono anche divertita a scolpirmi la lapide, così:*

**MIRELLA VITA (1919-211?)**

**ARPISTA**

**NON TENNE MAI MASTER CLASSES**

**NÉ CORSI ESTIVI.**

**NON FU MAI DI COMMISSIONE IN CONCORSI.**

*Avrei voluto aggiungere: “NON VINSE MAI CONCORSI”, ma non direi la verità richiesta dall’ immaginario cimitero, dato che giovanissima, vinsi un concorso a premi della cui commissione faceva parte la mia Maestra.*

*Ma i miracoli non si ripetono. Partecipai senza vincere ai concorsi per la RAI di Torino, per la Scala di Milano; per il Conservatorio di Torino; per il Conservatorio di Verona.*

*Non li vinsi, ma non li persi, forse perchè un concorso è un’occasione per farsi ascoltare dai Maestri e, con un po’ di fortuna e di buon mestiere si può aver la meglio sui giochi occulti della caccia al posto.*

*Nel corso del tempo, alla RAI di Torino mi fu offerto un posto senza concorso e mi potei permettere di rifiutarlo; alla Scala suonai con contratti lunghi e brevi e per chiamate improvvise, senza prove; a Torino insegnai per dieci anni; a Verona per altre venticinque.*

*(Naturalmente come insegnante di Conservatorio fui di commissione di innumerevoli esami, ma questa è un’altra storia, una normale valutazione di scuola.)*

*Una volta conquistato un modo di campare, è bello non darsi per paghi, ma, anzi, avventurarsi nella parte più luminosa della carriera, il mondo dei concerti da solista. Non è certo un mondo facile, perchè ma, lo sappiamo bene, in musica nulla è facile. Ma possiamo contare su un possente alleato: il pubblico, che è tutt'altro che scemo, vuole la buona musica e ama l'arpa.*

MIRELLA VITA