

SESSION STORIES
Digital Works

Interviewee:	Skaila Kanga
Instrument:	Harp
Date of Birth:	1946
Place of Birth:	Mumbai. Grew up in Colindale, North London
Parents' Occupations:	Father: Engineer then a violinist. Mother and Skaila travelled from India to join father in London who started playing for the Philharmonic
Interview Location:	Westminster Archives on 8 th March 2023
Interviewer:	Maya Gottlieb
Summariser:	Margaret Perrin

Skaila grew up in a musical household and her father would be rehearsing all the time. She began piano lessons then started to go to Saturday morning school at the Royal Academy of Music when she was 11 years. She continued until she was 18. She started to learn the harp just before she left after seeing it being played in a concert by the Philharmonic orchestra. She noticed it was the only instrument being played by a woman so she thought it would make sense to learn it for the future.

She started her 3-year degree course at the Royal Academy but in the 2nd year got a call from the Philharmonic director to play over a summer season, she was then asked by the English National Ballet to do a tour then the BBC Concert Orchestra called to do some cover work. By 1967 Skaila was doing 6 or 7 broadcasts a week. She then went off to freelance and did a lot of work at Shepperton and Denham film studios, along with orchestral and chamber music.

In the 70s' she had her four children. Having a full-time nanny meant she could continue working but she didn't tour. She was in a group called the Nash ensemble and shifted into session work so she could be at home with the kids.

David Snell & John Marston were her fellow harpists that gave her a chance and her harp teacher's friend found a 2nd hand harp for her. She got lots of opportunities as there weren't many people of a similar age with the same skills.

Her first session was for Radio 2 in the Aeolian Hall in New Bond Street where there was a BBC studio. She was terrified. Her first film session was in Denham studio for the film *Oliver* (score by Johnny Greene). There was an orchestra of about 80 people and the film was projected on a screen and the conductor would conduct the musical cues. You'd have to redo it if you missed the moment. Skaila carried on doing a lot of films at Denham. She recalls *Ryan's Daughter* having 11 harps.

She remembers CTS in Wembley where a block of flats is now. It was built over a stream so always damp and the walls were multi-coloured. It had 4 studios, 1 of which was for film. She did a run through of the Les Mis arrangement there but when it went to the run of the show they cut the harp out.

In 1970 she got a call to turn up at the Trident studio in Soho from a cellist who'd done the arrangements for the Elton John album. Skaila had been at RA with Elton and she did all his sessions after this. Elton now a big benefactor at the RA.

Challenges – reading complicated parts, balancing work and family & switching styles on a sixpence, (eg. AM a library session, PM, Wallace & Gromit & evening a Mozart chamber concert). But loved the variety of session work and liked improvising. Need to be versatile, every day is so different.

The computer age changed everything and musicians are much less of a priority. You are at the mercy of the engineer who is feeding you music in one ear and you are playing in a booth on the click. Playing separately means you lose the instinct of an orchestra but you have to move with the times otherwise you've had it.

Getting work – fixers, composers, word of mouth. Always enough work to go round but if you turned down work for whatever reason you could be put 'in the fridge'. Skaila recalled a time when a fixer called Sid Sachs called her for a job when she was younger and her mother told him she was too ill. He didn't call again for 5 years. In those days there were 56 fixer names, now there's about 3. Now things more image based. Irrespective of musical skills need to look good on camera. Hierarchy of status of people who are brilliant been eroded by other needs. As a freelancer it's 'shockingly precarious' the most notice is a month.

Payment used to have to be within a month. For film sessions it was within a week. The Musician's Union was a useful body to bind everything together and to act on your behalf.

Predominately male but that started changing in the 90s. It was very formal when she first started - suits and ties. In the 90s a few women were brought in. You have to be ultra-professional especially as a woman. Colleagues all very supportive and co-operative, they know it's not all about them. You go into the job accepting the anonymity. Overall, the people are lovely and so appreciative and the friendships she's made over the years are very special.

She used to have a roadie who would move the harp to the different studios. She would get there early and tune up before anyone else arrived. As a harpist you have quite a lot of leeway. No-one really understands the harp so left to your own devices to an extent.

The sound of the harp is very special in Abbey Road studio one, AIR is a close second.

Most memorable film sessions were with genius composer Jerry Goldsmith and John Williams for his Harry Potter scores. The album that sticks out of the thousands is Joni Mitchell's 'Both Sides Now'. Knew it was a 'moment in time'. Played with Frank Sinatra for 2 weeks (Albert Hall and Royal Festival Hall). 'My Way' starts with a harp and he always finished on this before escaping from the fans. (Signed silver goblet/fish and chips story).

Ends on Skaila talking about how playing the harp is her hobby and how obsessed she is with sessions and how it's almost like an addiction. But, under the cloak of being a glamorous career it is hard work.