

Notes on *Will You Miss Me*  
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*Will You Miss Me* was written in 1979 in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, where I was, for a short time, a graduate student in composition. I don't remember the exact circumstances of the piece, but I believe it was done as a class presentation in Ben's tuning seminar. I performed it for the class (which maybe had, at most, five other students).

*Will You Miss Me* had confluent inspirations. In no particular order: my longstanding passion for and interest in the music of the Carter Family (or at least two-thirds of it: Sarah's singing, and Maybelle's guitar playing); Ben's music and friendship, which was one of the main reasons I went to Illinois in the first place; and an odd but maybe important urge to use my own voice in a piece (I rarely sing in public). Finally, I wanted to write a piece for this unusual instrument itself, the *transfer harp*, which fascinated me as an extraordinary musical instrument generally unsuited for performance.

I was a somewhat reluctant graduate student, not at all convinced that I belonged there. Nevertheless, I still tell my own students that a good way to pick a graduate school is to identify a composer whose music they find to be important and resonant, and identifies possibilities for their own work to explore. Although I was very interested in Sal Martirano and Herbert Brün's extraordinary work and thought, I confess that if Ben had not been at Illinois I probably would not have gone there. While there, I worked with Ben on a number of things: the "transcription" of early Partch scores; computer programs for just intonation theory (and other things); as a copyist for some of his scores; and my own music. Ben's compositional genius is well known. But, just for the record, Ben was (and still is to this day) a great teacher and friend.

Bill Colvig and Lou Harrison built the Harrison-Colvig transfer harp for pedagogical purposes, to be used in conjunction with the monochord to transfer scales, note-by-note to a multi-stringed instrument. Like the Partch *harmonic canon*, it was intended to be the "canon" ("set of rules") from which other instruments may be tuned. The design is inexpensive, repeatable and elegant. It has movable bridges, which sit on the soundboard (like a koto), 17 metal strings, tuning beads (behind the nut), and autoharp-style tuning pegs. There are three different methods for tuning each string: moving the bridge, sliding the bead, or turning the pegs. As I said, it was not intended for performance: the bridges tend to rattle on the soundboard, which is quite thin. But it was a very useful instrument for tuning and scale experimentation (especially in those pre-computer, pre-MIDI days). It allowed one to design scales, tune them note-by-note on the monochord, and *transfer* those pitches to the transfer harp.

I got one from Lou and Bill, around 1976, while living in Santa Cruz. I used it to work on some pieces (mainly *Piano Study #5 for Just Fender Rhodes* [see 1/1, *Quarterly Journal of the Just Intonation Network*, 4 (1), 1985]). But I'd often imagined using it in a piece as well, and finally did when I moved to Illinois. Some combination of the quiet, mystical Carter family tune, my association with Ben, and the relative safety of performing in front of just a couple of my

fellow graduate students emboldened me to arrange and sing the song. I tried to use the **idiosyncrasies** of the instrument: the ability to bow only the top or bottom string; using the movable bridges for a kind of vibrati; the quiet sounds of simply “touching” the strings. Aside from a general aesthetic reference, there are two specific, explicit acknowledgements to Ben and his work: the 13-limit tuning, and the short, completely-out-of-context quote from “Amazing Grace.”

I believe I only performed it twice: once in Ben’s class, and again at an informal composers’ concert. After I left Illinois, I rearranged the piece for the New Kanon New Music Ensemble (**a group** I was in, with Gary Schmidt, Andrew Newell, Pat Mundy and Dan Thomas). We performed that version many times on tour around the U.S. Other ensembles have performed the piece as well, often substituting other types of zithers, autoharps and the like for the transfer harp.

It’s hard to know, as we stumble through our artistic lives, where certain pieces and ideas come from. Influence is a frustratingly hazy idea, and maybe it’s not useful to spend too much time trying to pin things down. This is particularly true, I think, if one is lucky enough to have spent time in the **presence** of composers like Ben. But circumstance and inspiration can be as palpable as influence is vague: this piece specifically emanates from Ben’s class, and unabashedly pays homage to the art of a beloved mentor.

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