

books

BY LEAH DENNISON

String of Pearls

Melville Clark's multifaceted musical legacy to Syracuse gets star treatment in a new book

Harpist Linda Pembroke Kaiser didn't intend to write a book when she began two decades of research on Syracuse musician Melville A. Clark (1883-1953). But this man of many hats (and many harps)—former head of the 150-year-old family-owned Clark Music Company, inventor of the Clark Irish harp, and the first president of Syracuse's first symphony orchestra—inspired Kaiser to don a new hat of her own.

Her first book, *Pulling Strings: The Legacy of Melville A. Clark* (Syracuse University Press; \$29.95; 186 pages/softcover), reveals Clark's life and career as a musician, entrepreneur, inventor, collector and civic leader. Kaiser presides over a series of book signings for *Pulling Strings*, starting Wednesday, June 2, at the Onondaga Historical Association.

"He was so multifaceted," Kaiser says. "That's why I figured he was going to go into obscurity. People sort of knew who he was, they knew the {Clark Music} company," but there was much left untold. "The more I found out, the more I felt like I was the one who had to do it."

Pulling Strings draws from 55 linear feet of letters, photographs and primary documents—many of which are reproduced in the book and its appendices—from Special Collections at SU's Bird Library. Clark's son provided additional sources. "He saved so much material, he expected somebody to do this," Kaiser says. "I went through all these papers and got every single thing I thought was relevant."

She chose to sort them topically, according to different aspects of Clark's life and career, and came up with 34 categories. Talk about multifaceted. "I realized I couldn't make 34 chapters," Kaiser says. She was eventually able to consolidate the information to nine categories, which became the chapters of her book.

Turning the pages of *Pulling Strings* is like peeling the petals of an onion, revealing the layers of Clark one chapter at a time. He was, for example, a prolific inventor, of devices musical and otherwise, friend and musical partner to soprano and first daughter Margaret Woodrow Wilson, and a collector of

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Linda Kaiser: Local harpist extraordinaire has written *Pulling Strings*, about a musical founding father of Syracuse.

Melville A. Clark

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many things—phonographs, antique musical instruments and music boxes, one of which he presented as a gift to Princess Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace. Clark even designed a balloon offensive used by the British military in 1918 to distribute more than 1.2 million Allied propaganda pamphlets across Germany.

Perhaps Clark's best known contribution—and the one that first inspired Kaiser's research—was the invention of the Clark Irish harp, to which Kaiser devotes the third chapter of *Pulling Strings*.

The Clark harp is smaller, less expensive and more easily portable than the concert pedal harp Clark had learned on and played as a child. His design made the harp a more accessible and affordable instrument for many people. Ever the innovator, Clark continued to tinker with and tweak his harp design even after it had entered standard production around 1911.

When Kaiser began researching Clark, she says, "I was just curious, because I had owned {a Clark harp}." At the time she purchased it, she "didn't think to ask where it came from or the year, I didn't have any brains on it." By way of her early, casual research, she heard mention that Clark had done much more than invent the harp.

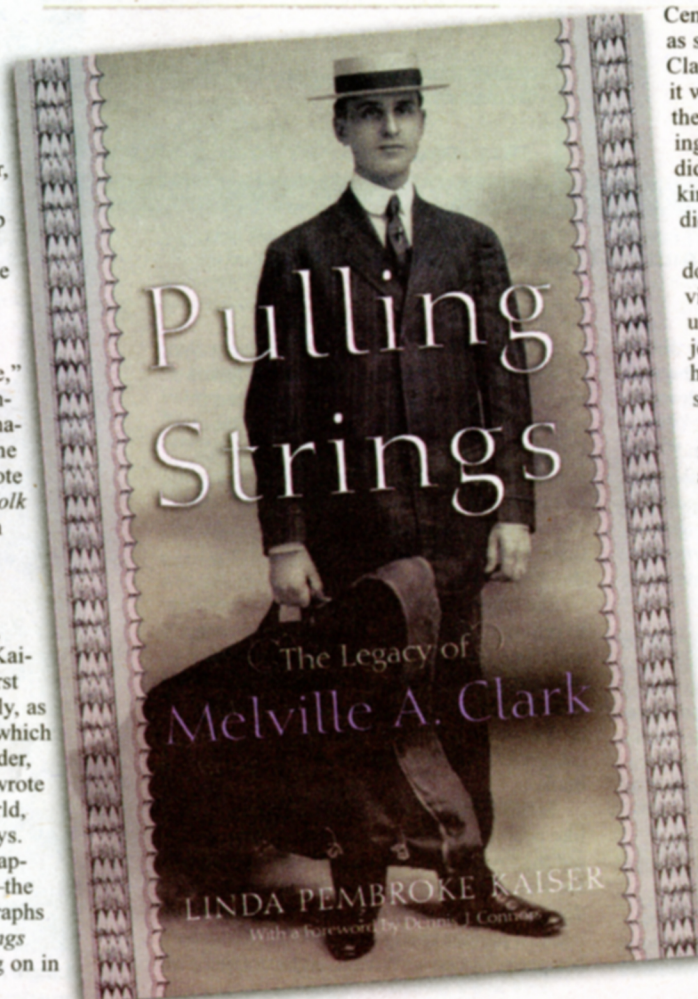
"I went to the OHA and poked around, and then I called his son, and he just kept answering my questions," Kaiser says.

"And then finally, he said, 'Why don't you come here and look through what I've got?' So I did."

Kaiser has written and lectured on Clark before writing *Pulling Strings*, but for smaller, specialized audiences. "I'd speak to an Irish cultural group about the Irish harp—nothing about the {nylon} strings or the symphony—then I'd speak to our harp association about the harp, then I'd speak to somebody else about something else," Kaiser says. "I wasn't ever connecting them; I just had information that was interesting to some particular group." She also wrote articles for the *International Folk Harp Journal*, each focused on just one element from Clark's complex legacy.

Pulling Strings is not an attempt to connect all the dots, either. "It's not a biography," Kaiser says. But it does, for the first time, present Clark more wholly, as a multidimensional character, which Kaiser hopes will reach a broader, more diversified audience. "I wrote {about Clark} for the harp world, but then I expanded it," she says.

A collection of historical snapshots both literary and literal—the volume contains many photographs and illustrations—*Pulling Strings* also chronicles what was going on in



Central New York, musically as well as socially and economically, during Clark's day. For example, "I thought it was interesting that the family kept their music company afloat by selling refrigerators," Kaiser says. "They didn't say, 'Oh, we can't sell those kinds of things.' They could, and they did."

That creative, outside-the-box can-do attitude is quintessentially Melville A. Clark—and, Kaiser hopes, a universally appealing quality. "My job now is to talk about it, and to have other people enjoy the book," she says. "That's my mission."

She hopes that people of different interests and backgrounds appreciate Clark's entrepreneurial spirit and fearlessness to try new things. After all, it certainly inspired harpist-turned-author Kaiser—who, incidentally, started out as a physical therapist.

The June 2 book signing takes place at the OHA, 321 Montgomery St., 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. For OHA information, call 428-1864. Subsequent signings are: June 10, 6:15 to 6:45 p.m., at Clark Music Co., 2922 Erie Blvd. E. (446-7020); June 17, 7 p.m., at Creekside Books & Coffee, 35 Fennell St., Skaneateles (685-0379); and Aug. 5, 7 p.m., at Barnes & Noble, 3454 Erie Blvd. E., DeWitt (449-2947). □