

Hip Harpist

Killing the Twee with Deborah Henson-Conant



When her parents rented a harp and tried to encourage young **Deborah Henson-Conant** to play it, she dismissed it as sissified. But a decade later, the half-dozen lessons she took got her a gig with her college band, which needed someone to play the instrument. She soon left classical music behind, lugging her six-foot concert harp into jazz clubs and jamming. But if you billed a show as featuring a “jazz harpist,” you probably wouldn’t get many more audience members than strings in the instrument, so Henson-Conant started singing as well.

Now the Grammy-nominated “hip harpist” wields her concert harp in venues where it’s seldom gone before, and also straps on and plugs in a cut-down version that she can strum, pluck and tune while belting out blues, boogie, pop, even gospel and show tunes in a sturdy alto voice, sometimes sounding like Sandy Denny (when she does a Celtic harp show), sometimes Carole King, sometimes Dianne Schuur, sometimes like a blues guitarist.

Henson-Conant, who appears at The Shedd on Tuesday, March 29, is an engaging stage presence, fond of telling stories and jokes in her one-woman show. She also performs with orchestras, including the Boston Pops. Maybe it took Joanna Newsom to finally kill the image of the harp as delicate, twee and old fashioned, but Henson-Conant is happy to dance on that outdated image’s grave.

Another string virtuosa hits town Thursday night, March 17, when **Sarah Chang** — who’s continued her artistic growth beyond her prodigy years, has played with most of the world’s major orchestras and is one of today’s leading violinists — joins the **Eugene Symphony** to perform one of the pillars of the Romantic repertory, Brahms’s big *Violin Concerto*. The orchestra will also perform one of the greatest works ever written for orchestra, Claude Debussy’s three symphonic sketches, *The Sea*. Few works have so movingly depicted any subject, in this case the wind, waves and light on the Mediterranean. The concert opens with another nautically inspired work, Felix Mendelssohn’s stormy *Hebrides Overture*, which evokes the fa-

mous Fingal’s Cave on a Scottish island and the roiling ocean around it.

While celebrating the Portland Baroque Orchestra’s appearance here last week and its new relationship with our own Oregon Bach Festival, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that Eugene has its own period instrument ensemble. The members of the **Oregon Bach Collegium**, led by harpsichordist **Margret Gries** and violinist **Michael Sand**, have devoted years to studying and performing Baroque chamber music on the instruments the composers intended. Their March 22 concert in the intimate atmosphere of United Lutheran Church at 22nd and Washington features the music of Antonio Vivaldi, going way beyond the usual *Four Seasons* to explore sonatas, other concertos, church music for voices, chamber cantatas and more.

Two other refugees from the classical music world, **Tommy Cappel** and **David Satori**, headed abroad to explore the music of other cultures, including the musical hotbeds of Bali, West Africa and Serbia. But it’s Middle Eastern music — including belly dance rhythms and performances by dancer **Zoe Jakes** — that forms the foundation of their band **Beats Antique**’s danceable fusion of electronica, world beat and pop sounds. The San Francisco-based band plays at the McDonald Theater on Thursday, March 31, and we’re telling you about it early because their shows have been known to sell out. Another Bay Area-based electronica artist, **Eskmo**, opens.

Speaking of belly dance, our own **Middle Eastern Dance Guild** has been bringing that joyously jiggly performance art to local stages for two decades now. On March 18, they’re hosting former Silicon Valley software engineer **Jim Boz**, who’s now a leading dancer, choreographer and teacher — and, like the Beats Antiquers, he also composes and remixes Middle Eastern influenced electronic interpretations of classical Arabic sounds — to Cozmic Pizza. The restaurant also hosts jazz pianist and bandleader **Solomon Douglas’s Swingtet** on March 28. The ten-piece band specializes in the danceable music of the great Count Basie Band and Duke Ellington Orchestra, along with other big band standards. **ew**

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