



COURTESY JOHN DOAN

Harp guitars being played in his undated photo labeled Knutsen Farm with the high-collared fashions suggesting it is a Victorian-era scene.



R. NEIL HAUGEN PHOTO

John Doan and his 20-string harp guitar will come to Astoria one last time Friday, Dec. 7, before the Willamette University music specialist moves to San Diego. He encourages people to sing along in an intimate concert setting to encourage human connectivity.

In the past 30 years, Doan has performed in China and Russia; more recent tours have taken him to tiny towns in England and Switzerland. Although he has played for an audience of 1,200, he prefers the togetherness of an intimate concert.

"People spend time face to face with each other," he said. "We have taken that 'face to face' out of the equation ... we have a curious situation that has evolved to our present crisis in polarity in our society."

He hopes people will "unplug" and embrace personal interactions, noting that today's anonymous online connectivity minimizes personal interactions, perpetuating the distancing process begun by recordings, radio, TV and movies. (He is not alone. John Phillip Sousa demonized the phonograph in 1906.)

The Friday, Dec. 7, event will be held at the Lewis and Clark Bible Church in Astoria thanks to organizers Lynda and Michael Leamy. Doan has appeared at venues like Astoria High School and the Liberty Theatre, but has played at the more intimate church once before, said Lynda Leamy.

Doan is an associate professor of music at Willamette University.

Souls filled with song

The Astoria event likely will be his last Northwest appearance, however, because he is moving from his Salem home to San



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John Doan enjoys collecting zithers and other rare stringed instruments. This celestiphone dates to 1913.

Diego to be closer to family.

Evelyn Laughman, of Astoria, was introduced by friends to Doan's music and now a regular listener to his performances on YouTube.

"He not only is a wonderful musician, he is a marvelous storyteller taking you to places most have never been," she said. She and a handful of others recently attended one of his in-home concerts. "John truly lives his music, and I feel our souls were filled with song. It's an afternoon I'll never forget."

When touring, Doan collects unusual instruments like his harp guitar, autoharp and classical banjo, plus myriad zithers, many from Germany and Austria. He delights, too, in sharing old photos of groups playing instruments that have gone out of vogue. One shows the Seaside Band from the turn of the 20th century; another is a long-ago Asian mandolin ensemble with coast connections.

"I like having fun and being zany on stage," he said. "The professor who is sharing his 'research,' sometimes tongue in cheek."

He started the Christmas-themed show in 1986 highlighting the Victorian era. His break came when Oregon Public Broadcasting recorded "A Victorian Christmas with John Doan" and licensed it to the Public Broadcasting Service. It was nominated for an Emmy for best entertainment special of the year.

His CD recordings include "Wrapped in White - Visions of Christmas Past." Billboard Magazine wrote, "Doan breathes new life into musty tunes with his pristine,

intricate picking, which is laced with the delicacy of a snowflake."

Touching heartstrings

His presentation for the 2018 "farewell tour" includes a portable 8-foot-tall fireplace that provides the parlor-style backdrop for his storytelling. He encourages his audiences to sing seasonal songs as a way of building community.

"It's an unusual take for a Christmas program," he said. "Sing-alongs are fun, but to try to tell our story through the music and reflect on archival photos of people 'caught in the act of making their own music' is fun, too."

"Christmas music is America's last folk music. Many people will know the tunes and we all sing them together. It is what we did before radio and TV."

He concludes his concerts by telling the story of how he was inspired to continue his musical mission after playing his 20-string harp guitar for American folk legend Burl Ives as he lay dying; Ives reportedly called his sound, "heavenly."

Writer Michael Leamy, another keen fan, is sharing in the work to bring Doan to the North Coast one last time.

"As John Doan's fingers touch the strings of his vintage instruments, his music touches the heartstrings, and stirs the soul," Leamy said. 