

# Heaven on Earth: The Harpists Convene

By Barry James

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SEVRES, France — They've brought their harps to a party — and everyone is asking them to play. This town outside Paris is harp heaven all this week, with more than 800 players and lovers of the instrument from 37 countries attending their fourth, and biggest, world congress.

There are harp recitals throughout the day, lectures about harps and major concerts in Paris and Versailles.

All the main manufacturers have brought their wares, giving Jubal's children a chance to try out a wide variety of instruments. The resulting cacophony prompts the question: Can paradise really sound like this?

Weighing up to 90 pounds (40 kilograms), a full-size concert harp is not easy to transport. "I sometimes wished I played the piccolo," said David Watkins, a British virtuoso who found his first harp abandoned under a heap of coal and was immediately seduced by its sound and shape.

With a combination of wire, nylon and gut strings, all of which behave differently, a big concert harp is tricky to keep in tune, especially when conditions are humid. Its 48 or so strings tuned in an empty hall will often require retuning when the audience comes in. In fact, it is cruelly said of harpists that they spend half their lives tuning their instruments and the other half playing out of tune.

Still, the silvery, shimmering sound of the instrument and its harmonious form make up for a host of defects.

"I experience a vague feeling of poetic love when I breathe a beautiful rose," Berlioz said, "and I have long felt something similar at the sight of a beautiful harp. Whenever I saw this instrument, I had to contain myself from falling on my knees and embracing it."

Watkins — one of the world's leading soloists, who has plucked the harp for Callas and Sutherland, Fonteyn and Nureyev — said playing it was both an intellectual and a sensual experience "on top of which is all the mystery and the mystique."

"You play it with your bare

hands and nothing comes between you and the music," he said, as his fingers rippled over an English air by Orlando Gibbons.

Not for nothing did wild Celtic chieftans call for the bard to soothe their savage breasts after days of warfare or carousing. The harp is said to induce wonderful feelings of tranquillity, and there may be sound scientific reasons for this.

According to Watkins, harpists live longer than other instrumentalists because of all the good vibes to which they are subjected. "As in the story of David and Saul, the harp achieves remarkable results in therapy, as it soothes and releases tension," he said.

"It induces what we call an alpha state of consciousness," said Joyce Rosenfield, a professional harpist from Oakland, California, who describes herself as a sister in the New Age GEM society — standing for "God and Earth our Mother." Dressed in a green habit resembling that of a nun, Rosenfield sits at a table in the congress, radiating tranquil karma.

The attraction of the harp, with its ethereal harmonics, has a lot to do with the harmony of the spheres recognized from the earliest times, she said. In ancient Greece, the harp and the flute were the instruments of Apollo, in touch with nature and the spiritual world. Drums and fifes, on the other hand, belonged to frenzied Dionysus.

The harp, through its ancestor the lyre, is possibly the world's oldest instrument, and the hunter who first twanged his bowstring was the world's first harpist. According to Watkins, the harp used to be a man's instrument, of troubadours and bards, until Queen Marie-Antoinette brought it into favor as a fashionable diversion in refined salons of France.

Thus the gilded concert instrument supplanted the smaller Celtic harp, and was in turn ousted from fashion later in the 19th century by the increasing popularity of the pianoforte. In genteel Victorian homes in England, one of the gentlemen customarily played the flute and one of his sisters or daughters accompanied him on the harp. The graceful action of



William Rankin

David Watkins, leading soloist: "Mystery and the mystique."

playing the harp, Percy A. Scholes noted in his *Companion to Music*, was particularly suited to the display of well-rounded limbs.

Young women, including a large number from Japan, dominate the harp scene in Sévres. Most are classical players. But a few, like Deborah Henson-Conant, use the harp, including electronically amplified instruments, to explore different avenues in jazz and so-called New Age music.

If the harp is the instrument of the angels, the devil, it seems, may have prompted its design. Under its elegant shape lies a mechanism of fearsome complexity. In the early 19th century, a Frenchman named Sébastien Erard invented the double action that enables concert harpists to raise the pitch

by a semitone or a tone, using a separate pedal for each of the seven keys. The pedals connect with the strings through a series of linkages. Although the harp looks simple, it contains more than 2,000 pieces. The Celtic or folk harp, on the other hand, is relatively straightforward.

Kim Webby, the only professional harp maker in New Zealand, made more than 60 folk harps after his sister took up the instrument, and then spent 2,300 hours designing and constructing his first full-size concert harp. That included crafting each part by hand, even down to the screws. Although the outside of the instrument is beautifully carved, "it is what you do not see that matters," he said.

Carl Swanson, another one of

the tiny breed of harp manufacturers, said making a harp entails constructing a wooden frame weighing less than 80 pounds and then hanging the equivalent of a Volkswagen Beetle from it without its warping or coming apart.

Swanson, who has repaired harps in Boston for 14 years, has designed and built the prototype of a concert harp inspired by one of Erard's elegant gilded Empire-style models, but incorporating modern materials and techniques. After showing the harp at the congress, he plans to put it on the market next year.

"Starting up a harp production line is murderously expensive," he said. "You cannot buy the parts out of a catalogue, nor are the parts interchangeable. You start with a blank sheet of paper, then go to the machine shops."

A reasonable life for a harp costing \$11,000 to \$30,000, Swanson said, is only about 30 years. Many harpists play for their bread and butter in restaurants and hotels, and the pedal mechanisms take a hammering because popular music requires a lot of modulations. Moving the instruments in and out of the cold makes the neck warp and the joints open.

"It does sound very nice, though," Swanson said. "People get hooked on the sound and the shape before they realize all the problems."

The success of the congress indicates that the harp is making a comeback after having been eclipsed so long by the piano. The popularity of folk music is reflected in the increasing sales of the Celtic harp.

People like Henson-Conant or the jazz player Harvi Griffin are showing some of the rhythmic possibilities of the concert harp.

Although modern chromatic music presents difficulties for the harp player, many 20th century composers, starting with Debussy and Ravel, have appreciated the rippling, impressionistic quality of the instrument.

"It seems almost out of place in the modern symphony orchestra," Watkins said, "until a single note breathes magic into the orchestral texture."