



LOUISE JOHNSON

Friday 19 April 2023, 12:30 pm
Phillips Hall | Blackheath Blue Mountains NSW

Louise Johnson | harp

PROGRAM NOTES

The Harp's Journey

Albert ZABEL [1834-1910] | *La Source* (1897)

Harpist and composer, Albert Zabel, who developed the Russian technique of harp playing, was the harpist for the ballet orchestra of St. Petersburg in the 19th century. *La Source*, a well-known recital piece for the classical pedal harpist, and possibly Zabel's most famous composition, is typical of the romantic writing of the day, full of downward rippling arpeggios with a simple melody played over the top.

Ancient Harp

ANON, Syria [c. 1400 BC] | *Hurrian Hymn No 6* (considered the world's oldest known melody)

Written on a clay tablets as an ode to the goddess Nikkal, it was composed in Cuneiform by the ancient Hurrians around the 14th century BC. The clay tablets containing the tune were excavated in the 1950s from the ruins of the city of Ugarit in Syria. A near-complete set of musical notations, including specific names for lyre strings, and their respective musical intervals, also included specific instructions for how to hold the hands and play the song. There have been many attempts to decode and play *Hurrian Hymn No.6*, but because of difficulties in translating its ancient tablets, there is no definitive version. This translation is by Michael Levy, based upon Professor Richard Dumbrill's studies.

Medieval Harp: 400-1400

ANON | *Monophonic Plainsong*

From the 13th-century Latin term, *cantus planus* ("plain song"), referring to the unmeasured rhythm and monophony (single line of melody) of Gregorian chant.

TRAD | *Brian Boru's March* (1014)

Brian Boru's March was supposedly written as a lively tune for the soldiers to march to on their way to the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Brian Boru died at the Battle of Clontarf in which his army defeated the Vikings, so perhaps this tune, also played as a slow air, commemorates the journey of bringing his body back to Armagh for burial. The unknown composer may have purposely composed a tune with both the ambiguity of victory and the loss of a leader.

Bray Harp c. 1200

Trouvère melodies

Shortly before Christmas 1192 Richard I was captured by Leopold V, Duke of Austria, who accused the English monarch of arranging the murder of his cousin Conrad of Montferrat. He was kept prisoner at Dürnstein Castle, and at first no one in England knew where their king was.

The minstrel called Blondel searched for his master throughout Europe in vain. On his way home through Austria, Blondel learnt there was a closely guarded unidentified prisoner in a nearby castle. Suspecting it could be his master, Blondel located a tiny barred window high up on the castle wall which he thought could be a cell. Under the window he sang the first couplet of a Troubadour's song which he had composed, a voice responded with the second couplet. It was the King. After being found by Blondel, Richard was handed over to Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor. It was while languishing in captivity as the Holy Roman Emperor's prisoner that the monarch wrote his song, *Ja nus hon pris*, as an address to Marie of France, Countess of Champagne. Eventually, the English people paid the huge sum of £100,000 to set him free. This is where the saying "A King's Ransom" originated.

Blondel de NESLE [c. 1155 – 1202] | *A l'entrant d'este (Here comes the summer)*

~

Richard the LION HEART | *Ja nus hon pris*

No prisoner can tell his honest thought
Unless he speaks as one who suffers wrong;
But for his comfort as he may make a song.
My friends are many, but their gifts are naught.
Shame will be theirs, if, for my ransom, here —
I lie another year.

Renaissance Harp: 1400-1600

Claude GERVAIS [1525-1583] | *Gaillarde* (c.1550)

Claude Gervaise was a French composer of the Renaissance period, largely known for his instrumental music. He was closely associated with the music publisher Pierre Attaignant, who was one of the first to print using single impressions. With

this method, a single vertical strip of music type is made up of five little dashes plus a music symbol, such as a note, a rest, or an accidental.

Line enough of these strips up next to each other and a musical staff is created.

The *Galliard* was a form of Renaissance dance and music popular in Europe in the 16th century. It is mentioned in dance manuals from England, Portugal, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy. It is an athletic dance, not improvised, but consisting of choreographed patterns of steps, characterised by leaps, jumps and hops.

The *Galliard* was a favourite dance of Queen Elizabeth I of England. In 1589, when the Queen was aged in her mid-fifties, John Stanhope of the Privy Chamber reported, “the Queen is so well as I assure you: six or seven *Galliards* in a morning is her ordinary exercise”.

Baroque Harp: 1600-1750

George Frideric HANDEL [1685-1769] | Concerto in B-flat Opus 4 No.6 (1736)

i. *Andante Allegro*

The famous concerto in B-flat, Concerto VI Opus 4, was originally written for harp in 1736. It is one of the only existing harp concertos from the Baroque era. It was written to be performed between movements of Handel's oratorio, Alexander's Feast. Handel, an accomplished organist himself, had made it a custom to play organ concerto movements during the intermissions between movements of his oratorios. The concerto was later arranged for organ by the composer and included in the six Opus 4 Organ Concertos.

Classical Harp: 1750-1810

J L DUSSEK [1760-1812] | Sonata No.6 (c.1800)

i. *Adagio*

ii. *Tempo di minuetto*

Dussek was not only a virtuosic pianist but also a prolific composer in the Classical era. He also composed for, and concertised with, the harp as his wife, Sophia Guistina, was an accomplished harpist of the time. His music for the harp contains a great variety of figuration within a largely diatonic harmony, avoids dangerous chromatic passages and is eminently playable. His music is considered standard repertoire for all harpists, particularly his Six Sonatas

Irish Harp

Turlough O'CAROLAN [1670-1738] | *Si Beagh Si Mhor* (1691)

The tune is attributed to the blind harpist and singer Turlough O'Carolan, as his first song, written to the tune of *The Bonnie Cuckoo*.

A beautiful old Irish air played simply and leisurely or as a slow waltz. Sí Beag and Sí Mór are the names given to two small hills, situated close to each other in south County Leitrim, said to be ancient burial sites.

~

TRAD | *Morrison's Jig*

Page | 4

This well-known tune is named after the renowned Sligo-born Irish-American fiddler, James 'The Professor' Morrison (1891–1947), who recorded it in the 1930's. Morrison did not compose the jig but obtained it from a County Kerry accordion player named Tom Carmody, who knew it as *Stick across the Hob*. Carmody in turn had learned it from his father, Maurice.

20th Century Harp

Gabriel PIERNÉ [1863-1937] | *Impromptu Caprice* (1901)

Gabriel Pierné was a French composer who flourished in the latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth but his name appears rarely in concert programs outside his native country, despite the attractiveness of his music. A pupil of César Franck and Jules Massenet, he was something of a child prodigy. He wrote a few operas and ballets of some distinction, as well as an appreciable amount of orchestral and chamber music. He was better known in his day as a conductor and he notably conducted the world premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*.

The solo *Impromptu-Caprice* was also published for piano. It contains many characteristics so typical of the French style, such as significant tempo changes, runs and flourishes of semiquavers and widely varying dynamics.

~

Louise JOHNSON [1955-] | *Improvisation* (2024)

A journey of strange sights and sounds on the harp that Louise has been asked to perform during her 56 years of playing.

Paraguayan Harp

The harp is the national instrument of Paraguay. Beautiful and distinctive, Paraguayan harps and harp music are considered national treasures and are loved throughout the world.

Alfredo ORTIZ [1946-] | *Nocha de Fiesta* ("Let's party!")

~

TRAD | *El Pájaro Campana*

A 'bell bird'. The name of the bird heard around the capital city of Asunción whose call sounds like a bell.

Electric Harp

STRAUSS / WASHINGTON & HARLINE [1896 /1940] | *Thus Spake Zarathustra*
Wishing Upon a Star

Travelling through a Space Odyssey to reach Astral Destiny with wishes on the way.

Page | 5

~
Billie EILISH [2001-] | *Bad Guy* (2019)

“The song pokes fun at the way people present themselves. The initial idea for the song is about people who have to tell everybody that they are a certain way all the time. They’re not that certain way. In general, I feel like you will never catch a bad bitch telling everyone she’s a bad bitch. It’s on—it’s you.” – Billie Eilish

| Notes by LOUISE JOHNSON