

The Joy and Challenges of Commissioning a New Harp Concerto

by Teresa Suen-Campbell

IHAD the honor of commissioning James W. Campbell, a Canadian judge/composer, to write a new harp concerto, a project that took about four years to complete. Named *Atonement*, it was written in classical style and given its world premiere by Kindred Spirits Orchestra under the baton of Kristian Alexander in November 2014 in the Greater Toronto Area of Canada. The concert also featured Ann Hobson Pilot performing John Williams' concerto *On Willows and Birches*. While Williams' concerto has a contemporary sound, Campbell's piece is more in the classical tradition of Haydn and Brahms.

Three *grand dames* of the harp, Elizabeth Cifani, Judy Loman, and Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh, all of them formidable talents, also have premiered new harp concertos. What follows are some of their experiences in bringing these new works to life.

Elizabeth Cifani and Harp Concerto #1 by Gustavo Leone

Elizabeth Cifani, former principal harpist of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, is also senior lecturer of harp at Northwestern University in Chicago. Over the course of her vibrant and lengthy career, she has pioneered new music and has premiered several harp concertos, all



Elizabeth Cifani

written for her, including *Capriccio in July* by Chinese composer Feng Shi Yang; a concerto for wire-strung harp and string orchestra, *When Touched by Better Angels*, by American composer Paul Seitz; a harp concerto by Jon Polifrone; and a harp concerto by Chicago-based composer Gustavo Leone. Leone, originally from Argentina and a music professor at Loyola University, has written quite a few works for the harp, including the *Preludes*, *Musical Studies*, *Red Quintet*, as well as a second concerto for harp and orchestra, *Como un Sueño*, commissioned by harpist Faye Seeman, in 2006. The first Harp Concerto was commissioned by Katherine Abelson of the ensemble Concertante de Chicago in 1994. Neo-classical in style, it has three movements.

Leone was not a novice at writing for the harp, having previously consulted Lucile Lawrence on his first harp composition *Five Preludes*. Cifani remembers their collaboration in this way: "I really enjoyed playing the concerto. It was a pleasure to work with Gustavo. He is one of the most original composers I know. You can tell the work has Latin American influences, but shining through are his own characteristic trademarks and you can see that he is reflecting his own personality through his music."

Leone remembers working on it for six months, with the last month devoted to editing and copying individual parts for the orchestra from the software. Two rehearsals were required to prepare for the performance. Cifani spent two to three months learning the work, while also while playing for the opera season and preparing David Finko's harp concerto, for its Chicago premiere, at the same time.

Cifani has strong opinions on memorization: "If a [performer] is going to wreck their performance

because memorization gets in the way, I would prefer to have the performance with the music in sight. I do not see any problem with performing music with scores.”

She also offers advice to composers: “... put everything [you] want to hear into the score, including every detail and direction on how it is to be performed, because, once the composer passes away, performers will have no way to know what[your] original intentions were.”

Judy Loman and the Harp Concerto by Raymond Murray Schafer

Judy Loman, former principal harpist with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, is currently adjunct professor of harp at the University of Toronto and a faculty member of the Glenn Gould School of Music at the Royal Conservatory of Music. She is also a visiting artist at the Curtis Institute of



Judy Loman

Music in Philadelphia. Many people may forget that Judy actually hailed from the US and thus, Canada was very fortunate to be the beneficiary of her talents. Last year, she was inducted into the Order of Canada, Canada’s highest civilian honor, for her great contributions to musical culture in Canada.

As a member of the Toronto Symphony, Loman performed many concertos with the orchestra. Over the years, the symphony asked her to provide suggestions regarding possible new commissions. She recommended that several Canadian composers, who were also her colleagues, such as Glenn Buhr, John Weinzwieg, Kelly-Marie Murphy and Murray Schafer, write new harp concertos for the TSO. During the creative process, Judy worked closely with all of these composers and made suggestions along the way, so that there was usually no more editing to do once the works were actually finished. As Murray Schafer

had already composed *The Crown of the Ariadne* and *Theseus* (for harp and string quartet), by the time he wrote the harp concerto, he knew very well how to write for the harp. It took about six months for the whole work to be completed. Loman noted: “Mr. Schafer is very good in giving one enough time to practice; he is very respectful to performers in that respect.” The composer conducted the premier, in 1987.

Like Cifani, Loman noted that she generally never performs new works by memory: “I do not want to take chances on new works.” In addition, performing a new work is quite challenging. As an orchestral harpist, she found it helpful to both rely on the conductor and to pay attention to the orchestral writing especially in avant-garde music where, for example, harp entrances may not be as obvious as in classical pieces.

Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh and the Harp Concerto by Michael Conway Baker

Elizabeth Volpé-Bligh, principal harpist of Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, is the harp instructor at the University of British Columbia. She is also on the faculty of the VSO School of Music and VSO Institute at Whistler (VSOIW).



Elizabeth Volpe Bligh

She is president of the West Coast Harp Society and the American Harp BC Chapter. She was also chairperson of the hosting committee for the highly successful World Harp Congress held in Vancouver in 2011. Volpé-Bligh commissioned and premiered Canadian composer Michael Conway Baker’s harp concerto in its final edition with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra in 2000. A live recording of this concert is available on you-tube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=964TZQWj9SE>

According to Volpé-Bligh, the harp concerto commission came about over a neighborly cup of coffee with Baker: “He had wanted to write a harp

concerto because his wife Penny loves the harp, finding yet further inspiration from the ebb and flow of the river behind his house.” The piece was first performed by a community orchestra in the British Columbia area, and later after a few revisions, it was then performed by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Volpé-Bligh provided a lot of input in the creation of the piece, even adding a mini-cadenza. The original score was also very pianistic, and so she suggested some changes to make it more “harp-like.” It took several months for the work to be completed, in time for the very first concert. “Then we made some more changes (e.g. adding more woodwind instruments), and thus, for the final version of the harp concerto, it took a couple of years, from start to finish.” For Volpé-Bligh, four to six months were needed to learn the work.

While she prefers to memorize, she has very practical advice on the subject: “If you are going to wreck the performance through memorization, then I would suggest that you do not do so.”

Teresa Suen-Campbell and the Harp Concerto by James Campbell

I commissioned and premiered a new work for solo harp at the American Harp Society, Inc. Summer Institute in 2015, a work composed by Wendy Wan-Ki Lee, professor of music at Chinese University in Hong Kong, where I used to teach as adjunct assistant professor of music. Closer to home, I also commissioned a harp concerto by James Campbell, who also happens to be my husband.

Prior to composing the harp concerto, James had already written a duet piece for harp and piano, *Silver Pear Tree of Paradise*, and a sacred song for harp, strings and voice, *The 23rd Psalm*, both pieces



Teresa Suen-Campbell

recorded on his album *When God Whispers*. One evening, over a delightful meal of authentic Chinese food at Chinese University, following my evening classes where I was teaching the history of the harp, James told me he was working on a concerto for piano and orchestra. I said to him, “Why not write a harp concerto instead!?” And so there is the power of suggestive thinking!

A classical pianist but not professionally trained in composition, James is basically self-taught, like Schoenberg, save for some background in music theory. The original score was quite pianistic, so I suggested changes to make it more harp-friendly. Writing the piece took about four years of intermittent work. The final version was not completed until nine months before the concert, i.e. around February 2014. Professional Hong Kong critic/composer/orchestrator, Dennis Wu edited the score and prepared the individual parts.

We had the standard two rehearsals for the premiere. I spent about half a year to actually learn the work although, of course, I also benefited from my active participation during the composition process. I do not usually memorize contemporary music that I premiere, and this was no different. I have no doubt that all who have had the rewarding experience of premiering a new concerto have found it a privilege to be such a part the creative process.

Useful Information:

<https://www.harpsociety.org/pdfs/resources/OnCommissioning.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Teresa Suen-Campbell received her doctorate in harp performance at Northwestern University in 2008, the first harpist from China to receive this distinction. Following graduation, she was principal harpist of the Hong Kong City Chamber Orchestra and adjunct assistant professor of music at Chinese University of Hong Kong. She currently lives in Toronto and serves as associate performance faculty in concert harp at Carleton University. ❧