

**Performance Identity Expression in the
Twenty-First-Century Harpist:
“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics**

by

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Abstracts: (English)

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In the art of performance, personal identity expression is an intrinsic part of the daily artistic practice of musicians, together with the composer's ideas and the musical character as contained in the score. The performer's cultural traditions and personal aesthetics influence choices made on stage, sometimes representing social and political statements. For harpists of the twenty-first century, performance identity expression has become an avenue to expand the instrument's uses, moving away from outdated stereotypes and placing it in the center of the classical music world as a modern, versatile instrument. This thesis explores how this process has been taking place within the harp community, first by analyzing the four categories of identity expression and the four categories of the ethics of the instrument using historical examples, then by examining the work of six world-class international harpists who through their daily musical activities are changing the affordances of the harp, and as a final step, applying them to an original research-creation project entitled "Orishas" Suite for Harp and Electronics.

(French)

Dans l'art de la interprétation, l'expression de l'identité personnelle fait partie intégrante de la pratique artistique quotidienne des musiciens, au même titre que les idées du compositeur et le caractère musical décrit dans la partition. Les traditions culturelles et l'esthétique personnelle de l'interprète influencent les choix faits sur scène, représentant parfois des déclarations sociales et politiques. Pour les harpistes du XXI^e siècle, l'expression de l'identité scénique est devenue un moyen d'élargir les usages de l'instrument, de s'éloigner des stéréotypes dépassés et de le placer au centre du monde de la musique classique en tant qu'instrument moderne et versatile. Cette thèse explore comment ce processus s'est déroulé

au sein de la communauté de la harpe, d'abord en analysant les quatre catégories d'expression identitaire et les quatre catégories d'éthique de l'instrument à l'aide d'exemples historiques ; puis en examinant le travail de six harpistes internationaux de classe mondiale qui changent les possibilités de la harpe à travers leurs activités musicales quotidiennes ; et comme étape finale, appliqué ces concepts u projet de recherche-crédation « Orishas » Suite for Harp and Electronics.

Preface

In Cuba, the harp is among the most underrated and misunderstood instruments in classical music. It remains frozen in time, with stereotypes and uses that existed during the first half of the twentieth century continuing to predominate in the minds of musicians, audiences, and musical institutions. I spent the first ten years of my life as a harpist hearing that the harp was too limited to play more than a few standard solo works and the orchestral repertoire. It was even considered too limited for higher education! The country was completely isolated from the world, and while the harp evolved into a powerful, versatile soloist instrument abroad, outdated paradigms persisted in my country.

Even after I emigrated, the idea that the harp would be a good instrument to play Cuban music remained buried in the back of my mind because classical music practices and Cuban cultural traditions seemed too different to connect. However, after several years of education and actualization, I realized this link could indeed be achieved. The six harpists that will be studied in this thesis, as well as many others (including my incredible mentor Jennifer Swartz) provided me not only with the inspiration, but also with the tools and support to create a project that would merge my two musical identities. Through this research-creation project, I will both show Cuba how versatile and modern the harp can be and demonstrate the musical richness of my country to the international harp community.

Chapter 1

Four Categories of Identity Expression in Artistic Performance

In a study on the effect of different identities on the act of musical performance, the Korean pianist Jin Hyung Lim writes, “Performance is at once a personal, social, and political act: performative power engages critically and imaginatively with questions of identity through a process of communication.”¹ In addition, Lim continues,

Performance, as an ephemeral art, is explicitly in flux, but what is less obvious is that in this very state it expresses the flux of the reality and knowledge that feed into and underpin it. A performer’s reality and knowledge not only determine performative decisions derived at least in part from one’s cultural experiences and social circumstances; emotional understanding also has a significant role to play, whether it is the recognition of emotions “in” or expressed “by” the music, the performer’s emotional response to the music (or generated by playing it), or both.²

While performers and audiences in classical music might generally assume the act of performance to be, on the surface, a reproduction of the composers’ ideas as written on the page, Lim’s claims above demonstrate that many factors affect a performer’s professional endeavors and musical outcomes. On a deeper level, performers express their personal identities through their musical choices, which is perhaps why a work can sound so different when performed by musicians from opposite parts of the world: their performances express how they, as individuals, understand life and the world around them. Therefore, to be a performer is to encode numerous factors that influence the act of performing—consciously or otherwise—and this artistic practice requires reflection that extends beyond the composer’s ideas or the purpose of merely entertaining one’s audience. The performer’s identity, their

¹ Jin Hyung Lim, “Identity Performance and Performance Identity. Performing Isang Yun’s *Fünf Stücke für Klavier*,” in *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, ed. Catherine Laws (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2020), 199.

² Ibid., 197.

relationship with the instrument and its musical contexts, their emotional interpretation of the music, and their cultural heritage, and their adherence (or opposition) to modern societal codes all play important roles in the production of a live performance.

As a result of cultural and technological developments since c. 1950, many musicians today find that previously demarcated roles (of performer, composer, educator, impresario, etc.) have lost their boundaries. These previously distinct roles have become intertwined, and the skills required to survive in the contemporary market exceed those acquired while training in traditional academic settings. A certain level of proficiency is now required in areas such as marketing, public relations and advertising, audio and video production, web design, and more. How and where musicians promote themselves has become just as important as how well they can play their instruments.

As younger generations of audiences move away from the traditional concert hall setting, performers must engage in new conversations about music and the place it holds within society. In a volume devoted to artistic research in music as a new discipline, Jonathan Impett explains that these new tasks require performers to “reflect more consciously on their places, roles, the nature of their musical activities, and their relationships with musics and practices from many other times and places, as well as the sources and rationales for their incomes.”³ They must now expand their field of knowledge and capabilities not only to survive, but also to engage with a new generation of audiences who, as Impett describes, are undergoing “a recoiling from elitism, the questioning of a canon and a reticence to judge

³ Jonathan Impett, “The Contemporary Musician and the Production of Knowledge: Practice Research and Responsibility,” in *Artistic Research in Music: Discipline and Resistance* ed. Jonathan Impett (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2018), 225.

value or importance, the dissolving of the remnant behaviours of high bourgeois culture, and the impact of cultural relativism on Western art music.”⁴

As a result, deep self-reflection that involves questioning one’s identity is inevitable. Music seems to be intricately connected to identity, both personal and cultural. The sociologist Simon Frith describes this phenomenon as “not a thing but a process—an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*,” explaining further that, “Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective.”⁵

For performers of the pedal harp, this experiential process has taken shape at an accelerated pace during the last few decades. After almost two centuries of following imposed deals about when, where, and how a pedal harp should be used, harpists are now engaging in artistic practices that break away from outdated musical and social preconceptions, centering their careers on their quest for their personal and musical identity expression, and experimenting with, and at times changing the affordances of the instrument. The harp indeed seems to possess an identity of its own—separate from that of the harpist. The roots of the harp’s identity can be traced back to obsolete social contexts and stereotypes that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and consolidated over the next two hundred years, mainly connected to wealth, social status, and associations with femininity and homosexuality. While it could be argued that other instruments possess a similarly separate identity, pedal harps still come in many shapes and colors today, while many other instruments have featured a certain level of homogeneity in design. Although all harps have the basic morphological elements (i.e., a column, a neck, and a body/sound board), their

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Simon Frith, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: SAGE, 2011), 4.

aesthetic designs range from very simple to extremely ornate with wood carvings, hand paintings and 24k gold leaf added to the column, sound board, and feet. In addition, the high price-point that results from the fully handmade production process reinforces those old stereotypical associations.

As a harpist of this generation who has also experienced geographical displacement and various kinds of racism based on my origins and cultural traditions, the topic of the role of identity in performative practices has become of utmost importance to my process of discovering who I am as a musician, and the relationship I want to have with my instrument. Thus far, however, it appears impossible to separate the object's subjective identity from that of the harpist, and from what audiences expect. This chapter therefore explores the expression of identity from both the performer's and the instrument's points of view. I will use as a model the four categories of identity proposed by Jin Hyung Lim: 1) *identity as difference*; 2) *identity as both personal and social, constituted and negotiated via numerous kinds of relationships*; 3) *identity is always contingent on and changes constantly via experience and negotiations with others in particular circumstances*; and 4) *identity as narrative*.⁶ I will combine these categories with the four categories of the "ethics of the instruments," as presented by art historian John Tresch and musicologist Emily Dolan: 1) *the material disposition: the nature and configuration of its elements and the material parts that make it up*; 2) *the instrument's mode of mediation: whether its action is considered to be autonomous or passive, modifying or transparent, hidden or visible*; 3) *the map of mediations of which an instrument is a part, which includes the air, sound, composers, players, other instruments,*

⁶ Jin Hyung Lim, "Identity Performance and Performance Identity. Performing Isang Yun's *Fünf Stücke für Klavier*," In *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, ed. Catherine Laws (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2020), 200–201.

*listeners, and the rules of composition; and 4) the telos of an instrument's activity, its aim or ends.*⁷ Both sets share similarities since, although one set is argued from the human's perspective and the other from the object's, Dolan and Tresch confirm that their theoretical framework applies "concepts to nonhuman objects that are usually attributed to humans."⁸

Each category of one set aligns almost perfectly with that of the other, and it is important to note that although they have distinct features, elements of the different categories build on the previous one in the set, making them interconnected and dependent on each other. I will focus in this chapter on analyzing each set separately as the authors define them, translating the examples they provide in their text to the harp and its performers. Some aspects of gender stereotyping and its relationship to the harp will also be included in the analysis, as will the effect of technology on the way the harp is used in the concert hall. This discussion will serve as the theoretical foundation for combining both sets of categories in the following chapter, which interprets how these affordances are currently being negotiated within the pedal harp community. I will base my arguments on the views of six world-class international performers of the twenty-first century who are transforming the concert hall experience. The discussion will explore the ongoing social process in order to produce new musical knowledge that can help other harpists find their unique voices.

The four categories of Identity

Jin Hyung Lim's "Identity Performance and Performing Identity" draws on the work of musicologist Philip Auslander and sociologist Simon Frith. According to Lim, Auslander

⁷ John Tresch and Emily Dolan, "Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Music and Science," *Osiris* 28, no. 1 (2013): 284.

⁸ Ibid.

defines three key aspects of performers' identities: "the *real person* (the performer's personal identity), the *performance persona* (the performer's stage personality), and the *character* he or she plays in."⁹ Although the concepts of *persona* and *character* may seem similar, Jin explains that "Auslander describes the term *persona* as a performed presence, in-between the performer's 'real' identity and the *character* of the music he or she plays in."¹⁰ In other words, the *persona* relates to the attitudes the performer assumes on stage, while the *character* incorporates aspects of the music defined by the composer. Psychologists Peter Burke and Jan Stets ascribe the development of more complex personalities in general to the differentiation of roles, groups, organizations, and social categories within the postmodern world.¹¹ They describe two analytical approaches that correspond to Lim's categories:

We can look at these [multiple] identities from an internal framework or from an external framework. The internal focus attends to issues of how an individual's multiple identities function together within the self and within the overall identity verification process. [...] The external focus addresses how the multiple identities that an individual has are tied to the complexities of the social structure in which the individual is embedded.¹²

The art of performance has always involved the portrayal of different identities, yet the gradual evolution within society brought about by technologization and globalization of practically every aspect of life has resulted in musicians embodying more complex configurations. Burke and Stets explain that compared with those in the premodern era, the different identities of the postmodern era have fewer common or shared meanings. They claim that in earlier times, a woman, for example, had a handful of identities available: being a daughter, a wife, a mother. In the postmodern era, a woman may possess those identities,

⁹ Lim, "Identity Performance and Performance Identity," 199.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 188.

¹² Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford Academic, 2023), 187.

and can also be a teacher, a political leader, a business owner, a celebrity, and so on. As a result, “not only are there more identities available, but they often have less in common with one another.”¹³

In the case of classical musicians, while most performers play an active role in societal changes through their personal interactions, the industry itself is based on centuries-old paradigms, which translates into an internal struggle in which the numerous identities that come with living in the postmodern world directly oppose those of being a classical musician. Let us imagine, for example, a person who only feels comfortable wearing t-shirts and jeans but is required to wear a tuxedo or a gown on stage. As one of many possible examples that could illustrate Burke and Stets’, clothing visually conveys two contrasting identities that coexist within many classical musicians, as well as the opposing meanings those identities carry. Nonetheless, these contrasting identities and the internal processes performers undertake to manage them have borne fruit in the form of several new performative practices and the transformation of instruments and their uses. The four categories of identity in performance that Jin Hyung Lim presents thus serve as an important tool for comprehending current trends.

Lim’s first category, *identity as difference*, relates to performers’ personal views of who they are—that is, what makes them different from the rest of humanity. This facet of identity “is shaped by how we perceive ourselves, as well as how others recognize us through what we are not.”¹⁴ Here, personal preferences and views, family units, and the societies and cultures in which performers are born and raised become the point of reference for constructing their personal identities. Historically, harpists have shared a sense of sameness

¹³ Ibid., 188.

¹⁴ Lim, “Identity Performance,” 200.

and otherness based on schools of technique. Robert Adelson presents the example of François-Joseph Naderman, who did not allow the pedal harp to be included in the Paris Conservatoire's curriculum.¹⁵ Naderman, a simple-action harp builder, was at odds with the Erard family and their new instrument, and the double-action harp was barred from the curriculum until after Naderman's death in 1835.

As another example from twentieth-century North America, Carlos Salzedo's and Marcel Grandjany's success as both performers and teachers created two separate branches within the community whose members viewed themselves as being in opposition to each other in their claims of technical superiority. One's teaching lineage became a matter of pride and a way of identifying with a specific group—including the type of harp one chose to play. When I began an internship at the Lyon & Healy factory in 2016, I learned the “trade secret” that harpists who choose harps with carvings and gilding (such as the Lyon & Healy “Style 23”) tend to identify themselves with the traditional norm, while the community considered those who choose simpler-looking harps (such as the “Salzedo” or the “Style 30”) to be rebels or rule-breakers. Reflecting on that comment almost a decade later, I realize that although choosing a simpler model may have originated in one's identification with technical lineage, it had also become the visual representation of the divide between traditional and forward-thinking performance in the harp community. The choice of harp is not the only aspect that signals this divide. Modern harpists advocate for systemic change by challenging every stereotype, including those related to limitations of technique and repertoire.

Remarkably, after centuries of following old paradigms, a new stance is emerging within the community. “Being different” has become a common denominator among harpists, whether through moving away from gender stereotypes or classifications, escaping repertoire

¹⁵ Robert Adelson, *Erard: The Empire of the Harp* (Paris: Camac Harps Publications, 2023), 121.

limitations, or standing against subtle forms of racism. The focus is now on exploring alternatives that can be made visible on stage: dramatic dress codes, gestures and attitudes in performance, the use of technology, combining performances with other art forms, or new competitions that welcome flexible repertoire and prioritize artistic originality over repertoire requirements. Anne Yeung presents several examples of this trend, which took hold during the last two decades of the twentieth century and continues to evolve. She calls it “the empowerment and expansion of the harp,”¹⁶ naming performers such as Deborah Henson-Conant or Park Stickney as pioneers in this new trend, in which “the importance of relevance, awareness, and communication are paramount to the evolving status of the pedal harpist. The harpist can no longer rely on the stereotypes of image and beauty to engage the audiences and musicians of the late-twentieth century.”¹⁷ Although these attitudes perhaps continue to perpetuate the duality of “us versus them” inherent to *identity as difference*, they are nevertheless also opening new pathways towards inclusion and acceptance.

The second category is *identity as both personal and social*. Lim argues that “identity is relational and social, constituted, and negotiated, via numerous kinds of relationships.”¹⁸ Thus, the various contexts in which a person takes part, as well as the social biases related to those contexts, shape their views about themselves and the way others perceive them. The society in which a musician is raised permeates their musical expression and their approaches to building a professional career. In the case of the pedal harp, the instrument’s traditions are

¹⁶ Anne Yeung, “Gender, Image, and Reception: The Development and Social History of the Pedal Harp” (DMus diss., Indiana University, 1998), 154.

¹⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸ Ibid.

linked to social preconceptions that continue to influence the multiple identities embodied by performers.

Investigating “how aesthetic materials come to have social ‘valency’ in and through their circumstances of use,” the sociologist Tia DeNora writes:

The observation that agents attach connotations to things and orient to things on the basis of perceived meanings is a basic tenet of interpretivist sociology. But its implications for theorizing the nexus between aesthetic materials and society were profound. It signaled a shift in focus from aesthetic objects and their content (static) to the cultural practices in and through which aesthetic materials were appropriated and used (dynamic) to produce social life.¹⁹

Applying DeNora’s observations to the harp, contemporary audiences and performers unconsciously attached connotations to the instrument and its practice, which are congruent with social stereotypes constructed during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in European society. In this context, gender stereotyping and associations took root, linking the “angel of the house” and “culture of domesticity” to both the harp and women. Anne Yeung argues that “by elevating the status of women to a higher moral plane, the image of women as angelic beings was concentrated upon while the physiological realities of conception, birth, and feminine sexual pleasure were deemphasized. The only acceptable avenue for women to attain security and comfort was an advantageous marriage.”²⁰ The harp became the perfect accessory to this image due to its soft and mellow sound, the need for performers to remain static without rocking their bodies sideways, and the elegance portrayed in the gestures of playing. Furthermore, the ostentatious price of the harp made it one of the preferred instruments for showing wealth and status, a sense of elitism that continues to this day. Yeung concludes that “the combination of the concern for appearance and the nineteenth-century

¹⁹ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

²⁰ Yeung, “Gender, Image and Perception,” 75.

idealization of women created the image of the harpist as a masculine fantasy. The harp, with its historical association with heaven in western Christianity, perfectly completed the societal definition of proper women.”²¹

Nonetheless, the professional realm of music remained off limits to most women harpists during that century since it contradicted the social codes of conduct related to the female sex, thereby perpetuating the stereotype that male harpists were the true virtuosos and superior to women. This cliché continues to this day, even though the majority of harpists are now female. This aspect will be further explored in the ethics of the instruments’ category, but even when advocating for the removal of gender stereotypes, the mention of “male versus female” is evident in the words of Nicanor Zabaleta, who stated in an interview in 1988:

I would wish that the clichés such as angels, gilding and decoration be taken away from the instrument and that it be more plain in appearance. It is absolutely necessary that more men play the harp, as was the case up to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It seems there should be an even distribution of men and women as in other instrumental fields.²²

Zabaleta’s claims are on point regarding the need to remove the socio-cultural association of eighteenth-century imagery linked to the female gender: women’s respectability and social status, as well as sexual implications of female purity, sex appeal, and angelic virtue. These historical images are in direct conflict with current times and put performers who do not fit the mold in a difficult position. When their gender, personal identities, and/or cultural traditions do not align with the established norm, they are forced to search for modern and radical ways to present themselves and the music they perform.

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ursula Lentrodt, “An Interview with Nicanor Zabaleta,” *World Harp Congress Review* 3, no.3 (1988): 10, quoted in Anne Yeung “Gender, Image, and Perception,” 155.

The third category examines how *identity is always contingent on, and changes constantly via experience and negotiations with others in particular circumstances*. Lim discusses diasporic identities, explaining that according to cultural theorists Martin Parker and Stuart Hall, “forced and free migrations, and the process of globalization in the so-called postcolonial world, encourage the increase of migration, and migration creates multiple identities in response.”²³ When experiencing displacement, internal conflicts arise from new interactions and rules imposed by the new society. The globalization of music and music education over the last several decades has turned classical music into a diasporic art that draws on the diverse perspectives of different regions of the world. Therefore, musicians who have experienced migration—either voluntarily or forced—have an added layer within their musical identity brought about by their geographical displacement.

Musicians now sometimes move to places that possess cultural traditions opposite to their own, often seeking to continue their education in countries that provide better opportunities than those found in their homelands. These musicians must adapt to the new environment and adopt many foreign concepts. Questions thus arise, not only about the new society, but also about the previous one, and new sets of identities begin to form that will be expressed in a variety of ways, depending on the circumstances. Jin Hyung Lim writes that “when people are displaced, they experience more conflict and greater confusion about who they are;”²⁴ and Burke and Stets explain why conflict and confusion arise: “Identities that have common meanings are likely to be activated together whenever those meanings are present in the situation,”²⁵ but “all the relevant meanings must be either unrelated or aligned.

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Lim, “Performance Identity,” 202.

²⁵ Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 189.

They cannot remain in opposition. For example, if two identity-relevant meanings perceived in the situation were in opposition with each other, as one was brought into alignment with the standard, the other would be moved out of alignment.”²⁶

The harp community has direct experience with this process. Diasporic pedal harpists possess a shared embodied knowledge that is acquired through the affordances of the instrument and its European environment and traditions, internalizing concepts and stereotypes without engaging in abstract theorization or analysis of its effects on their personal identities and artistic personas. While diasporic identity might seem like a negative aspect, Lim claims that “identity can change depending on where one is, as well as what one does, how one behaves, what one wishes to express, and how one expresses it in a given context. However, these things change over time. Diaspora is not only about one’s history; it is also about being open to newness.”²⁷ Those internal conflicts that surface as a result of migration and globalization force performers to think analytically about their artistic personas and musical endeavors, which has increased the speed at which the harp world is evolving. There is now a higher level of awareness about other types of cultures and their traditions, and international organizations are becoming more inclusive towards harpists who do not represent the European paradigms.

The fourth and final category is *identity as narrative*, which refers to the idea that identities “are constructed not only by external factors: we also shape our own identities by making choices and negotiating the consequences at every moment.”²⁸ Lim quotes psychologist Richard Stevens, who suggests in the introduction of his book *Understanding of*

²⁶ Ibid., 190.

²⁷ Ibid., 203.

²⁸ Ibid., 201.

the Self that “our experiences, actions, and events in every corner of our lives create some kind of narrative.”²⁹ Identity as narrative is the expression of one’s internal interpretation and perception of the first three categories after several interactions with others; it is the construction of a personal story that will transform and/or be verified throughout one’s life.

Because the categories are interconnected, many of the examples quoted in the previous categories are also illustrations of narratives that have served harpists in specific circumstances. In addition to those already explored, Anne Yeung points out that during the twentieth century, the harp’s narrative of a female instrument provided women with the possibility to enter the workforce of professional orchestras,³⁰ serving as both the perpetuation of stereotypes and a way to fight for their place within classical music. A contrary example is Carlos Salzedo’s new harp design, which served his narrative of masculine superiority in harp performance. Later in the century, Deborah Henson-Conant’s dramatic dress codes of short skirts and shiny blouses, served the narrative of rebelling against the societal norms imposed on harpists;³¹ while others exploited the elitism and elegance narrative to make a living performing in corporate events and weddings.

Currently, twenty-first-century harpists are constructing new narratives using elements of their multiple identities, personal aesthetics, and interests to create performances that present new ideas and advocate for systemic change. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this process has also been brought about by circumstances surrounding classical music, an increase in the number of performers, and changes and new demands within the industry.

²⁹ Richard Stevens, *Understanding of the Self* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 23, quoted in Lim, *Identity Performance*, 201.

³⁰ Yeung, “Gender, Image, and Reception,” 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

Globalization and the expansion of the environments in which performances are to be designed and carried out has transformed the work of musicians. They are now on a quest to adapt to new environmental demands that force them to think about the relationship they as artists have with a wider, more varied, and harder-to-please audience. Musicians must address flexibility of production, quantifiability, and accountability, as well as broader external concerns that inform performance practices. Jonathan Impett points at an increased use of technology, arguing:

Technology can be used to generate a sense of immediacy, situatedness, and responsiveness in music making, when even live performance of “classical music can seem an act of commodified reproduction. In interactive technological environments, for example, we can situate complex and contingent musical events and experiment with ways of mapping the notational or symbolic back to musical reality. [...] What concerns us here are two complementary properties of this environments: that it allows the emergence of communities, however temporary, that are geographically fragmented; and that the event or knowledge can be instantiated dynamically, adaptively, in response to local conditions.”³²

More harpists graduate from professional training institutions than there are jobs available, forcing them to rethink the way they approach the instrument and their careers. This in turn creates the question of what is unique about them, and how can that be shown to the world—that is, what is their personal narrative? Harp performers now take on a larger role in the creation of the music they perform, removing the clear distinction of the disciplinary boundaries between creator and interpreter, and adopting a more active and interdisciplinary role; they may even expand into artistic research, which as Paulo de Assis defines it, engages with discursive formations emanating from their concrete artistic

³²Jonathan Impett, “The Contemporary Musician and the Production of Knowledge: Practice, Research and Responsibility,” in *Artistic Research in Music: Discipline and Resistance*, ed. by Jonathan Impett (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2018), 230.

practice.³³ The inclusion of technology in harp playing and its relatability to younger generations provides another avenue towards different musical markets and systemic change. The use of electronic and electroacoustic harps—in combination with effects pedals, looping stations, and other electronic devices—expands the sound possibilities, and therefore the genres in which the harp can be included (e.g., Jazz, Rock, Techno, etc.).

The four categories of the ethics of instruments

The categories of identity just discussed in relation to performers can also be applied to instruments—including the harp—as objects with a certain level of autonomy and agency. In their article “Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Music and Science,” John Tresch and Emily Dolan present new ways of thinking about instruments and the role they play in music and science. The line of thinking they propose links the fields of musicology and organology, and provides new tools to analyze the connection between technology, music, and instruments in an era in which “the current proliferation of digital technologies has also altered our perspective on those objects that the digital replaces or imitates.”³⁴ They present the example of Apple’s Logic Pro, software that grants its users full control over the music production process from start to finish, and in which thousands of digital plugins realistically imitate the timbres of real instruments. Tresch and Dolan write:

Its interface seeks to reproduce the physical characteristics of mixers, pedal boards, and drum machines: the user can still turn knobs and dials and press virtual buttons—a feature that is surely as much a concession to nostalgia as it is a useful way of bridging the gap between physical device and software. In Logic Pro, the instrument becomes synonymous with its effects; it becomes, as it were, purely

³³ Paulo de Assis, *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance Through Artistic Research* (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2018), 12.

³⁴ Tresch and Dolan, “Toward a New Organology,” 279.

aesthetic—a particular texture, a timbre, as well as a cultural resonance that can be conjured up with a few clicks. We see and hear the original instruments, as a material object, in new ways. The metamorphosis from physical objects to digital plug-ins draws attention to the historicity of Logic Pro’s new and old instruments; instruments have life histories, multifaceted and changeable personalities.³⁵

These interactions between human and machine create new relationships between composers, performers, and audiences. Tresch and Dolan suggest that “musical instruments express the inner states of the composer or the performer, moving outward from the mind to the world, while scientific instruments bring external states of the world into the consciousness of observers, moving from the world to the mind.”³⁶ These processes unfold on many levels of artistic practice in classical music, just as with the processes of identity formation discussed above. Performers and composers consciously use the technological tools available to them to bridge the ever-widening gap between modern audiences and classical music.

To develop their categories, Tresch and Dolan draw from Michel Foucault’s work on ethics, or the self’s relation to the self, which consisted of four dimensions: “an *ethical substance*, or the part of the self-understood to be addressed by ethics, including the relevant domains of activity; *a mode of subjections*, or the relation of the subject to explicit codes of conduct, rules and obligations; *the ethical work*, or the activities through which the subject is constituted; and finally *the telos*, or the end toward which this activity is directed.”³⁷

The first category of Tresch and Dolan’s ethics of instruments is *the material disposition of the instrument*: “the nature and configurations of its elements and the material parts that

³⁵ Ibid., 280–81.

³⁶ Ibid., 281.

³⁷ Tresch and Dolan, “Toward a New Organology,” 282.

make it up.”³⁸ Every element used to create a specific instrument is important; however, what makes material disposition unique in the case of instruments is that while the construction of a violin, a piano, or a harp remains relatively consistent over time, the instrument becomes a new tool when combined with other material elements, and its function is transformed. While Tresch and Dolan use the development of keyboard instruments as their example, a parallel example can be outlined using the harp. Since the first harps were developed in ancient times, the basic principles of construction—a triangular wooden structure with strings that connect to a soundboard—have remained almost the same. They can be plucked with nails or fingertips, but the strings are always pressed and released by exerting finger tension. This basic configuration has been transformed throughout history, evolving with time and according to musical needs. The instrument that is used today resulted from several attempts to add a metal mechanism to furnish the potential for chromatism. While the design and its principles have remained constant for the past two hundred years, after the Strasbourg-based instrument builder Sébastien Erard patented and produced the double-action system in 1810, further additions have slowly yet continuously been developed. Many of these additions are technological, including amplification devices, either placed on the soundboard or built into it, devices to dampen the natural duration of vibration, or simple external objects that can be placed between or rubbed on the strings to produce new sounds. With each addition, the instrument’s function changes to adapt to the needs of the composer and performer. Examples include a dampening mechanism created by the Obermeyer-Horngacher company, which was specifically designed for Nicanor Zabaleta in the twentieth century and is still manufactured for their Cassiopeia model alone. Salvi Harps is also attempting to find solutions to the matter

³⁸ Ibid., 284.

of dampening³⁹ through new experiments carried out in collaboration with Dutch harpist Remy van Kesteren.

Additional examples include the different amplification devices used by Salvi/Lyon & Healy Harps and Camac Harps. Compared to the placement of a single soundboard pickup or microphone, these devices each offer their own specific advantages to produce a cleaner, amplified sound across the two companies' respective ranges of electroacoustic and electronic instruments. In terms of what is called "instrument preparation," the harp has evolved from using all the capabilities of the fingers and feet (i.e., playing with nails vs. fingertips, or depressing pedals halfway), to playing between the mechanism and the tuning pins, and finally to the inclusion of external objects like strips of paper or wine corks to produce new sonorities. This evolution of the harp's material disposition has translated into new uses and interactions between the human and the machine.

The second category of an instrument's ethics is "*the instrument's mode of mediations.*" According to Tresch and Dolan, this translates into whether its actions are considered to be autonomous or passive, modifying or transparent, hidden or visible"⁴⁰ Modes of mediation can be understood in terms of who is playing who, or as the interaction between instrument and performer, and the fluidity of the different mediations between these separate agencies. Tresch and Dolan ask two interesting questions. First, do we understand a given instrument

³⁹ The pedal harp possesses a natural duration of the sound that can only be dampened—unlike the piano with its automatic damper pads—by the performer's placing of the hand on the string. This natural reverberation sometimes makes harmonic changes to be blurred, and the performer has an extra job of cleaning the resonance while playing the rest of the music. In addition, when making fast pedal changes, if a string continues to vibrate, the change will produce a sound—especially on the lower register—that will seem like the performer made a mistake.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 284.

within a given context as passive and obedient to the hands of the user, or does it appear as active, occasionally beyond the user's complete control? And second, how much does the instrument control the user, and vice versa?⁴¹ While instruments are generally considered passive objects to be controlled by the performer, this passivity is less evident when learning and performing the harp due to its technical complexity, the designs that are included in its basic shape (which gives it a personal identity of its own), and even the unique sound of individual harps. These factors within this category demonstrate the harp's agency and exhibit interconnectedness similar to that of human identities.

Since every harp is handmade, each one possesses a characteristic sound, despite sharing the same basic structure explained above. Following the same procedures on the same models can produce great variety in color, warmth, and depth of the sound. Some harps are very bright, while others are dark. Additionally, ornaments such as gilding and ornate carvings can be added to each model. These visual characteristics (as already indicated above) affect not only the way audiences see the instrument, but also the performer's relationship with it. The symbolic connotations of a Lyon & Healy "Style 26"⁴²—which features many golden angels and flowers carved on its column—contrasts drastically with those of a "Style 30"⁴³ of the same brand—with its simple art nouveau shape and lack of decorations other than the color of the wood. Traditionally, simpler models held more masculine associations, and ornate ones were linked to femininity. However, modern thinkers have taken steps toward deconstructing outdated stereotypes and moving the focus from image to quality of sound. Yet the

⁴¹ Tresch and Dolan, "Toward a New Organology," 289.

⁴² "Premium Harps," Lyon & Healy Harps, Inc., <https://www.lyonhealy.com/harps/style-26-gold/>

⁴³ "Professional Harps," Lyon & Healy Harps, Inc., <https://www.lyonhealy.com/harps/style-30/>

instrument's decoration is still associated with numerous stereotypes in the minds of listeners and performers.

Although other instruments can also be personalized, perusing various harp manufacturing companies' catalogues indicates that this personalization happens more often and more visibly with the harp than with other instruments. This tendency brings to mind Tresch and Dolan's question of who is playing who.⁴⁴ Does the performer really choose the harp, or do sociological influences result in the harp choosing the performer, so to speak? How strongly do visual aspects factor into the instrument's agency?

The harp's design also influences a second factor in this category regarding the instrument's agency: the gender associations and stereotypes that surround the instrument, which were discussed above while analyzing the four categories of identity. In terms of general perception, Jason Cumberledge refers to a 1981 study by Griswold and Chroback about the gender associations of instruments, in which students rated the harp as the most feminine instrument, followed by the flute and the piccolo. As Cumberledge explains, "feminine gender associations with certain musical instruments may lead male [students] to shy away from those instruments."⁴⁵ Susan Hallam, Lynne Rogers, and Andrea Creech argue that this type of gender-stereotyping depends on a range of factors, "including the shape or

⁴⁴ The question of who is playing who implies Tresch and Dolan's claims that the instrument's agency provides it with human characteristics. Therefore, it is who is playing who, instead of who is playing what.

⁴⁵ Jason P. Cumberledge, "Instrument and Gender as Factors in the Perception of Musicians and Musical Performance," *Contributions to Music Education* 43 (2018): 61.

size of the instrument, its pitch, quality of sound or the need for particular characteristics in order to play it, for instance, physical endurance.”⁴⁶

Anne Yeung writes that the development of more austere designs like the Salzedo model were made in an effort to establish a new image for the harp that would distance it from the “gaudy parlor-furniture style harp.”⁴⁷ While she does not make a direct reference in this passage to the gender associations involved in the production of new designs—including the Salzedo model—elsewhere she discusses early-twentieth-century associations between gender and the quality of harp playing, writing, “Harpists who were able to subdue the harp and capture the attention of the public were ascribed ‘masculine’ qualities” and explaining further that male harpists were preferred and received more publicity due to societal restrictions on women’s activities and stereotypes of masculine superiority.⁴⁸ According to Yeung, “the stereotype of the harp as an ornate bauble instead of a versatile instrument continued to be propagated by society in the twentieth century.”⁴⁹

In her article “A Ghost in the House,” Noël Wan provides several examples of what she calls “thinly veiled sexism” or of important performers claiming that “while the harp is considered feminine, there’s a reason why men are better than women.”⁵⁰ This is where a new factor within this category (technique) converges with the second factor (gender associations) in a way that relates to performance technique and the production of a clean sound: 1) The modern pedal harp is a big, heavy instrument; 2) the production of a quality sound requires

⁴⁶ Susan Hallam, Lynne Rogers, and Andrea Creech, “Gender Differences in Musical Instrument Choice,” *International Journal of Music Education* 26, no. 1 (2008): 7.

⁴⁷ Yeung, “Gender, Image, and Reception,” 132.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁰ Noël Wan, “A Ghost in the House,” *Collective*, March 24, 2022, <https://thecollectiveis.us/?p=1402>, par. 7.

building soft calluses⁵¹ that develop over several weeks through multiple stages of painful blisters forming on the player's fingertips; 3) a proper technique is required to reduce buzzing when replacing the fingers on the strings; 4) the string tension is high, and continues to increase with newer models (e.g., the Salvi Diva), which requires even greater arm strength and finger pressure; 5) the body must be relaxed to produce a clean sound, as well as to play fast and virtuosically, even when it is held in awkward and unnatural positions; and finally, 6) the need for constant practice to keep the first five items accounted for.. Following historical gender stereotypes, all these feats would be considered masculine, and one might therefore assume that a strongly built man would have more advantages than a petite woman. However, this is not necessarily the case. Some female harpists in the twenty-first century possess bigger sounds than many of their male counterparts; thus, the issue of male supremacy due to physical strength may depend more on technique than on body morphology.

Even when the required preparatory work is done, unexpected things might happen during a performance that remain outside the performer's control. For example, a string might break, or a pedal might not engage properly, causing harmonic changes and emotional distress for the performer, who must identify the problem and solve it as quickly as possible. Therefore, the harp's agency is foregrounded, and both performer and instrument need to be in sync to present a seamless performance.

Tresch and Dolan's third category is *the map of mediations*, or "the location they occupy with regard to other elements: other instruments, the range of users involved with them, their

⁵¹ The repetitive friction of the finger pressure on the string causes the skin to first blister, and then harden. But if a callus becomes too hard, the sound quality will be affected. When this happens, harpists usually must file their calluses to soften them.

objects, their audiences.”⁵² The authors provide several examples from scientific contexts, in which the relationship between elements brought scientific and technological advances: for instance, Pasteur’s experiments on food contamination, or the way that Cornelius Donder arranged his laboratory to correlate reaction times to cognitive events. Tresch and Dolan explain that in music, two terms exist to describe this type of organization: instrumentation, which describes the act of distributing musical material; and orchestration, a specific context of assemblage known as the orchestra.⁵³ The authors describe the historical correlation between the two terms, as well as the implications for how composers write for each instrument, and how they combine instruments and use them in specific settings. Tresch and Dolan pose two groups of questions, one related to traditional uses and the other to the inclusion of technology. In the first group, they ask: “How do different instruments within a group relate to each other? How are they coordinated? What sort of spaces do they require? What institutions support the ensemble?”⁵⁴ In the second: “How is a particular studio constituted? What is the relationship between people developing new technologies and those producing music with the technologies? How do scientific and musical practices merge and distinguish themselves?”⁵⁵

Historically, the harp has been included in many types of ensembles in both accompanying and solo roles. Robert Adelson points out that Sébastien’s nephew Pierre traveled extensively throughout Europe to encourage orchestras to adopt Erard’s new double-action harps, which offered better reliability and sound quality than their predecessors. In addition, Hector Berlioz’s friendship with virtuoso harpist Elias Parish-Alvars cemented the

⁵² Tresch and Dolan, “Toward New Organology,” 291.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

use of the new pedal harp in the orchestra.⁵⁶ For the following century, the harp would be mostly used within this setting, as well as to a lesser extent in chamber ensembles. In the twentieth century, composers' newfound interest in the instrument and the surfacing of several virtuoso performers gave rise to a new focus on the harp as a solo instrument. Anne Yeung provides several examples of composers, including Arnold Bax, Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, and André Caplet, who wrote music inspired by harpists Lily Laskine and Micheline Kahn, among others. In addition, new societies that promoted the instrument were founded by Marcel Grandjany, Phia Bergout, and Carlos Salzedo, and others.⁵⁷ Each from their own perspectives and based on their own values, these organizations continue to foster audience education, connections between performers, and the development of new musical and research projects.

Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, harpists and manufacturers have joined forces to produce new instruments that can fulfill the technological requirements of the modern era, transforming the spaces in which the instrument is used, and creating new relationships between composers and performers, as well as with other artistic mediums. Anne Yeung cites several examples dating back to the 1940s, proving that this process has been in progress for more than eight decades. However, the instrument was historically used first and foremost to elevate the performance, to fill out the music harmonically, or to introduce radio and television segments.⁵⁸ Addressing the emergence of the harp in jazz and popular ensembles during that period, Yeung quotes Sarah K. Voynow:

Inspired by the music of Ravel and Stravinsky, arrangers such as Boyd Reyburn included instruments from the symphony orchestra to define further his band's style. Drawn from the inspiration of the orchestral sound, the harp

⁵⁶ Robert Adelson, *Erard: The Empire of the Harp* (Paris: Camac Publications, 2023), 133.

⁵⁷ Yeung, "Gender, Image, and Reception," 119–22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

emerged as a secondary instrument in the commercially successful society bands of the time. Although not a jazz instrument, the primary function of the harp was to fill in orchestral textures which mainly included a flurry of rapid glissandos and arpeggios. A pleasing addition to sweeten the big band brass sound, the lyrical quality and varied sonorities of the harp provided the ensemble with elegance and helped to establish the jazz orchestra as a high society entertainment.⁵⁹

Today, the harp has expanded its horizons and assumed a more prominent position within popular ensembles. The instrument is now included in jazz trios and other ensembles to provide the same level of harmonic support and virtuosic capability as the piano. Musicians such as Park Stickney, Brandy Younger, Deborah Henson-Conant, Valérie Milot, Alexander Boldachev, and Caroline Lizotte, among others, showcase the harp's versatility as an instrument with a wide range of technical and musical possibilities. This trend extends to other popular genres such as rock and pop. Artists including the singer Beyoncé and the rapper Jay Z featured harpist Kristen Agresta-Copely as a regular member of their bands for several years. Dutch harpist Remy van Kesteren transitioned from classical harp into rock and pop, and is a leader in the use of technology with the harp. The harp's map of mediations has transformed over the past two hundred years and continues to evolve into an ever more versatile instrument.

The final category of instrument ethics is "*the telos of an instrument's activity, or its ends.*"⁶⁰ Tresch and Dolan write:

The answer may seem obvious in the case of musical instruments: a musical instrument is intended to play music. But even beyond the vast range of uses and meanings of musical performance, it's also true that musical instruments have at various points been employed to nonmusical ends.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sarah K. Voynow, "The History of the Harp in a Jazz Ensemble," *American Harp Journal* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 10, quoted in Yeung, "Image, Gender, and Perception," 135.

⁶⁰ Tresch and Dolan, "Toward a New Organology," 284.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 294.

They provide musical examples in which specific instruments are used to serve as sonic symbols of aesthetic and psychological ideas. For instance, in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the trombone is used to represent the authority of the Commendatore. The harp, on the other hand, has consistently been used in music to represent angels or, as in Debussy's *La Mer*, the movement of the sea.

As discussed above, the harp acquired social prominence as a feminine and elitist instrument at the end of the eighteenth century, in the court of the French queen Marie Antoinette. Later, it was used as a tool for upper class ladies to demonstrate their abilities in their search for a suitable husband, which cemented its gendered and class-based stereotypes. Today, harpists use the harp as a tool to advocate for changing societal paradigms related to issues such as gender and race; to educate audiences about the instrument's infinite capabilities; and to make connections between foreign cultural traditions. Most importantly, harps are tools to express personal identities and narratives.

Presenting and analyzing the two sets of categories outlined by Jin Hyung Lim (performance identities) and John Tresch and Emily Dolan (ethics of instruments), I have also suggested connections between them. Tresch and Dolan's view of instruments as objects possessing agencies that are formed and evolve through interactions with individuals correspond to the processes that Jin Hyung Lim identifies in humans, and more specifically in musicians who form multiple identities related to performance. In the following chapter, I will combine both sets of categories to explain how harpists of the current generation are expanding the instrument's capabilities by applying these concepts in their artistic practice and finding new ways to express their musical identities. My discussion will be based in large part on interviews of six international harpists who are leaders in the field of classical music, but who are also active outside of traditional performance settings. This study forms the basis

of the rationale for my own internal processes as a harpist of this generation, searching for my musical identity.

Chapter 2

The Four Categories in Practice

In the previous chapter, I discussed the theoretical concepts of performance identity as developed by Jin Hyung Lim and of the ethics of instruments as proposed by John Tresch and Emily Dolan, using the harp and its performers as examples. My analysis outlined the categories that constitute each conceptual framework and identified commonalities between them. Within each set, the first category relates to defining the who or what; the second to their relationships with others; the third to how these relationships vary in specific circumstances; and the fourth to the instrument's or musician's purpose or end. Now that each set of categories has been analyzed on its own, I will apply them in combination to the artistic practice of six world-class international harpists—Caroline Lizotte, Alexandra Tibbitts, Noël Wan, Valérie Milot, Remy van Kesteren, and Alexander Boldachev—who are all producing new musical knowledge and influencing the harp's cultural evolution in the twenty-first century.

Jonathan Impett asserts that musicians “engage on some level with the production of cultural knowledge,” explaining further that since it is “irreducible to *epistêmê* or *technê*, cultural knowledge requires a context, some degree of common experience, however tacit or individually interpreted, if it is to enter the stream of cultural consciousness.”⁶² I chose to study these six harpists and their experimentation processes because they share three attributes related to this sense of cultural knowledge: 1) their personal identities have changed their relationship with the instrument's affordances, combining elements of difference and

⁶² Jonathan Impett, “The Contemporary Musician and the Production of Knowledge: Practice Research and Responsibility,” in *Artistic Research in Music: Discipline and Resistance* ed. by Jonathan Impett (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), 221.

narrative to express their individuality; 2) they have moved beyond the context of classical harp performance through a process of experimentation and collaboration with other artists, making the instrument relevant to the times in which we are currently living; and 3) by expressing their individualities, these harpists embody the demand for acceptance and open-mindedness that has become prominent in modern society, thus transforming cultural behaviors within the harp community.

Canadian harpist and composer Caroline Lizotte writes original repertoire that employs technology to produce new sonorities, expressing her personal affinities towards rock without leaving the confines of classical music. Valérie Milot, also Canadian and a former student of Lizotte, follows her teacher's path of technology use; however, Milot goes one step further to include extensive visual components in her recitals, which can be considered an art installation as well as a concert, and has developed cellular phones technology to accompany any type of classical music performance.⁶³ Alexander Boldachev (Russia/Switzerland) has a close relationship with the theatrical arts. He creates multidisciplinary projects in which the harp is combined with theatre, ballet, and fashion. Boldachev is also a composer and arranger. Remy van Kesteren (Netherlands) and Alexandra Tibbitts (USA) have entered into a deeper relationship with technology by creating elaborate electronic systems that adhere physically to their instruments. They also have taken the path of composing original music that fits their personal aesthetics and views of the harp. Van Kesteren collaborates with harp factories and luthiers to develop new instruments, including developing a low-cost harp to support the instrument's democratization. In addition, he founded the Dutch Harp Festival and World Competition with the aim of challenging traditional mindsets related to the instrument. Alexandra Tibbitts is known as the "bionic

⁶³ "History", NEX-perience official website, <https://nex-perience.com>

harpist,” having created two control systems in collaboration with developers at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Music Media and Technology (CIRMMT) in Montreal, which expand the use of technology in harp performance without interfering with the instrument’s already complex playing technique.⁶⁴ Finally, the Taiwanese-American harpist Noël Wan focuses on expressing herself through contemporary music and fosters debates about gender stereotypes as a feminist performer and scholar.

These six harpists are not the only ones who embody these traits but constitute a small sample among a larger movement. Their experiences are also congruent with my own exploration of musical identity as a harpist. My analysis is based on interviews with these six harpists in which I asked twenty-nine-questions on topics ranging from general background and identity to technology and new projects. Their responses invite comparison, allowing me to identify commonalities and differences in their views about the harp, its stereotypes, the community, and work methodologies. (A full transcript of the interviews may be found in Appendix A.) Sometimes the performers responded before the question was fully articulated; clearly, their answers represent significant reflections of their thought processes.

From a quantitative scientific point of view, these subjects might not be considered a representative sample of the international harp community for several reasons. First, with four women and two men, there is a gender imbalance among the respondents—but this resulted from a conscious choice made to reflect the disparity in the wider community of harpists. Second, all six respondents belong to the Western European/North American culture—including Noël Wan, who is Taiwanese but grew up in the US—which might raise

⁶⁴ John Sullivan et al., “Gestural Control of Augmented Instrumental Performance: A Case Study of the Concert Harp,” in *MOCO: 5th International Conference on Movement and Computing, June 28–30, 2018, Genoa, Italy* (New York: ACM, 2018), par. 2, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3212721.3212814>.

questions about privilege and access to instruments. Despite their backgrounds, however, they all take a stance in favor of deconstructing elitism, and encourage the harp's democratization through their artistic practices. That they share this goal indicates that this has entered the mainstream and is not only occurring in the periphery. Third, at age fifty-five, Caroline Lizotte stands out from the rest group of harpists, who are in their early- to mid-thirties. Lizotte serves as an example of a successful forward-thinking female composer who continues to inspire younger generations of women to write music for the harp. Finally, from a historical point of view, the six respondents' efforts to expand the pedal harp and its uses is not a new process. They are continuing the work of previous generations of performers who—in their own cultural and social circumstances—attempted to achieve similar goals. What differentiates my respondents from the previous generations are the solutions they have found to move away from the stereotype—focusing on inclusion and acceptance, rather than elitism, in an age when communication makes it easier to achieve what previous generations could not.

In his book *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance Through Artistic Research*, Paulo de Assis explains that academics have not reached a universal definition of artistic research, but also that “there is some consensus that describes a particular mode of artistic practice and of knowledge production in which scholarly research and artistic activity become inextricably intertwined. [...] It is a specific field of activity where practitioners actively engage with and participate in discursive formations emanating from their concrete artistic practice.”⁶⁵ Later on, he mentions that “experimentation is the key concept to operate the intended shift from representation to problematisation [...] and an

⁶⁵ Paulo de Assis, *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance Through Artistic Practice* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), 12.

approach that fosters problematisation must remain open and flexible in terms of its starting objects of inquiry.”⁶⁶

Although de Assis’ concepts of experimentation and artistic research are aimed at shifting perspectives in both the analysis and final performance of a pre-existing body of works, his ideas can be also applied more generally to current artistic practices in the harp world: practices that not only call into question traditional interpretation processes, but also lead to the creation of new music, renewed relationships with audiences, and the education of the next generation of performers. For example, both the USA International Harp Competition and the Dutch World Competition are prestigious events that hold considerable weight in the community, influencing what virtually every young harpist will work on for the next two to three years. Nonetheless, the USA International Harp Competition focuses on perpetuating the art of representation since performers are judged on how accurately, technically speaking, they can perform a certain amount of repertoire.⁶⁷

In contrast, the Dutch World Competition focuses on presenting music from the problematisation perspective. As described by its founder, Remy van Kesteren, the competition “[has] been trying to push people to think more about what they want, what they stand for.”⁶⁸ Whether one plays Debussy on a pedal harp, or folk repertoire on the arpa jarocho, the focus is on defending one’s artistic choices and on drawing younger generations away from outdated mentalities. This approach increases audience awareness about their relationship to the harp and its possibilities, as well as inviting performers, albeit indirectly, to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷ “Judging Rules and Procedures”, 12th Solo USAIHC program, accessed March 27, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f55d703e00be17785a3e70/t/62c424e9aa306b38b29601e2/1657021680400/2022+program+book+online-compressed.pdf>

⁶⁸ Interview with Remy van Kesteren, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 25th, 2023, response to question 9.

become artist-researchers to a certain extent. Other examples of Assis' concept of problematisation being applied to current harp practices include the work of Alexandra Tibbitts and Noël Wan. Tibbitts focuses on how to simplify the relationship between technology and harpists, and Wan on education through the production of academic knowledge. As a result, they declassify “what the harp is allowed to be,”⁶⁹ and become—directly or indirectly—artist-researchers.

The categories in practice

Below, I outline how the categories of performance identity and the ethics of instruments can be combined, and apply these synthesized categories in my analysis of the six harpists' interview responses.

1. Identity as difference and formed by interactions with others; how we perceive ourselves, as well as how others recognize us through what we are not. | The material disposition: the nature and configuration of its elements and the material parts that make it up.

As discussed in chapter 1, the first category relates to a sense of “us versus them.” Viewed from the perspective of “us”, all six harpists are classically trained, having received at a minimum a bachelor's degree in performance from a university or similar institution. All six have or are developing careers as soloists. The majority have participated in the competition circuit, winning many international prizes. Remy van Kesteren and Noël Wan, for example, were the gold medalists of the USA International Harp Competition in 2013 and 2022, respectively. All six have at some point presented standard repertoire in their performances.

⁶⁹ Alexandra Tibbitts, Interview with the author, Montreal, May 4th, 2023, response to question 21.

Regarding how they approach the harp, all agree that it is a limitless instrument with infinite capabilities. Such views directly affect their approach to making music and how they use the harp, thinking of it as a tool. They also all agree that the instrument's supposed limitations, as perceived by other musicians and audiences, stem from the tendency to compare it with other instruments, including comparing its repertoire with works written for other instruments by historically-recognized composers.

When talking about the harp community specifically, the six agree that there have been some improvements in terms of access and focus, but also that there is still work to do in this area. For instance, Noël Wan states, “I don’t know if the elite harp circles are actually changing that much. The gatekeepers are still gatekeeping in that way. The number of people who care about what the gatekeepers think is shrinking, but it’s still there.”⁷⁰ Remy van Kesteren and Valérie Milot both agree that traditional competitions continue to dictate the rules. However, all six respondents observe that younger generations are breaking with this canon more openly. Caroline Lizotte refers to the divide in technical lineage, explaining that “with the Grandjany and Salzedo techniques, at some point there were some fights between the schools, Russian schools, even Asians. The fact that they can all communicate now I think is a step towards acceptance, and to the will of being a community.”⁷¹ The new generations are ready to move away from the strict division. According to Noël Wan:

A lot of people I talk to my own age have expressed that we’ve been relying on our teachers for a long time to provide a community, whereas is the Juilliard crowd, or the Indiana crowd, or the Alice Chalifoux crowd... We’ve relied on that for a long time, and we are feeling the need to break away from all that and say, well, how can we build new communities not based on method and lineage, but on some other things?⁷²

⁷⁰ Noël Wan, Interview with the author, Toronto, Canada, June 3rd, 2023, response to question 8.

⁷¹ Caroline Lizotte, Interview with the author, Quebec, Canada, May 12th, 2023, response to question 9.

⁷² Wan, response to question 12.

Therefore, the marked lines that used to divide the community are slowly beginning to disappear, and new ones are being formed based instead on embracing uniqueness and accepting differences.

In terms of difference or the perspective of “them,” and if one uses the unofficial classifications of “angel versus rebel” (see Chapter 1), all six are rebels, regardless of the type of harp they own. They have all experienced situations that caused them to break with tradition. Although some, such as Valérie Milot and Noël Wan, still call themselves classical harpists based on their core training, others have changed the way they classify themselves as musicians. For example, Remy van Kesteren claims, “I am a musician and I play the harp,”⁷³ and Alexander Boldachev calls himself a “classical crossover harpist and composer.”⁷⁴ It seems that the connotations attached to the label of “classical harpist” and the weight of the stereotypes surrounding that terminology no longer align with the way they perceive themselves, and adopting other terms differentiates them from the rest of the group.

With respect to the choice of harp, these performers shift the focus from aesthetic appearance to sound quality. Personal aesthetic preferences still influence the decision, but they are no longer a main factor. Caroline Lizotte, who has always chosen simple looking models, has added extra “rebellious” colors to her instrument; for example, her electric blue Salzedo, and her mirror Big Blue electroacoustic Camac. Lizotte recounts, “I didn’t want to play Handel when I was young, and I did not want to have a Lyon and Healy model 23 either. I wanted to have a model 30 because it was more modern and the Salzedo afterwards. I always felt a little modern, but now I own a 23! So, things change.”⁷⁵ Valérie Milot

⁷³ Van Kesteren, response to question 3.

⁷⁴ Alexander Boldachev, Interview with the author, Zurich, Switzerland, May 29th, 2023, response to question 3.

⁷⁵ Lizotte, response to question 17.

experienced something similar when buying her rare Salvi Apollonia, stating, “It’s so not my type, those very gilded instruments. It can fit for some people but not me. It’s just not the way I am. But it just happened to be the best harp I’ve ever played on in my entire life.”⁷⁶

Alexandra Tibbitts and Alexander Boldachev both agree that if instruments were not so expensive, they would buy different looking models to fit specific projects, venues, or environments. Remy van Kesteren has instruments designed specifically for him. For example, his Salvi Reus not only features a very simple looking design, but also has two extra strings and an additional dampening mechanism. He stays away from gilded instruments claiming that “talking about inclusivity... when you walk on stage playing a golden harp... I don’t think that is very twenty-first century.”⁷⁷

Noël Wan’s experienced the reverse of Lizotte’s process. Based on her previous choice to own a 23, Wan could be viewed as integrating better into the norm. She won a Gold 23 as the gold medallist of the USA International Harp competition, but decided to exchange it for a blue Salvi Diva, and has recently purchased a Camac Big Blue. She defends her sound over looks choices, mentioning that she “wouldn’t choose a harp that looks cool but has a bad sound. I think it’s so important that if we want to be taken seriously as musicians to also attend to musical elements in what we do, so there’s not all fireworks, but there is some substance in there too. It helps us get taken more seriously.”⁷⁸ What remains a constant among all six respondents is that the object is chosen based on personal preferences. However, although aesthetic design is still an important factor when choosing an instrument, in the end the emphasis shifts from instrument’s visual identity to its sonic profile and how

⁷⁶ Milot, response to question 17.

⁷⁷ Van Kesteren, response to question 17.

⁷⁸ Wan, response to question 17.

closely the instrument's sound matches the performer's musical taste and views of themselves.

2.Identity is both personal and social, constituted and negotiated via numerous kinds of relationships. It can be read differently by different people, according to social contexts. | The instrument's mode of mediation: whether its action is considered to be autonomous or passive, modifying or transparent, hidden or visible.

As explained in Chapter 1, the second category in each set presents social preconceptions that are linked to outdated paradigms, such as the assignment of genders and names to instruments by their owners. If the harp's feminine associations are to be taken as a rule, harpists should think of their instruments as women. However, this is not the case among all my respondents, who have assigned their instruments three types of gender definitions. Noël Wan is the only one of the six that considers her harp to be female, claiming, "It's a very feminine instrument, but not in the weak, domestic kind of way. I think it's feminine in the sense that it resonates with you. It's close to you and it's an intimate instrument. And without stereotyping, as a woman I'm more inclined to want to be close and intimate, and get to know people."⁷⁹ Both Alexandra Tibbitts⁸⁰ and Valérie Milot think of their harps as men with whom they share long-lasting relationships. Milot states, "The harp is more of this lion energy. It can buzz, it's always on the edge of explosion. So, it's very masculine."⁸¹ For Milot, this connection with masculinity is not affected by the aesthetic design since she owns a model named after female goddess, which also has a very delicate shape and gilding. Lizotte, van

⁷⁹ Wan, response to question 20.

⁸⁰ Tibbitts, response to question 20.

⁸¹ Milot, response to question 20.

Kesteren, and Boldachev, finally, do not see the harp as a gendered object. For them, it is a medium of expression rather than a separate entity that can be assigned a gender. Considering my respondents' views on this subject, harpists are tending to move away from the harp's feminine associations, and such views could be interpreted as an effort to challenge stereotypes.

On the other hand, the gender of performers continues to be an open discussion. Most interviewees agree that male performers continue to have many advantages over women. Milot and van Kesteren present size and tension (see Chapter 1) as one of the factors that might be contributing to this disparity. Most of them also agreed that men receive more attention due to their relative scarcity among harpists and the traditionally patriarchal systems that continue to dominate Western society. In terms of performers, Boldachev presents an interesting point of view:

I think the harp is a good example of the gender equality and inclusion. It shows that when we talk now about such things, we should consider both sides. Normally when we talk about inclusion, we talk about females that need to get more attention, or higher fees and possibilities, and when we talk about the harp it is the other way around.⁸²

He considers the instrument to be the most inclusive in terms of women's access to it and the success of their careers. Noël Wan disagrees with this view:

I think a lot of my issues with gender is feeling like we are constantly subject to a lot of double standards, where women have to work twice as hard to be recognized. A man does one thing, and we say oh my god! You are amazing! And women are working very hard trying to be recognized; and the only way we feel like we can be recognized is to become more like the male harpists. So, to be super edgy and whatever. But that's in terms of gaining power and recognition in the community. On the other hand, there's the question of this feminine imagery that I don't think helps diversify our profession. I don't want to use the word progress because I don't think it's a fair way to describe it, but conforming to a stereotype doesn't encourage

⁸² Boldachev, response to question 19.

diversity in the field, which is the same issue of just having a narrow understanding of what people do. Men get to be flashy and free and that's what we expect a professional harpist to look. They have to be a genius in some way.⁸³

Despite their varied opinions about gender inequalities between performers, all my respondents agree that social preconceptions held by audiences and musical institutions continue to limit the instrument and the place of its performers in the world of classical music.

In her dissertation, Anne Yeung asserts that in orchestras like the Vienna Philharmonic, which did not allow female performers until 1997, “the presence of a female harpist is tolerable only because the harp is not considered a vital and equal member of the ensemble.”⁸⁴ Therefore, harpists must prove themselves to satisfy audience expectations. Alexandra Tibbitts and Noël Wan refer to the gender bias of computer algorithms used to populate social media feeds, which more often show either the angelical type of harpist, or male performers doing something edgy. Wan touches on this dichotomy by asserting, “We're being portrayed one or the other. I don't know if we harpists can change. We have to change with people, through scholarship, through performance, so that people start to understand how the continuum is, rather than defaulting to one side or the other.”⁸⁵

According to Alexander Boldachev, the harp community's biggest challenge is marketing—how harpists present themselves and the instrument to the world. Tibbitts remarks that men market themselves better in social media; but the key is not how performers are using the tools, but how the audience tends to perceive men and women harpists

⁸³ Wan, response to question 19.

⁸⁴ Anne Yeung, “Gender, Image and Reception: A Social History of the Pedal Harp” (DMA diss., Indiana University, 1998), 149.

⁸⁵ Wan, response to question 19.

differently, based on the associations of genius and eccentricity that surround male performers. The stereotype may continue to be perpetuated in people's minds because the harp is still considered to be a lesser instrument, and women tend to be seen in that light as well. This topic continues to raise important questions about differences in views, and such conversations tend to be projected towards overturning the stereotype of the angelic harpist. Nonetheless, it will take years for sociological changes to take hold and gain enough visibility for performers of any gender to be able to avoid the harp's stereotypes. The key to making these changes happen is education. Performers who learn more about the instrument's history, literature, construction, and social associations will be able to make conscious choices that translate into the production of better musical and artistic content for audiences to consume.

3. Identity is always contingent on and changes constantly via experience and negotiations with others in particular circumstances. | The map of mediations of which an instrument is a part. In music it includes the air, sound, composers, players, other instruments and listeners, and the rules of composition.

As discussed in Chapter 1, diasporic identity became relevant to the discussion of how performers develop multiple identities. Among my six subjects, three (Noël Wan, Alexandra Tibbitts and Alexander Boldachev) are diasporic to a certain degree, and the rest belong to forward-thinking societies such as Canada and The Netherlands, which foster freedom of expression. Alexandra Tibbitts moved from California to Quebec; Noël Wan was born in Taiwan and raised in the US, and Alexander Boldachev moved from Russia to Switzerland when he was 14 years old. Although the first example might seem to be less extreme, the cultural society of Southern California is very different to Montreal's, which Tibbitts

considers to be “the city of misfits.”⁸⁶ Wan does not physically embody the European traditional look, but being part of the competition circuit for several years kept her learning repertoire and moving in circles that adhere to the traditional norm. Boldachev’s teachers in Russia and their views on the role of a harpist did not allow his desire to expand his professional horizons to crossover genres.

Despite the cultural contradictions they experienced, the circumstances in which these performers have been involved pushed them to find new places for the harp. Caroline Lizotte’s desires to bring the instrument to other settings began to develop when she was young and her brother invited her to join his rock band playing the harp.⁸⁷ Remy van Kesteren developed similar interests at a later stage—after winning the USA International Harp Competition and landing a contract with Deutsche Gramophone to record harp standards—and decided to leave his growing professional career as a solo harpist to perform pop, rock, and electronic music. In addition, he is working to help democratize the harp and increase access for those who cannot afford an expensive instrument. One example is his collaboration with luthier Joris Beets to produce Harp-E, an electroacoustic lap harp that is assembled by the performer and costs less than five hundred dollars.⁸⁸ Alexandra Tibbitts brings her harp to raves and underground nightclubs, and then goes on to perform in concert halls with professional orchestras. These artists all share a curiosity about other genres of music and forms of art, and it is that insatiable curiosity that makes them question how they can expand their instrument’s uses.

⁸⁶ Tibbitts, response to question 10.

⁸⁷ Lizotte, response to question 22.

⁸⁸ Harp-E, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.harp-e.com/en-us>.

These artists also believe that putting the harp in unexpected contexts helps educate audiences. Van Kesteren remarks, “These days I play pop festivals, and there are some people that will never ever buy a ticket for a harp concert, and suddenly they are at this festival and are confronted with this instrument. Many times, they come up to me and it can be an overwhelming experience.”⁸⁹ Valérie Milot offered similar views when she describes the reaction of the audience to her harp recitals stating:

It’s true that some people that don’t know the harp will look at programming and see it’s a harp recital. And the chances that you will go to that concert is because you are interested in the harp. And knowing that a lot of people don’t know what the harp is really about and have some misconceptions of what it is. Or some harp shows may fit with what they think the harp is, but they can also be very surprised. [...] Some people come to the concert because their partner wants to come, and they are like augh... And then they say wow! That’s not what I expected! Well, yes! The harp is not just what you think and there are so many things! And often at this point is when I share other harpists’ names and I go and see what this person does.⁹⁰

Both Alexander Boldachev and Caroline Lizotte refer to Harpo Marx's efforts in the 1940s to include the harp in the Marx Brothers’ shows as an example that proves how beneficial it is to take the harp out of its traditional concert contexts. Boldachev adds that “as any type of product, if you see it around on TV, on posters, on social media, there will be more people playing it, and more development.” In a similar vein, Lizotte explains that “it’s more a matter of society than harpist themselves, because there will always be angels and rebels. In every field. So, I guess the rebels are the ones that bring every media and every type of language into something new because you want to give. The harp exists and our community is a good one!”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Van Kesteren, response to question 29.

⁹⁰ Milot, response to question 29.

⁹¹ Lizotte, response to question 29.

4. Identity as narrative: our experiences, actions, and events in every corner of our lives creates a narrative. | The telos of an instrument's activity, its aim or ends.

All six of my respondents put the harp in non-traditional contexts. But how are they doing so? As stated in the previous chapter, the categories of performance identity and of ethics of instruments are related and build upon each other. As the final stage, category four helps answer the question of how. Considering their professional endeavors in conjunction with their interviews, it is clear that my six respondents have all gone through a conscious process of questioning their identity as harpists, reflecting on their personal preferences in light of societal and historical assumptions, sometimes adhering to the rules, at other times rebelling against them. As a result, they have formed personal narratives with their instrument, and expressed these narratives through their music with technological and academic support, and in combination with other artistic mediums. Most importantly, they all collaborate with others.

Four of the six have moved towards composition and improvisation as new means of expressing their identities. Valérie Milot and Noël Wan, who remain solely performers, have nonetheless engaged in other creative and entrepreneurial activities that serve both their personal narrative and the evolution of the community in general. The music they perform, standard or otherwise, is always influenced by their personal identities. Remy van Kesteren and Caroline Lizotte have shifted completely towards performing their own music exclusively; others, like Valérie Milot, Alexander Boldachev, Noël Wan and Alexandra Tibbitts continue to perform standard repertoire when asked, but always add an extra element that connects with their identities. They may choose music because its context serves a purpose, or they may use their personal views on dress codes to support their narrative and that of the music they are performing. Milot supports such choices, claiming: “If I dress in a way that I don’t like, or do things that I don’t like, then I am not myself and cannot have this

contact with people.”⁹² They have relinquished the images of gowns and tuxedos, and use clothes to serve the music rather than to fit a visual stereotype. Some, such as Alexandra Tibbitts also collaborate with designers to create outfits specifically for the music they are performing.⁹³

Although my six respondents do not share a single methodology for creating new shows, they all begin with an idea that aligns with their personal narrative. For example, Valérie Milot conceived her show *Transfiguration* during the pandemic as a response to the need to find refuge in one’s community.⁹⁴ After an idea forms, research brings it to fruition. Caroline Lizotte first explores the identities and ideas of her commissioners because she wants her music to also fit their personal aesthetics.⁹⁵ Noël Wan reads theoretical scholarship that can support both her academic views and the musical program.⁹⁶ The research process may also include collaborative elements and inspiration drawn from meeting and learning from new people. All six performers share a sense of perfectionism and a need to be in control of their ideas about the performance they are developing, yet they are willing to relinquish some of that control to others in areas that fall outside their own expertise; nonetheless, they remain fully involved in every step of the process.

Another important aspect that helps them convey their narrative is the use of technology, which serves as a tool to not only expand the sound of the harp and its capabilities, but also to educate and connect with modern audiences. For Lizotte, technology is not limited to electronics, and it also involves the use of everyday objects that can

⁹² Milot, response to question 16.

⁹³ Tibbitts, response to question 16.

⁹⁴ Milot, response to question 25.

⁹⁵ Lizotte, response to question 25.

⁹⁶ Wan, response to question 25.

transform the sound of the harp. Most importantly, her current mission is to compose music for electroacoustic harps and provide harpists with original repertoire. In contrast, Alexander Boldachev prefers to incorporate technology only in some instances, explaining, “I want people to see that it’s all my hands. If I’m using the pedals or other effects through the computer, I would normally do it in collaboration with another person, because I’m not a big expert in that area.”⁹⁷

However, using a lot of technology in a show creates constraints and the pursuit of new sounds and musical possibilities must be balanced with an element of practicality. Due to differences in the types of equipment that each performer has available to them, Lizotte faces the obstacle of finding a balance in the amount of technology she can include in her compositions.⁹⁸ Milot, whose shows have many layers and require a multidisciplinary team, needs to find equipment that will fit a limited budget, because “for us artists, we ask for grants for projects, and there’s always a point where you have to choose: Ok, I don’t have all the money needed to do that, am I still going there? And usually, we say yes! So, it’s a lot of stress, risks, but definitely worth it.”⁹⁹ One downside of taking the path of including technology is that it adds to the financial pressure of playing an already expensive instrument, which might limit the accessibility of this type of work to many performers, or even delay the production of new performances. Nonetheless, it is proving to be an excellent tool for narrative development, creative expression, and the demystification of an instrument that otherwise might still be perceived as limited.

⁹⁷ Boldachev, response to question 26.

⁹⁸ Lizotte, response to question 26.

⁹⁹ Milot, response to question 26.

The work of these six performers aligns with de Assis's definition of artistic research. Their artistic practice is instilled with an extra layer of depth and research, brought about by problematizing and questioning their personal and musical identities. In accordance with the quote by Jonathan Impett introduced at the outset of this chapter, these harpists also share some degree of common experience, both in the way they have followed traditional values in using their instrument, and in their need to transform cultural consciousness about the harp through their artistic endeavors. As discussed above, this is not a new process, but a conscious effort to learn from the past and improve the ways in which the harp is used and how it is viewed by performers, audiences, and institutions. Through their work, the harp's purpose has morphed from a tool for European social distinction to one for identity expression and multiculturalism.

Chapter 3

Cuba's Sonic Identity and the Harpist's.

“Quien no tiene de congo, tiene de carabalí” (Who doesn't have Congo in them, has Carabalí] is an old Cuban proverb used to defuse arguments about race. The proverb serves as a reminder that there are many factors beyond biological traits that influence one's personal identity. In previous chapters, I examined identity on a global scale from both the individual's and the instrument's perspectives. I based my analysis on two sets of four categories that outline how identity affects the art of performance and performers' relationships with their instruments, specifically the pedal harp. I further discussed how increased awareness of identity's influence on music-making has been transforming the status quo of the harp, drawing on interviews with six world-class harpists who exemplify this trend. My analysis also served as an exercise to explore my own internal processes and evolution as a performer who embodies contrasting identities. The following two chapters will focus on how these concepts apply specifically to me, and how my environment, heritage, and cultural background as a diasporic musician impacted my doctoral degree and career as a professional harpist.

Because Cuba's national identity was a major influence for the creation of the artistic project *“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics*, which accompanies this research, I will include a discussion of Cuba's Afro-Cuban religion, the Regla de Osha, as a distinct identity category in the first part of this chapter. I lay out important information about this culture and its music to establish the cultural background that influences both my own identity and the mythology behind the concept of *“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics*. The second part of the chapter will consider how the categories I explored in Chapters 1 and 2 have influenced the development of my own musical identity, focusing on the first three from each

set. That discussion will lead to my presentation of the concept of *identity as narrative* in Chapter 4, with “*Orishas*” *Suite for Harp and Electronics* serving as the illustrative example.

Some historical facts of Cuba

An island nation located in the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba is the largest of the Greater Antilles. Historically, this was an attractive location for several political empires: from the Spaniards and the English in the colonial era, to the United States of America and the USSR in the twentieth century. Cuba was conquered by the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century and it remained under their control until 1898, when Spain signed over Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Cuba to the United States in the Treaty of Paris of 1898.¹⁰⁰ Cuba’s importance as a colony was rooted first in the discovery of gold, followed by the Spanish crown’s recognition of the land’s fertility for planting sugar and tobacco; in its many bays that allowed ships to stop and restock supplies while transporting goods and riches to and from Europe; and in its advantageous location, which provided easy access to the rest of America and the Caribbean. “The key to the Gulf,” as it is often referred to, became a strategic place to control other regions of the West Indies.

The exploitation of riches from the new lands required extensive yet cheap labor. According to Jalil Sued-Badillo, “the promise of gold determined the fate of the new lands,” and Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico became primary mining centers. The small *Taino* tribes were coerced into exploring, clearing and constructing mines, as well as extracting, smelting, and shipping ore, which wiped out their population in what Sued-Badillo calls a

¹⁰⁰ Brenda Gayle Plummer, “Building US Hegemony in the Caribbean,” in *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and its Peoples*, ed. by Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 419.

“truly genocidal population decline.”¹⁰¹ Spanish missionary Fray Bartolomé de las Casas attributed the many diseases imported from Europe, including measles and smallpox, as another reason for the fast decline of the native population.¹⁰² Therefore, a new labor force was needed. Román Orozco ascribes the high number of African slaves imported to Cuba to the growing sugar plantation industry, as slavery was “the only formula that guaranteed the owners that their laborers would not abandon their plantations to become small independent farmers.”¹⁰³ Although it is certain that the importation of African slaves became more extensive during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africans were imported as early as the 1540s to work in mining operations.

Most of the slaves were brought by Portuguese dealers who would negotiate with African tribes from the coast to buy slaves captured from enemy communities. Among the many tribes that were introduced in Cuba were the carabalíes from the Calabar region in southeast Nigeria. Others came from the Ivory Coast, the Golden Coast, and the so-called Slave Coast. Many also came from the Congo basin. However, due to their influence, the predominant ethnic group in Cuba is the Yoruba, which includes groups from the old Kingdom of Dahomey, present-day Togo, and a large region of southwest Nigeria.¹⁰⁴ The mix

¹⁰¹ Jalil Sued-Badillo explains that the term *Taino* is a modern label applied by historians to a variety of ethnic groups which populated the Caribbean islands prior to the European Conquest. Jalil Sued-Badillo, “From Taínos to Africans in The Caribbean,” in *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 99, 104.

¹⁰² [Bartolomé de Las Casas](#), “The Devastation of the Indies,” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Aviva Chomsky et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 14.

¹⁰³ Román Orozco, “Introducción,” in *Orishas del Panteón Afrocubano*, by Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui (Cádiz: Quorum Editores Asociación de la prensa de Cádiz, 2008), 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

of African tribes with the Spanish colonists resulted in a process of *transculturation*, in which immigrants of different races and social groups influenced other groups and were influenced by them in return, creating a new type of societal culture—in this case, the Cuban one.¹⁰⁵

Historical facts and religious tradition of the Regla de Osha

The Regla de Osha is a religion practiced in Cuba, which was introduced by the African slaves. In Africa, the *Orishas* (deities) were linked to a specific tribe or region, except for select rites such as *Obatalá*, which was practiced across a larger region (Obatalá was considered the creator of the world). In most cases, they were real humans who were deified after their deaths, and who often shared a common ancestor linking them to certain families. Orishas were attributed supernatural powers, and they were thought to control certain forces of nature, exercise various powers, and possess a deep knowledge of the properties of the plants used as medicines at the time. A pot or basin was used to preserve their power, and the orishas were described as pure, immaterial forces that were only perceptible to human beings through possession. The person to be possessed was usually a member of the same family, which is why today in the Regla de Osha, one speaks of “the son/daughter” of a specific deity. In Cuba, the classification of son/daughter refers to a spiritual kinship, but in Africa it denoted direct familial lineage since the orisha was considered an ancestor of the paternal genealogical line.¹⁰⁶ It is important to mention that this tradition has been passed down orally through generations, and that it continues to function the same way today as it did in Africa

¹⁰⁵ Fernando Ortiz, “Transculturation and Cuba,” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Aviva Chomsky et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 26.

¹⁰⁶ Román Orozco, “Introducción,” in *Orishas del Panteón Afrocubano*, by Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui (Cádiz: Quorum Editores Asociación de la prensa de Cádiz, 2008), 20–24.

many centuries ago. It is a mystical world that is learned through practice and repetition, characterized by a certain level of freedom within an established set of rules.

For those unfamiliar with the orishas, their stories and religious pantheon can be compared in some ways to those of the ancient Greeks. These deities are organized in hierarchical positions, and have human features and psychological characteristics (i.e., the flaws and strengths of a mortal), but also hold the capacity to control the natural forces around us and free us from curses and evils of this world. Therefore, one can recognize connections between mythologies. For example, Oshun, the goddess of fertility, sensuality, and love is the counterpart of Aphrodite; Shangó, the god of the thunder and war would be Ares; Obatalá, who controls thought and wisdom, can be compared to Metis; and Olofin y Oloddumare to Zeus, among others. The orishas are always represented as imperfect beings, and they all have different *caminos* (paths or avatars) depending on the *pataki* (legends, fables, or situations in which an orisha was involved), which contribute to the definition of the deity's attributes or gifts, and how it can help resolve a specific problem.¹⁰⁷ The same deity can take many forms—for example, the form of a child or an elderly person—or even change sexes. They are each associated with specific symbols, numbers, food, dances, and even prohibitions, and should be respected by every person who practices the religion, especially those who are the sons and daughters of orishas.

The music and instruments as elements of the magic

As discussed in Chapter 1, John Tresch and Emily Dolan argue that instruments have a level of agency and autonomy separate from the performer, and they become less passive under

¹⁰⁷ Diccionario Yoruba, https://www.slideshare.net/orco_inm/diccionario-yorubaespaol, 22.

certain circumstances. Whereas poetry's meaning is not necessarily present in the words, but in the ideas, for the Yorubas, the musical elements of their religion, including their instruments, are an indispensable part of their identity. And it is the active agency of the *bata* drums what enhances the magic of the ceremonies. From the process of construction to the performance, the drums are not just an accompaniment element, but a separate entity that holds subjective power, and that is respected and revered by the members of the congregation. Thus, bringing back Tresch and Dolan's question of who is playing who? For this ensemble, the human is not playing a passive instrument, it is also at the mercy of the drum's subjective identity and psychological power.

Fernando Ortiz argues that music "is not precisely found in the sounds, let alone in a specific range of them, but in the emotional or mental representations that are invoked by the sound vibrations, whichever they happen to be."¹⁰⁸ Spoken language is enhanced by the singing melodies that accompany a prayer, while the repeated rhythmic patterns of the drums, which are intrinsic to their daily lives, provide the emotional meaning. In coordinating rhythmic accents between song and instrumental music, Yoruba music enhances individual and collective efforts to hold the mystery. Ortiz also argues that "the rhythm, besides being a physical phenomenon and of its logical effect in repetition, [...] is also in itself a psychological phenomenon caused by the reflected impression that its resonance produces in the human mind through the senses."¹⁰⁹ Each deity possesses a special instrument that marks its invocation—maracas and bells are usually used to call *acheré* and *agogó*—and has many names with which they can be referred to. Knowledge of these words implies a level of power with which a person can control the *orisha*'s supernatural force, and the repetition of

¹⁰⁸ Fernando Ortiz, *Africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Ediciones Oriente, 1965), 354.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

sometimes incomprehensible words serves the same purpose.¹¹⁰ In addition, these instruments not only possess an auditory connection to magic, but the material dispositions are meant to come from a sacred tree or metal, or the skin of a sacred animal, providing it with a subjective separate identity. As it happens, priests and the members of the congregation learn the sounds without consciously knowing what the words mean; however, they intuitively comprehend the prayers' meanings, accepting that their mysteries are meant to be felt, rather than understood.

In addition to maracas and bells, the religion's other instruments are also percussive, namely from the membrane family. Collectively named batá, they are called *aña* in sacred contexts and referred to as *ilú* in secular usage. In addition, each ilú is named according to its size. The smallest is called *Okónkolo*, which refers to an object of small dimensions; the medium-sized one is *Itótele*, which means to carry out an action that follows in the order, in this case the order of succession in which the drum is played; and the largest and lowest in register is called *Iyá*, which means mother.¹¹¹ The *Iyá* must be played by the *Olubatá* (most capable musician), usually called *akpuataki* (boss), who “possesses the religious foundation of the drum, next to knowledge and hierarchies close to the Babalawo (priest) but obviously referred to the instrument itself.”¹¹²

The batá are a trio of bi-membrane, bi-percussive drums in the shape of an hourglass that are made out of hollowed wood and animal leather drumheads and ties, and are placed on the performers' knees. They can be considered a sextet due to their different tuning, and the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 190–91.

¹¹¹ Victoria Eli et al., *Instrumentos de la Música folclórico-popular de Cuba Vol.2* (La Habana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana, 1997), 320.

¹¹² Ibid., 321.

variety of sounds each membrane can produce, as well as how the membranes vibrations influence each other. Each drum is traditionally performed by a single male player, who is usually a member of the religion and is therefore allowed to touch the sacred drums. However, as a result of these instruments being used also in secular music in recent times, multiple batá can be performed by a single person, and the performers may not be sacralized or may be women. Each drumhead is hit with the hand, and sonic variety is produced by hitting the middle or the edge of the drumhead with the palm, the knuckles, or the fingers. The three batá are always placed in the same order: the Iyá in the middle, with the Okónkolo to its right and the Itótele to its left. The tuning of the drums varies from place to place, and changes with heat, humidity, and the length of time they have been played. The batá can be tuned by pulling on the leather straps that are connected to the metal ring, or by hitting the holding ring with a wooden mace.”¹¹³ Figure 1 shows the sounds that each drum can produce according to Fernando Ortiz. While Ortiz’s transcribes pitches according to the European tradition, spectral studies done by Victoria Eli and other authors have shown that the frequencies produced by the combination of the six membranes “rather than a definition of notes or fixed sounds, during the execution of these instruments, [...] produces an entire system of sonic relationships that perform different communicative functions distributed in the three levels: bass, treble and medium.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid., 327.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 330.

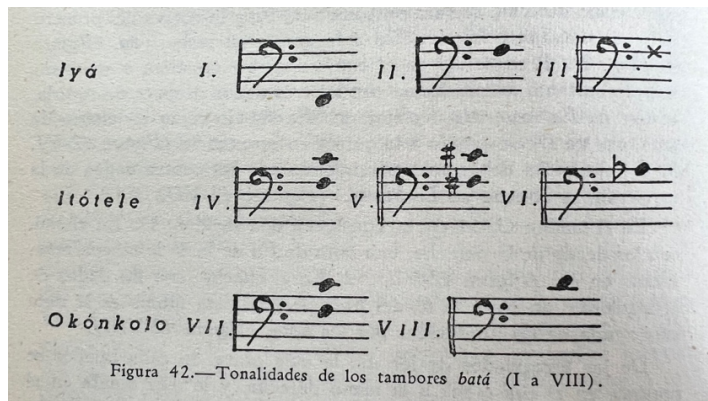


Figure 1. Pitches of the batá, according to Ortiz. Image reproduced from Fernando Ortiz, *Africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Ediciones Oriente, 1965), 376.

It is said that the drums have a language and can speak, since “the rhythmic patterns performed by the six membranes suggest in their entirety the intonations of Yoruba speech.”¹¹⁵ These drums are used in religious celebrations and can be accompanied in some types of celebrations by the singing of the **Akpwón**, the person who sings each of the prayers to the deities. Although the drums take on the function of accompanying the singing, they still possess what Eli calls “a rhythmic-speaking connotation, led by the Iyá, and happening in parallel with the solo-chorus chant alternation.”¹¹⁶ Their *telos*, or the instrument’s end (see my discussion of Tresch and Dolan in Chapter 1), is to invoke with their magical sonorities, each of the twenty-four deities. They do so in order of relevance, always open and closing with Elegguá, and bring them all down from the spiritual realm to Earth. Each Orisha has their own characteristic “toque” (rhythmic formulas) and from these individual segments, many rhythmic combinations can be produced. There are several toques performed for each

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 331.

¹¹⁶ Victoria Eli, *Instrumentos*, 331.

deity depending on the tempo or mood of the prayer, they are usually linked to a specific patakí (fable) that relates to the ceremony that is being performed. Appendix B gives a description of each of the five deities used in “*Orishas*” *Suite for Harp and Electronics* and lists the chants and the batá rhythms used as thematic material for the suite.

The Regla de Osha is patriarchal in its essence and rules. Only men can become priests and the batá group also comprises only men. Despite the batá trio’s historically matriarchal tradition, the drums are also referred to exclusively using the grammatical masculine voice.¹¹⁷ Women play a lesser role within the religious hierarchy, mainly as the helpers of the male priests. They are relegated to a specific place within rituals, and are considered impure until they reach menopause. Women are thought to hold the power to undo the magic performed during rituals, to the extent that a man who has been in sexual contact with a woman and has not “ritually cleaned himself” can cause the batá to loosen and go out of tune. According to Fernando Ortiz, even the proximity of a woman can affect its power.¹¹⁸ Victoria Eli explains that “women are only allowed to offer their respect to the drums through salutation and dance.”¹¹⁹

While these traditions remain in place in orthodox religious settings, women are allowed to take part in some ceremonies and have become involved in the performance of secular Yoruba music, much as they have taken on more roles in society at large. Furthermore, the musical elements of the religion have migrated to other genres, including music of the Western European tradition. This process of musical transculturation began in parallel with European nationalistic and folkloristic movements in the first half of the

¹¹⁷Ibid., 320.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 377.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

twentieth century. Cuban composers Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla included Afro-Cuban rhythms, melodies, and percussion instruments in their symphonic compositions, thus becoming the musical leaders of the *Afrocolonismo* movement that was founded by Fernando Ortiz in the 1920s. *Afrocolonismo* focused on establishing the legitimacy of the Black identity in Cuban society, culture, and art. This process was later reinforced by the Cuban Revolution, which used music as a means for its new socialist experiment, which Susan Thomas argues “applie[d] its politics and sonic explorations to compel and engage, thus fomenting social change not via the small, educated elites targeted by the avant-gardes of art music, but via the public at large.”¹²⁰ Although the government prohibited any kind of religious expression for several decades and thus marginalized the practice of the Regla de Osha faith, musical elements of Afro-Cuban religions were incorporated into an extensive range of artistic expression, adapting existing cultural heritage to a new form of nationalism. From that time onward, the “Western Art Music” of Cuba has contained these rhythmic and melodic formulas, which are widely recognized by the entire population.

The four categories applied to my own identity expression.

As mentioned above, the aim of this artistic project is to combine the separate identities that exist within me by exploring their commonalities and differences. In Cuba, the Regla de Osha religion has permeated all levels of society—whether they are religious or atheist, everyone from blue collar workers to intellectuals—is familiar with the Regla de Osha religion and

¹²⁰ Susan Thomas, “Experimental Alternatives: Institutionalism, Avant-gardism, and Popular Music at the Margins of the Cuban Revolution,” in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. by Ana R. Alonso Minutti, Eduardo Herrera and Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51.

knows the deities' attributes and how to pray to them. Any person walking on the street can recognize and even sing along with the tunes of their chants, and dance to its rhythms when a ceremony takes place.

These chants and rhythms form the soundscape of my place of origin. I am a harpist, born in La Habana, Cuba into a family of professional classical musicians. My father was principal oboe of the National Concert Band and taught at all levels of education. My mother is an international prize-winning choir conductor who advocated for access to early music education. She also pushed choir performances beyond their typical settings by including other art forms, especially dance, in her choir's (the Schola Cantorum Coralina) performances. In addition, the repertoire the choir performed always included several works by Cuban composers, most of whom continue to follow in the footsteps of the Afrocubanismo movement. A typical concert program of the Schola Cantorum Coralina usually began with medieval European music, moving through the Western canon from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to Francis Poulenc, then transitioning to Latin America with Alberto Ginastera, and finishing with Cuban composers such as Guido López-Gavilán or Conrado Monier. The choir's signature piece is "Afrorritmos" by Cuban composer Yaniel Fernández, which references chants and instruments associated with the Orisha Yemayá.¹²¹

My country's rich musical culture, my formal conservatory education (following a Soviet curriculum), and my family's work exposed me to a wide array of instruments and musical genres. However, I wanted to be a harpist, and this instrument posed many contradictions within the communist society of Cuba, which limited my access to training on the instrument. As a result of the country's isolation since 1959, along with the stereotypes

¹²¹Schola Cantorum Coralina, "Afrorritmos", Producciones Colibrí, YouTube Video, 3:49,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxQrrn7sNdY>

already discussed in previous chapters that linked the harp to wealth and elitism, the instrument remained forgotten and frozen in time. While the harp experienced an evolution and expansion in the rest of the world, in Cuba it is still considered an orchestral instrument with an extremely limited repertoire that includes only Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp K. 299, Debussy's *Danse Sacrée et Danse Profane*, and Hindemith's *Sonate für Harfe*.

I received my early harp education from Mirtha Batista—the only remaining harpist in the country—as part of an emergency government plan to train seven performers that could cover the empty positions in the island's orchestras. The country's financial situation prevented us from each acquiring our own instruments, so we completed our studies by practicing on one old Russian Lunacharsky harp with a small number of method books. Both my harp training and my access to international music festivals and competitions were limited, and I grew up without learning about the harp's history, performers, and repertoire. My identity as a harpist and musician, shaped by my home and educational environments, my relationship with the instrument, and my career prospects while I lived in Cuba, was full of contradictions.

In Cuba, I had a relationship with the harp that was somewhat consistent with my traditional background and its accompanying biases. In a way, I took on two identities—as a musician and as a harpist. However, as Peter Burke and Jan Stets state, “the individual's behavior must control situational meanings to make them congruent with the meanings held in all the identity standards that are activated.”¹²² Therefore, my identity as a Cuban musician took precedence over my identity as a harpist due to the influences of my environment and my daily life.

¹²² Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 189.

After emigration, my identity as a harpist became more prominent. As Burke and Stets explain:

One cannot both be good and bad, or both strong and weak. When different identity standards require oppositional meanings, [...] the system is put into an impossible situation in which one or both identities cannot be verified. To the extent this happens, the identity standards themselves must shift as people's identities change to remove the conflict.¹²³

In my case, removing the conflict meant eradicating certain behaviors and adopting new ones, as well as focusing on becoming a part of the status quo to the best of my abilities. I assumed a new identity based on what I believed was expected to fit into the harp community of my chosen place of studies and residence, and the world at large: I wore gowns and heels; I played only standard repertoire; and I worked toward competing in the USA International Harp Competition and being accepted to prestigious educational institutions. In my mind, and according to what I observed in the mainstream, that was the only way to achieve a professional career in harp. Nevertheless, my previous identity remained present in other aspects of my life, even as I worked to make those elements less prominent. Jin Hyung Lim explains this process as follows:

The members of a diasporic community not only participate in the sense of physical and social displacement, but also share the sense of distinctiveness due to the certain cultural homogeneity produced by participation in traditions, customs, and particularly language.¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid., 190.

¹²⁴ Jin Hyung Lim, "Identity Performance and Performance Identity: Performing Isang Yun's *Fünf Stücke für Klavier*," in *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, ed. by Catherine Laws (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2020), 205.

For almost a decade, I listened (and danced) to Cuban popular music only at home, while walking, or on the metro. I spoke my language only with my close friends and family. Even now, my playlist only includes music from the favorite bands of my youth. I listen to this playlist at least twice a week to feel that connection to my homeland and to who I was before. As Lim points out, “displaced individuals often need to seek the familiar scents and tastes of their homeland cultures to reinforce and reaffirm this aspect of their identities.”¹²⁵ However, because I expressed two opposing identities, I was ostracized. In Cuba, I was prevented from continuing my higher education because of the perceived limitations in the harp’s capabilities, uses, and repertoire; and abroad, my age (I started a bachelor’s degree in my mid-twenties), lack of knowledge, lack of financial means to attend summer festivals, and harp-technical weaknesses put me at a disadvantage relative to my peers.

As a result of these conflicts, I began to ask myself many questions: Who do I want to be as a musician and harpist? What kind of music do I want to perform? Does wearing gowns and pearls fit my personal aesthetics? Should I completely let go of my previous identity? If given the choice, would I prefer a harp with carvings and gold, or a simpler, more austere design? Do I approach music the same way as other musicians from a different background? I realized that the answers to these questions involved finding new meanings in different situations that could confirm both of my identities and meld them into one. I also noticed that many other harpists were asking themselves what appeared to be the same questions, and reaching similar conclusions, even if they had different backgrounds. Therefore, harpists must be undertaking in a deep self-reflection that involves questioning one’s personal preferences, and the social processes occurring more broadly on a national and international

¹²⁵ Ibid., 204.

level, as well as taking a critical approach to the music performed. Thus, the idea of this research topic and artistic project was born.

Slowly, and after becoming acquainted with the work of the six harpists discussed in Chapter 2, among others, I began to seek solutions for my identity conflicts. Jin Hyung Lim writes that “in artworks, including music, diasporic identities motivate complex intercultural and multicultural structures.”¹²⁶ *“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics* is exactly that: a multicultural artwork that shows my country the infinite possibilities of the harp, and shares the exciting music of my country with the international harp community. The only question that remains is how I can combine these two identities in a way that brings together the best of both worlds (national and international), while also showing my personal narrative (which precisely straddles those national and international worlds).

¹²⁶ Ibid., 203.

Chapter 4

“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics and the Expression of my Identity as Narrative

According to Remy van Kesteren, “Just putting [the harp] out of context, presenting it in a different space, especially if it touches what the audience knows [...] they get surprised! And then you can lure them into your world and into a deeper understanding of our instrument.”¹²⁷ Van Kesteren is one of several twenty-first-century harpists who are putting the instrument in unexpected contexts to express their identities and narratives, and to change cultural consciousness regarding the harp. The creation of “Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics, which involved experimentation and collaboration, likewise emerged from my need to reconcile two sides of my identity that seem at odds with each other, and for which I have experienced some negative backlash: In Cuba, because I chose an instrument that represented the negative image of capitalist wealth; and abroad, because of my background. The work was born out of internal conflict, a search for musical honesty, and the ultimate realization of conclusions similar to those of Remy van Kesteren. Cuba needs the harp to speak its language and vice versa. Moreover, for both of the musical identities I embody as a performer to coexist, I needed to explore what Peter Burke and John Stets call situational meanings (see Chapter 1) and the connecting points among them; otherwise, they will remain in conflict.

Composer Paul Théberge asserts that “indeed, the manner in which you play an instrument can transform both the instrument itself and the nature of the musical sounds produced.”¹²⁸ For many twenty-first-century harpists, this transformation has become vital for

¹²⁷ Interview with Remy van Kesteren, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 25, 2023.

¹²⁸ Paul Théberge, “Music/Technology/Practice: Musical Knowledge in Action,” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006), 286.

moving past previously imposed limitations. Music sociologist Tia DeNora argues that presentations of the self to others are not the only basis for identity construction, since, as she writes,

Equally significant is a form of introjection, a presentation of self to self, the ability to mobilize and hold on to a coherent image of ‘who one knows one is.’ And this involves the social and cultural activity of remembering, the turning over of past experiences, for the cultivation of self-accountable imageries of self. [...] Music can be used as a device for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is.¹²⁹

Describing such a process, Jin Hyung Lim summarizes Richard Stevens's statements about identity as narrative mentioning that “understanding identity seems to unfold a narrative:” a narrative that is built upon the combination of our subjective understandings of ourselves and the world around us.¹³⁰ These authors connect music and music-making to the musician’s personal need for self-expression. My own musical narrative as I understand it today was only developed after experiencing opposing cultural circumstances and a multitude of situations (both good and bad) that affected my views about life and about myself.

For several years, my narrative focused on using the harp in the traditional manner—both in Cuba and abroad—and was only transformed as other aspects of my life forced a change of perspective. Those kinds of changes, however, tend to result from personal conflict, existential crises, and the need to let go of outdated ideas. Remy van Kesteren

¹²⁹ Tia DeNora, “Music and Self Identity” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006), 141.

¹³⁰ Richard Stevens, “Introduction: Making Sense of the Person in a Social World,” in *Understanding of the Self*, ed. by Richard Stevens (London: Sage), 1996, 23, quoted in Jin Hyung Lim, “Identity Performance and Performance Identity. Performing Isang Yun’s *Fünf Stücke für Klavier*,” in *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, ed. Catherine Laws (Ghent: Leuven University Press, 2020), 201.

experienced it after realizing that winning an important competition and having a classical solo career was *a* dream, but not *his* dream.¹³¹ For Noël Wan, the impetus was the COVID-19 pandemic, moving to another country with her spouse, and not being able to find the type of work she was hoping for after completing a doctoral degree.¹³² My own change in perspective stemmed from the emotional and physical burnout of spending years trying and seemingly failing to catch up to the technical level of my peers. Only after giving up on that dream did I realize that I was acknowledging only one part of my musical identity.

Combining two sonic identities and my own as identity narrative

Liam Maloney and John Schofield define the concept of sonic identity as “the study of sound and sound-making in relationship to heritage,” and describe it further as “an approach or lens that allows us to preference the aural rather than the visual aspects of culture as portrayed in heritage and within heritagization processes, revealing links to human endeavor through sound.”¹³³ Maloney and Schofield thus see heritage as something not exclusive but inclusive; it is a creative and participatory practice encompassing both a personal and a national collection of distinctive characters that are central to people’s lives and lifestyles.¹³⁴ Therefore, sonic identity “exists within or around space and place, being at once an

¹³¹ Remy van Kesteren, interview with the author, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 25th, 2023, response to question 22.

¹³² Noël Wan, “On quitting, part 1,” in *Undutiful Daughter*, February 25th, 2024, https://nywharp.substack.com/p/8dc9b7d6-cbed-48f4-95b2-13d83340752e?fbclid=IwAR0kANcdnvlEcFFF4DAz1OiuCU_5lqH5EMRruD7nAig9DLUhOQmDuSIazWA

¹³³ Liam Maloney and John Schofield, *Music and Heritage: New Perspectives on Place-making and Sonic Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

expression of a location and an integral feature of the place-making process.”¹³⁵ Cuba’s colonial history (see Chapter 3) and the coexistence of different religions in such a small geographical area contributed significantly to the formation of the nation’s sonic identity, especially for people of African descent. One could also argue that the pedal harp’s historical associations and stereotypes contribute not only to its agency, but also to its sonic identity. The instrument’s elegance and sound automatically transform the space in which it is performed—be it a concert hall or a living room—and the way that audiences appreciate music, elevating their experience. These associations have contributed to the formation of a distinct sonic identity that dictates where, when, and how the instrument should be used.

The sonic identities of both Cuba and the pedal harp are distinctive with respect to sound production and place-making processes: Cuba tends to be seen as more entertaining and popular in terms of audience engagement, while the pedal harp is thought to be elitist and inaccessible to some audiences. This opposition raises the question: Is it possible to merge two seemingly contrary sonic identities and create a new one that embodies the strengths of each separate identity? Maloney and Schofield argue that sonic identity exists within a nexus of bidirectional concepts, including “how sound changes spaces and us, how we change spaces through sound, and how spaces change our understanding of sound.”¹³⁶

Therefore, my narrative developed for the purpose of finding and merging the signature aspects of both sonic identities, and to help create new ways of communicating by drawing from both cultural heritages. For decades, I was told that the harp and Afro-Cuban music were too incompatible to combine. However, by looking beyond the visible differences

¹³⁵Ibid., 3.

¹³⁶ Liam Maloney and John Schofield, *Music and Heritage: New Perspectives on Place-making and Sonic Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

between their musical and social characteristics of one instrument having soft delicate sounds and belonging to the high classes, and the other possessing a lower, harsh sonority and related to the lower social classes, I found commonalities that have previously been overlooked. I came to understand that the three batá have a similar kind of agency as the harp, since the drums engage with the performer in the same manner described by John Tresch and Emily Dolan (see Chapter 1); the batá's purpose of inducing ethereal experiences for the listener is also similar to the harp's; the nuance and sweetness of Yoruba chants sometimes resemble the traditional sound of the European instrument; both instruments are connected to mythological contexts; and both share virtuosic, at times quasi-aggressive performance characteristics. The harp can produce harsh noises by putting extra pressure on the strings, placing the pedal in between the notches not fully engaging the discs, rattling the wire strings together, changing multiple pedals fast making extra noises both musical and those produced by the pedal bars latching carelessly on the wooden notches, just to name a few examples.

“Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics

My vision for this suite was to experiment and create a piece that showcases the harp's capabilities to Cuban audiences using a language that is familiar to them. At the same time, it presents a rich musical culture to the harp community through a medium they know well. While I first envisioned a work for harp and batá, the suite ultimately became a multidisciplinary piece for solo harp in which the performer also sings and dances, and which incorporates a loop station and the Digital Audio Workstation Ableton Live. Additionally, the harpist's movements and small extramusical elements (e.g., bells and hand fans) add visual elements to the performance.

The work comprises seven sections inspired by the legends of five Orishas: Elegguá, Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá, and Oshún (see Appendix B for more details about each deity). Like a symphony, the suite is intended to be performed as a whole, with minimal pauses in between each section. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Regla de Osha is primarily an orally-transmitted tradition, and the suite's musical elements follow this rule. Technological and extramusical elements add to the challenge of performing the piece. The harp is already a difficult instrument to play, and having to think about additional elements can cause the free style that this type of music aims to convey to be lost in the complexities of execution.

To fully comprehend the musical style of Yoruba music requires repetition and participation in religious ceremonies. Théberge addresses this necessity, which is shared with other orally-transmitted musical traditions, stating, “For musicians, style is something that is primarily felt; it is an awareness that is as much physical as it is cognitive. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in improvised and semi-notated forms of music, where a sense of the relevant musical traditions and conventions are passed on not through discourse but through practice.”¹³⁷ To transfer this oral tradition keeping the essence of its free and intuitive style to a classical harp setting and a written score required several collaborators: 1) a composer with the ability to translate Yoruba chants to a different idiom; 2) a sound engineer to provide technical knowledge and support for finding solutions to musical and performative challenges; 3) a costume designer to create an outfit that is religiously accurate and respectful, but that also accounts for the practical need to operate the harp's seven pedals and extra devices with the feet; 4) a choreographer to create a choreography that takes into

¹³⁷ Paul Théberge, “Music/Technology/Practice: Musical Knowledge in Action,” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006), 286.

consideration not only the instrument, but also all of the work's religious elements; and 5) a Babalawo, or priest, to provide religious guidance.

Due to the personal nature of the project, I needed to find people who knew me and understood who I am as a person and as a performer. Although the collaborators I asked to join the project had never worked with a pedal harp, they each had skills that were necessary for this endeavor. The composer and designer are longtime friends, and we have grown together as artists throughout the years, which gave me a sense of security and facilitated communication because they understood who I am, my limits, and my personal aesthetics from the beginning. For those who did not previously know me, I took the time to create personal bonds before the creation process began to ensure the same level of understanding among everyone involved. This need comes from several cultural perspectives, starting with one from the Regla de Osha itself, where every person that joins the religion and a house led by a Babalawo—normally referred to as padrino (godfather)—automatically becomes part of the family, even if there is no blood connection among them. Another connection comes from my personal experience growing up around twenty people who fed me, bathed me, played with me, and calmed my crying while rehearsing every day in my house, and with whom I created long-lasting bonds. Cuban people are very friendly, and developing emotional connections with those around you is part of the culture.

Pepe Gavilondo is a composer with many years of experience writing music for contemporary ballet companies and non-traditional classical music settings. In addition, for the past ten years he was the keyboardist of Síntesis, a Cuban band that has been described as “among the most recognized and popular musicians on the island [...] particularly for blending the African roots imbued in the island's sound with jazz and rock.”¹³⁸ Therefore,

¹³⁸ “Biography”, in Síntesis <http://sintesisicuba.com/biography/> accessed February 2nd, 2024.

besides our personal friendship and trust in each other's abilities, his work provided him with the compositional and idiomatic knowledge needed to accomplish this project, without the risk of falling into stereotypical compositional formulas. Costume designer Alicia González is also a musician and amateur dancer, and understands the other artistic elements present in the piece. We grew up together, which means that she knew me well enough to include my personal taste in the outfit design without much explanation. The two additional collaborators were found through personal contacts. Andy Le, a sound engineering student from McGill University who joined the project upon my invitation, has become the key person for finding technological solutions to a wide range of challenges, from adjusting the software to fit the music composed, to teaching me how to use work with technology, a field I had little knowledge of. The final member is Julio Hong, a Cuban choreographer and Babalawo, who contributed expertise in both religion and dancing. The entire team is in direct communication with me, the performer and lead investigator.

Musical material transformation

The Yoruba religion has certain rules within its canon that need to be respected so its essence may be captured, even outside of ceremonial settings. The entire team had to keep in mind the following list of rules while developing the project:

- 1) Always open and close with Elegguá because he is the deity that opens and closes the paths and should always be prayed to in that order.¹³⁹
- 2) Shangó and Oshún cannot be placed together in the piece.

¹³⁹ For a detailed description of Elegguá, see Appendix B.

- 3) A woman should not sing or dance the music of Shangó.
- 4) A woman should dance only to the female deities: Oshún and Yemayá.
- 5) Women should wear skirts, not pants.
- 6) If several orishas are performed, the garments should be white to show respect towards each orisha.

The first limitation we encountered was that we wanted to use well-known chants of each orisha, which required some changes to the order in which the chanted music is usually played in a typical ceremony. According to the babalawo Julio Hong—priest of the Regla de Osha—the order of performance should have been Elegguá-Oshún-Obbatalá-Shangó-Yemayá-Elegguá to be true to the canon. However, we also wanted to consider internal musical and literary rhythm as we tried to find where moments of tension and rest make the most sense throughout the piece based on the nature of the selected chants. For example, the Yemayá Asesú chant is a slow, lullaby-like chant, and therefore would not contribute to building energy toward the end of the piece. In a ceremony, it is customary for several chants to be performed for each deity, and the tension varies within the series of chants.¹⁴⁰

Performing every chant for each of the deities takes several hours. However, this was not feasible given the suite's thirty-five-minute timing and musical concept of presenting only one or two representative chants of five deities. Keeping in mind that Oshún and Shangó must be kept separate, Yemayá was placed after Shangó following tradition, but closer to the middle instead of near the end. As a result, Oshun's chant was moved to the penultimate

¹⁴⁰ Victoria Eli et al., *Atlas de los instrumentos de la música folklórico-popular de Cuba* (La Habana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana, 1997), 330.

position before Elegguá, and the order thus became Elegguá-Obatalá-Shangó-Yemayá-Oshún-Elegguá.

As I explained in the previous chapter, the music for the orishas performed in religious ceremonies includes two main elements: the batá group which provides the rhythmic section, and the Apkwón, who sings the chant or prayer for the specific orisha with interjections by the choir of congregation members. The music comprises a melodic line and a rhythmic base; it is not harmonic in the same sense as Western art music, but the combination of the choir and the batá reveals implied cacophony-style harmonies. Comparing the sustain of different instruments, Pepe Gavilondo, observes that “the drums have a very fast attack, decay and release of the sound, while the harp’s design makes the sound ring for extended periods of time, unlike the piano for example,”¹⁴¹ which poses a sound duration challenge for translating this type of music to the harp. A certain amount of experimentation provided Gavilondo with the opportunity to not only to see harpists play, but also to learn how to play the harp himself and to understand what it takes to execute specific passages on the instrument. Another important fact that was discussed several times through this experimentation process, was that this piece is intended to evoke the Orishas rather than replicate the music exactly. Therefore, we gave ourselves some license to move away from the canon when it served the music.

Narrative depiction: software, extended and traditional techniques.

¹⁴¹ Pepe Gavilondo, *Reflections on the creation of “Orishas” Suite for Harp and electronics*, La Habana, Cuba, December 2023, par 4.

A key element to this artistic project was utilizing as much as possible acoustically extended techniques to enhance the harp's natural sonorities, and only incorporating electronic elements when the instrument's capabilities could not achieve the desired musical effect. For this reason, Gavilondo and I tried out different techniques, read the available sources on harp composition, and met with Canadian harpist Caroline Lizotte, who shared several of her own techniques.

Example 1 shows the basic melody of the chant of Elegguá as it would be performed at a religious setting, while Example 2 depicts the batá toque for Alubanché.¹⁴² Although the batá notation does not indicate pitch, in performance, the combination of the three drums produces the aural effect of implied harmonies and a melodic line. Herein lies not only the challenge of translating the batá to the harp, but also the way through the solution of how to do so. To bring out the same effect on the harp, the approximate intervallic references produced by each membrane of the drum is translated as shown in Example 3. To create polyrhythms, each layer of the batá notation is recorded separately using the looping station, building up to the complete polyrhythm. In the case of Loop Layer 2, which corresponds to the Okónkolo line, the digital delay effect produces the rhythm's formulaic repetition. This technique uses the harp's own natural sound decay to emulate the blended reverberation resulting from the drum's repeated pattern.

¹⁴² See Appendix B for complete versions of each batá toque used in the creation of this piece.

Ba - ra - su - a - yo O - mo - nia - la gua-nao ma-ma-ke - nia_i - ra - wo ch
 O ba - ra - sua-yo e - ke e e-chu od -
 da-ra O - mo-nia! guana mama kenia_i - ra wo eh

Example 1. Eleggúa chant

Iyá
 Itótele
 Okónkolo

Example 2. Toque Alubanché

Looper Capa 1
 Looper Capa 2
 Percussion
 Capa 1
 Capa 2
 Capa 3
 Perc.

FX Delay (T. ♩., Feedback 45%, Mix 40-45%)
 Cascabeles de pie
 no FX pdlit

Example 3. Toque Alubanché translated to the harp with digital effects.

Additionally, the harp's natural capabilities make it possible to render all the rhythmic layers of the batá in Oshún. Example 4 shows the batá toque *dadá*, which is translated to a harp loop as demonstrated in Example 5. Layers 2 and 3 represent the simple rhythmic pattern of the Itótele. Plucking the strings with the fingernails in layer 2 and playing *près de la table* in layer 3 add variety in timbre, demonstrating what can be achieved through traditional harp techniques without the need for artificial effects.

Example 4: Toque Daddá. The notation shows three staves: Iyá, Itótele, and Okónkolo. The Iyá staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Itótele and Okónkolo staves are in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various rhythmic symbols like 'x' and 'y' indicating specific sounds or techniques. The piece ends with a double bar line and the instruction 'D. C.'.

Example 4. Toque Daddá

Example 5: Toque Daddá translated to the harp. The notation shows four staves: Capa 1, Capa 2, Capa 3, and Capa 4. The Capa 1 staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Capa 2 staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Capa 3 staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Capa 4 staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation shows a complex rhythmic pattern across the four staves.

Example 5. Toque Daddá translated to the harp

Two other techniques used to mark specific points in the story's narrative are glissando and harmonics. In "Obatalá the father," for example, an open hand glissando is used in *piano* dynamic. The sound produced by the middle of the pads of the fingers with very little pressure produces a less direct attack, which creates ethereal sonorities appropriate for referring to the father of all consciousness. Additionally, "Shangó the Warrior" includes four types of glissando in a span of eight measures to portray a storm that escalates from small raindrops to hail, and finally to thunder:¹⁴³

- 1) Natural glissando in a soft dynamic to represent raindrops softly falling: see score, p. 18.
- 2) Nail glissandi using both hands for hail effect: *ibid.*
- 3) *Près de la table* glissandi with the left hand combined with nail glissandi with the right hand to portray the combination of rain and hail: *ibid.*
- 4) Thunder glissando: forcefully pressing the lowest wire strings to make them rattle against one another: see score, p. 19.

In other passages, traditional techniques are treated with a non-traditional approach. For example, I experimented with and chose fingerings that provide rhythmic stability, even when those choices were contrary to typical harp fingerings. Since accents and tenutos feature prominently throughout the piece and often occur on offbeats, splitting fingerings between the hands allows the two strongest fingers, the right-hand thumb and second finger, to pluck with enough intensity to achieve the desired sound.

¹⁴³ Note that due to the music's free repetition of recorded layers, plus the double time signatures present in "Shangó the warrior", there are no measure numbers, only pages for reference.

Motivic repetition has an important role in both narrative depiction and religious accuracy. For example, one musical gesture is varied and repeated twelve times in Shangó. If we refer to his patakí (legend), the warrior Shangó is a man who is always looking for conflict. The repeated musical gesture, which is executed with atypical fingerings, conjures images of Shangó boasting to another warrior to incite a fight—what Cubans refer to as *guapería*, or the act of aggressive gesturing and provocative speech, as well as bullying and violence. The motivic repetition combined with the variety of glissandi explained above build towards a musical and narrative climax.

Regarding the inclusion of small percussion instruments, Victoria Eli et al. explain that for a traditional performance, “a line of little bells called *chaworó* or *chaguoro* are placed around the *enú* and *chachá* of the *Iyá*.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Eli writes, “On occasions, the *acherés* (bells) mark the metric-rhythmic pulse of the musical event, but in others its ‘toque is not as stable and only contributes to enriching the timbre of the general sonic result.’”¹⁴⁵ “*Orishas*” Suite also includes pre-recorded percussion, in addition to the live harp performance to respect the original ensemble rules. Although the percussion lines were designed to be played by the performer, we later decided to use pre-recorded tapes since it was not feasible to produce stable beats in a live performance, while also playing the harp, changing pedals, and handling technology.

“*Orishas*” Suite also calls for the performer to use external objects in combination with traditional harp techniques. Several elements were necessary, for example, to portray the sea in the *Yemayá* section. First, a cadenza with free arpeggios represents the instability of the

¹⁴⁴ Victoria Eli et al., *Instrumentos de la Música folclórico-popular de Cuba*, vol. 2 (La Habana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana, 1997), 320.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

sea in constant motion, from calm to rough waters. This is the moment in the piece when we acknowledge the harp and its traditional association with Impressionism as an instrument designed to play arpeggios and blended sonorities. After the cadenza, the prayer to call on the orisha begins, and two rubber mallets (which were designed and custom-made by Caroline Lizotte for this piece) are rubbed against the strings while the performer sings. The friction between the strings and mallets produces an effect that mimics the sounds of whales and the metal of sunken ships compressing under great pressure. In the case of Oshun, a small bell—the customary *acheré* (bell) used to invoke her—is rung at the beginning of the section.

Different types of electronic sound effects also support the narrative, mainly in Shangó and Yemayá. In Shangó, software is used to apply a heavy distortion effect—like those used in heavy metal rock—to the main harp line that plays the prayer sung by the Akpwón and the battle depiction that comes afterwards. This effect produces the excitement, aggressiveness, and electric energy that Shangó represents. For Yemayá, phaser and flanger effects are applied to an unstable melody that accentuates off-beats, creating the sensation of fish and other life moving in the water.

Extra-musical elements

Extra-musical elements complement the harp's sound and aid in narrative depiction. These include the bespoke outfit, accessories, and choreography. The costume design symbolizes the idea of a new musician who embodies two opposite identities. It is not what one would traditionally wear for any Yoruba celebration, nor for a classical harp performance. Alicia González's design is based on my personal identities and characteristic symbols from both contexts. Reflecting on her design, she explains:

Two important features are added in the outfit to portray both heritages, and they are the main concept of the piece. One is the use of knots, which represent the transculturation process of the Cuban people, and the relationships and knots that happen throughout life that connect one person's story with another. [...] The other is the inclusion of pearls, which although based on the religious use of seashells for divination purposes, also serve as reference to the pedal harp tradition of refinement and sophistication. The pearls also stand for the beads used in the protection attributes—necklaces and *idés* (bracelets)—worn by the religious congregation, and the number in which they are placed guards a personal affinity between the performer and the deities.¹⁴⁶



The orishas portrayed in the piece are associated with several color combinations: red and black (Elegguá); white (Obatalá); red and white (Shangó); blue and translucent white (Yemayá); yellow and gold (Oshún) and black and red (Elegguá). During the experimentation process, Alicia tried to incorporate these colors into the outfit, but having to shed different layers between sections would have added an extra task for the harpist. Therefore, the early design was discarded, and a new one was created using only white, the customary color for

¹⁴⁶ Alicia González, Reflections on “Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics, electronic communication, Madrid, Spain, February 2024, par. 2 and 3.

the batá group and members of the congregation to wear in both religious ceremonies and secular festivities. Besides color, the design had to accommodate to the technology, including the looping station's many small buttons. With a big dress, the fabric of the skirt might block the performer's view of the buttons or get tangled in the cables and other parts of the device, potentially stopping or unwittingly deleting the pre-recorded layers. Pants were chosen to avoid this hazard. Since it is, however, not customary for women to wear pants in the Regla de Osha religion, González's solution was to design wide-legged, over-the-heel pants that look like a skirt and are very feminine but are short enough that they will not touch the equipment, as well as allowing the harpist to open her legs.

The design also needed to include an element that creates the effect of a flowy, wide skirt, since this feature is an indispensable aspect of the dance. Alicia therefore included an extra layer of fabric that is folded into the sides; it can be taken out when required, and then easily put back. As a result, "the outfit experiments with the same transition throughout the piece as the music itself, and the performer's journey in search for her musical identity."¹⁴⁷ Another element of the outfit is a peacock-feather fan, which is included in the dance portion since legends say that this bird is Oshún's favorite, and that she uses its feathers to ornament her body.

The final extramusical element in the piece is the dance included in Oshun, which was choreographed to fill two to three minutes of music. The inclusion of the looping station provided not only the ability to record several layers of the batá, but also the possibility to stand up and move away from the harp while the music continues. It was important to consider how the performer was going to accomplish this transition, as well as how much space was available to move around. The steps were created to fit a fifteen-by-ten-foot area—

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., par 6

—half of the stage space where the premiere was to take place, at McGill University’s Tanna Schulich Hall—but it can be adapted to fit larger stages if necessary.

Julio Hong explains that the chant to which the performer dances derives from a *patakí* that tells the story of how Oshún was unjustly incarcerated by Oyá, who was Shangó’s wife at the time. Oyá was jealous of how Shangó was falling in love with Oshún and spread rumors about her that caused her to be sent to jail. However, when Orunmila saw the injustice, he released Oshún. The text of the chant translates to “I am Oshún wherever I stand, I am Oshún, and in the land of the Osha, no one can take me down.”¹⁴⁸ It is a victory dance, in which she takes off her chains while laughing and showing her female power. The movements are sensual and confident, portraying Oshun’s personality. The dance is performed as it would be in a celebration, which required several lessons to learn and master the steps and character of the dance.

Performance challenges

The project involved many challenges due to the complexity of the setup, the music, and all the elements that would need to be managed by the performer, including: a set of nine buttons and four knobs to be operated throughout the performance (in addition to the seven pedals of the harp); more singing than has previously been included in classical harp performances;¹⁴⁹ a dance section that requires the performer to stand up and come back to the harp; recording several rhythmic layers with a high level of precision both in plucking the strings and pressing the record/play buttons; operating the effects in the software; and playing in sync

¹⁴⁸ See Appendix B for the original text.

¹⁴⁹ One example of singing is Caroline Lizotte’s “Suite Galactique” op.36.

with the pre-recorded percussion tracks. Most importantly, all of this must be executed as naturally and seamlessly as possible.

The first challenge we encountered was how to connect the harp. Since there is an effect assigned to each layer, we could not just use the sound signal of all layers already mixed coming out of the main output of the looping station, and then input effects in the software. Since the Boss RC-600 looping station has multitrack capabilities, we could connect one line per output to the sound interface. The second challenge was how to include all the effects and percussion tracks without the need to handle extra buttons on a MIDI controller. Since the harpist performing the work already has many other tasks to manage, we opted for automation. However, the music includes many improvisatory phrases, with *tenutos* and *ritardandi* that need to be accounted for. One option to deal with this issue was to measure every single breath the harpist takes and input that into the system in the form of time-signature changes and added measures; otherwise, the effects would start and finish at the wrong times. The issue with this solution was that it would not allow for a free performance. The ultimate solution to maintain some flexibility was to loop all the free sections in the piece: *Obatalá*, *Cadenza*, *Yemayá* prayer, etc. This produced yet another issue to find a solution for, since the software only allows for one loop grid at a time, and it would require pressing keys on the computer to come into and out of the loop. Therefore, we installed a *Max for Live* device, which allows for several loop automation grids to be pre-programmed and automated. As a result, the performer only needs to press a key to come out of whatever loop is currently active, without having to reactivate the sections that follow.

In terms of musical challenges, learning the layers and recording them with precision required months of training. Achieving a level of comfort in adding every element of the piece has been difficult. Remembering to breathe to fill the lungs to sing, while also playing demanding passages, took practice. Making each phrase musical and rhythmically precise,

and listening to the recorded feedback and metronome click through in-ear monitors while paying attention to what one is currently playing involved a high level of multi-tasking. But the biggest challenge remained how to make it all look effortless.

In conclusion, this artistic project portrays the complexities of two opposing sonic identities, as well as the psychological processes that I have experienced over the past decade in my quest for growth as a musician and harpist. Each musical and technological challenge symbolizes moments of my musical journey and the internal questions I have posed and solutions that I have found, all of which have led me to the path I am currently undertaking. In terms of experimentation and collaboration, the project exceeded my expectations. Each of my collaborators understood the vision behind the project and was able to make decisions both on their own and as a group. They also developed an understanding of the harp that is certain to benefit future projects that feature the instrument.

Conclusions

For the pedal harp, the last two hundred years have been a period of growth, where many routes were taken by its performers to find its place within the “Western art” music community and society in general. While most of the efforts were congruent with societal change, some solidified the instrument as an object associated with wealth and femininity, with limited musical capabilities, thus, creating a gap between the harpists who actively tried to show everything it could do, and musical institutions in charge of concert programming.

Today, centuries-old paradigms and stereotypes that prevented the expansion of the harp are actively being deconstructed and transformed, with performance identity expression taking a prominent role in the artistic practice of twenty-first century performers; The objective of this research-creation project was to explore how a search for identity has affected the work of modern harpists, and I’ve reached several important conclusions.

Although varied views about how, where, and why the instrument should be used continue, many performers are engaging in social conversations that foster inclusivity in terms of race, gender, and cultural diversity. New competitions, festivals and associations are being created to foster the exchange of knowledge about non-European cultures, their music and their instruments, offering diasporic performers an opportunity to find their individual voices without the need to suppress their cultural roots to adjust to the norm. The harp’s association with femininity is slowly yielding to a removal of gender labels, and the demystification of a domestic or angelic cliché. It is now being viewed by many as a powerful tool for musical expression that possesses a wide range of sonorities and characteristics, from warm and tender to virtuosic, explosive, and energetic. Performers and composers are not just aware of the harp’s subjective autonomous agency as a non-gendered object but are visibly showing it to audiences through new musical and artistic narratives.

The inclusion of technology for sound manipulation and the development of electroacoustic harps are creating new sources of incomes for performers who used to depend on a limited number of career paths. At the same time, it is connecting the instrument to younger audiences, who now have the chance to experience it beyond the traditional classical setting, with a modern, easily understood language. As a result, twenty-first century harpists are expanding the definition of a harp recital to include the unexpected and extraordinary.

The objectives determined for the creation of our “Orishas” Suite were accomplished to an unanticipated degree. While there were some implicit commonalities between both sonic identities of the Yoruba music and the pedal harp, their visible differences in timbre, sound duration and rhythmic use, could have caused the project to fail. The little knowledge that the collaborators had about the pedal harp, plus my own fear of technology throughout the process could have negatively affected the outcome. Nevertheless, an environment of communication along with the opportunity to experiment provided the team with a creative mindset that benefited the musical outcome. It has also left a space for the project to include other genres of Cuban music, visual elements, and more ways to manipulate the sound of the harp. “Orishas” Suite remains an unfinished piece that can evolve and morph in multiple ways.

The social impact of these modern artistic practices will take some decades to produce solid, visible results. My personal double goal of educating Cuban audiences about the pedal harp and showing the riches of Cuban music to the international harp community will also take time to bear fruit. However, the positive reception after the premiere of “Orishas” Suite has demonstrated the potential to transform the understanding of the harp and Cuban music, in the same manner as the work of Caroline Lizotte, Alexandra Tibbitts, Alexander Boldachev, Noël Wan, Valérie Milot and Remy van Kesteren has inspired many to take risks and express their unique performance identities.

The pedal harp continues to face many challenges in terms of affordability and concert programming. Education of performers, the production of academic scholarship about harp history, harp literature and social topics, and informed social media content production remain important if we wish to change the outdated views about the instrument. However, the future of the pedal harp is in constant flux, and the instrument continues to reveal surprising facets to be explored by performers of current and next generations.

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APPENDIX A

Interviews

Interview with Alexandra Tibbitts Montreal, Canada, May 4th, 2023

1-Why did you choose the harp?

The harp kind of chose me, and I know that's what a lot of people say, but my grandmother was a harpist. She passed away when I was two, my father had us playing piano while growing up, and we were not doing well with the Suzuki method and with piano. So, my dad decided it was time to switch teachers, and he happened to find a harp and piano teacher that was teaching from her mom's place down the street from us. So, a lot of things started lining up. My dad took harp lessons before I did, classic's parents' reverse psychology was that I was not allowed to play the harp, that I had to play the piano. And I begged him for weeks, or what felt like a lifetime to let me play. As a good parent he said, "You have to practice your piano before you can play the harp." Whenever it's really your choice... actually is a very good point, because I think in the harp world, we are taught to learn the standard repertoire and a very specific way of harp playing, but when you as the performer develop your identity, is in those little moments when you decide "this is what I want" that actually starts to pave the path that you take.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

My first teacher was Karyn Patterson and then after five years—when I was 11, in my mid high school education—I started with Dr. Beverly Wesner-Hoehn, who's Indiana trained. Then, in my undergrad I studied with Elena Mashkovtseva, and I had a couple of masterclasses and side lessons. One of my big influences was Heidi Lehwalder towards the end of my education in San Diego. Then, I came here to study with Caroline Lizotte for my master's and I've a couple of side lessons with Jennifer Swartz as well. But really, I haven't had a teacher since my masters.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

Hmm... yes, but I have also a lot of hats that I wear.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

Hmm... less and less. It's more about if I'm required to provide a classical harp recital, then I'll prepare a special program. But it's not my main focus today. I guess I haven't really let it go. It's more a reality of being a freelancer. A lot of my work comes from doing orchestral work, and maybe a little bit of chamber music. But I've really gone into my solo practice and developing that with my own music and focus.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

Only that I might need help carrying the harp up the stairs if I want to play on a stage that doesn't have a ramp. But in terms of limitations that the harp can play, dynamic ranges, etc., I think the harp has one of the largest ranges of any instrument. In terms of repertoire, we can play many genres of music, just the spectral range we have between the base and the highs, it's a percussive, a string instrument. I play a lot of contemporary music, and I'm really experimenting with the different timbres that the instrument can create, and we are not limited in terms of the fact that we have to use our hands or bodies to make music. We can also use objects or different kinds of artifacts to help create music. The instrument is only limited in the amount of imagination the composer has.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

I think it is the responsibility of the musician to perform their own research in order to discover the repertoire that is available and accessible. We can get stuck in the cycle of repeating certain standards, which is true with any musician of any instrument type, but it's the job of the musician to decide if they desire to expand upon their own repertoire study. Simply in regard of my personal practice, specifically in working with composers to develop works for electro-acoustic harp repertoire, I've seen the circumstance many times now where a work is developed (however, there may not necessarily be a follow through to publish the work and make it more widely accessible). It begs the question to how much repertoire has possibly been lost—again, this can be applied to, I imagine, any instrument type—from similar previous circumstances. I would be curious to see a digital catalogue that claims to have a comprehensive representation for classical & contemporary harp repertoire, with references from any and all nationalities. Perhaps, one may already exist. In terms of quality, I wonder how the question could be framed to reduce the ambiguity between an objective versus subjective response. Do we gauge the criteria based off of duration, musical forms, notation, etc? Or do we rather judge a work “quality” based on, for example, its popularity — in which would we then take the number of public presentations to come up with a point system? Again, I wonder about the subjectivity of the varying circumstances that would inform why specific pieces are programmed. How have these

programming choices been differently informed across the centuries of classical music, or do we limit this discussion to our reflections in the 21st century?

7-In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

Oh, well I think actually more about where is the harp in a global musical genres, because for me, I don't just play classical music, a lot of my artistic practice comes from experimental music, contemporary music in the more academic sense, pop and jazz, and it's about how the harp sit and represents itself as a musical instrument at the basis, not just with under the guides of being a classical instrument. Perhaps this is where I might not be the right person for this, because my personal approach is to bring the harp into the modern era, and that is also electroacoustic harp playing. You don't need an actual manufacturer of electroacoustic harp to play this type of music. You just need some kind of microphone or amplification system. So, if we are talking about classical music as an acoustic context, then there's perhaps some limitations, but that can also be said for the piano and violin. There are limitations on their instruments as well. Again, it comes back to the composer's imagination. Are we talking about minimalism? Berio Sequenzas? It's a very vast question.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you fell are happening within the international harp community?

Well, we can talk about competitions, where the repertoire might be limited in terms of what is being asked of musicians. You can think about composers actively working with harpists in schools and out of school and creating new music for today's standards. It's beautiful that now we have more composer/performer collaborations, and this has a lot of advantages. It allows the performer to have a bigger voice in demonstrating what the harp is capable of. It's more of a conversation about how the repertoire can be shaped. Disadvantages, that's hard to say, because we have an instrument that has a lot of capabilities in terms of the mechanisms that have been adjusted in the last two hundred years. I know there are some musicians that are trying to add more technology to the classical instrument, so it can play more nuanced genres. Is it the Salvi that Remy van Kesteren was working with that has the muffling system? Because we hear a lot about the fact that we have to muffle all the time, so the composers can hear the tonalities that they want. That's also making new demands on performers. Are they ready for that? Are we content with the instrument as it is? Have we explored all its capabilities? I don't think there's a bad thing. At least today we are going in a good trajectory.

9-Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

Again, I think you have to talk about genres of music too. I'm always impressed to see performers playing in different genres, because it gives me a different perspective about what the harp is capable of. Because we are classical trained musicians, we are not going to be using our nails like the Paraguayan harpists do. And they seem to be playing so fast! And how can we emulate these styles? You emulate it by seeing what's possible on other styles of music, and how you bring them to the classical harp. For me, I try to be inclusive, because I see it as a way of sharing knowledge and bringing it to your own playing. How to continue growing. Not to go to school and learn a specific technique, and to continue with that for the rest of your life; but what are the things we can learn throughout our life as musicians. I'd like to be a wishful thinker that we all want to support each other through this practice. The reality is that when we are in competition, there's no time and place to be inclusive. Everybody is focused on achieving a certain thing: that one prize. I see inclusivity when we talk about the Dutch Harp Competition and how that's putting artistry on the pedestal, instead

of just performing a perfect repertoire. It's in moments like this when we see inclusivity raising to the stage.

10-What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

Hmm... I think I'm talking to myself about these questions every day, because the realities of being a working musician. Everybody comes to the instrument in different ways. Their influences on how and why they play the harp are different. So, it's a question that has infinite answers, depending on the person responding to it, and the experiences that they had. I know my father was very influential in helping me get into the instrument, and the continuation. But as soon as I moved to Montreal, I didn't have the pressure to continue playing a specific style of music. It became my playground to go experimenting and incorporating technology. But would another harpist have that same desire if they had this experience? I mean, you are coming from a different background, and yet, we are both here having this discussion about how we want the harp to be, and how we both realize the harp today. To be a professional musician, you have to let go of a lot of baggage, to be able to continue the work. Like I was saying before, carrying the harp upstairs or moving it in the snow, I did not plan on doing that when I left California. I was content in the sun. But I realized that in Montreal I could have an actual music career, which meant that I came into a city that has a lot of harpists for its population size. Then, you realize that each have their own background and style they are exploring. And seeing that gave me a sense that I had the permission to explore the music I wanted to explore, because someone else is going to work on that Ravel or Hindemith, but who's going to create technology to be able to play in multimedia context? Who has that kind of work? I think that we end up following the path depending on what you are exposed to helps you change it. I don't think I would have had access to a research centre like CIRMMT if I had gone to USC. There, I would have been working on film scoring, and perhaps would have found my niche inside working with technology, but not meeting my collaborator and developing a system here in CIRMMT. In terms of diasporic is cute because I call Montreal the city of misfits. There are so many immigrants here, and I consider myself one, being an Anglo minority in a French majority. I worked very hard to be able to work in Quebec and speak French. But it's knowing that you are showing up for building your career, and to do that on your own, it has a lot of influence in your motivation and the work that you do. I can't realistically prepare a huge classical recital and a solo artistic program all at once. I try, and I get burned out. So, I'm learning to step back and just focus on the things that are most important for me. And leave space for other people to realize the instrument in their way.

11-What do you think differentiates the harpists of the twenty-first century from the previous generations?

There's something we were talking about before related to the feminization of the harp, and how the composers were male harpists. At least most of the repertoire that we perform today is influenced by male harpists. I think now we are seeing that there's probably more equity in the harp world, and that I hope is less gender in a way. Now we are seeing that the harp doesn't need to be within an orchestral context. It's taking much more stage.

12-What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

I think about my education and how I got into where I am today, and I know it's so important for harpists to learn technique. It's important to inspire people no matter what age, that the harp is a vehicle for expression. And to find that joy. You can have that same joy in every instrument, but how do you get people to grab onto the time of being a human, having a life

to learn things that inspire you. I think that in educational pursuit, we need to find a balance in learning to play the music and instilling this idea of autolearning. I think it's important for the harp today, because the reality is that there are so many different directions a musician can go, and giving people the permission to explore their instruments is important, but also have a good basis of technique to help you get there. That's something that didn't click until my mid-twenties.

13-How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

Well, my stage name is "The Bionic Harpist." But as a composer, I'm trying to use my name, Alexandra Tibbitts. I mean... that goes funky when you are trying to promote yourself. When is it appropriate to go by a stage name if you are trying to be a performer, like Madonna or something. Or just own the name on the page of the music that you wrote. I identify myself as a harpist, a musician, a composer, innovator. As a cultural connector. I've been in orchestras as production manager, and I thought that was really important in terms of understanding the needs of performers. I don't want to be the person that just comes on stage. I want to respect the craft of what it takes to bring everything on a stage together. So, it's easy to get tied up in a lot of different names in that context. We all have lots of different hats that we wear in this world. And mine are all focused on making it easier to be a performer on stage.

14-Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

Oh my god! I remember when I was auditioning for Arizona University in Tucson. The teacher was saying how all harp students had to come on campus in a skirt or dress, and I was 18 at the time, and I just thought: WOW! I'm coming from a catholic school with a dress code and I'm coming to university with a dress code? That seems pretty intense." And I love wearing big harp gowns for more classical concerts, but she would not really approve the attire I wear when I'm doing my bionic harp shows, which are body suits and crazy make up. But I have to say that I've had teachers that didn't put those types of pressure on me. I chose for example between USC and Montreal because I could really see when I met Caroline, that she's such a wonderful, warm person. And she's a rocker, and composer, and I saw myself speaking with her. I saw the future that I wanted to have. I don't think in the moment you fully understand the decisions you make, but there's something very spiritual about following your gut.

15-Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

Well, the album I'm working on right now I'm calling it "Impressions" because it's a series of Etudes where I have more experimental pop, techno, jazz, and all the influences that I have. Before I started this process, there's a big difference between the show that I made as bionic harpist and the album I'm making now. And when I decided to make this album, I thought... how great to use that opportunity to go further into these influences and make them into little pieces with their help as starting point! It's a different approach because now I play what I want to perform. I want to play the music that I want to see on stage, that I want other harpists to be able to play. But I don't think that can happen until they see it themselves. And my classical training has a big influence on that.

16-Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

I laugh because when I did my show for MuTech Mexico we realized that it was going to be such a big show, that I was going to have a look that was going to make a big statement. And because I tape basically these big acrylic panels that support these controllers that have

computers on them, and they signal via Bluetooth to my computer so I that everything is mapped, and I can adjust effects all from the harp's soundboard. And you have to add all of that to this beautiful instrument. So, is a big harp dress going to look good with that? What would make more sense? So, I had a designer that made this jumpsuit with a weird corset, and then I had fake hair on. And it is so random, but it made sense in that context. If I wore that dress while playing Glière, I'd say it would influence the way I interpret it. There's something theatrical about playing the harp. It's such a visual instrument! You don't just listen to it when you go to a harp concert. You are also mesmerized by gestures. So, what a person wears also influences the audience's interpretation of it. I think it's really about what puts you in the place of the music that you are playing. For me atmosphere is everything.

17-Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

Well, if the harp didn't cost thirty thousand dollars, then we could have a couple and change them like we change our wardrobes. But of course, for people who have the luxury of choosing their instrument, it's a like choosing your life partner. But I have a natural Salzedo model, and when I was picking it, I was there with my first teacher. And I didn't like the model. I thought it was too masculine. It didn't speak to me. But when I was hearing blindsided, I heard this instrument that has a dark sound and rounded brightness. So it was that what caught me at first. And then, once I got over what it looked like, I started seeing it with eyes of "actually, I'm kind of a tomboy, so it's cool that I have a harp that doesn't have flowers on it. I think it's going to age with me versus me aging out of it." It's a big investment! And to think about who you are and what's at the core of yourself, you are right to say that a violin or a piano, generically they look pretty similar. The harps are fashion statements as well.

18-What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists in the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

Social media it's on my mind every single day, and how we must produce something to be digested by the masses. But is that serving something in terms of creating a career? There are pros and cons. All of the sudden, we have students and professionals who create accounts and play a bunch of video game music and they have millions of views. But I really wonder, are they able to make a career of that? Will they be able to play recital of videogame music? Perhaps one person will do well, but that doesn't represent the harp's career path for the global masses. So, the pro is that is a whole new world for discovering how to use the harp today. My fear is that the quality of content becomes more contrived. That we're training audiences with candy, instead of giving them a rounded diet. Because music is education. But that's the job of the performer. Are they aware that we have a big job to do educating the people?

19-What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

We have a lot of female harpists in Montreal, and I would say we have a lot of homosexual harpists. I don't see many straight male harpists in Montreal, but that's probably not reflective of the global community. But it's safe to say that the harp is dominated by female harpists. I guess it's a hard question because we are talking about quantity. We're going to have a lot more publicity for those really famous female harpists, but also a lot of promotion for those very few male harpists. It's like supply and demand in some ways. Perhaps I don't pay too much attention to the classical world to give a fair assessment. If I think about my social media algorithms, I see a lot of Sasha, and I don't know if I'm seeing a lot of female harpists

to be honest. So, it's totally biased at that point. Who's actively promoting themselves at that point, or already has a great following crowd.

For example, all the male harpists of the previous century were also composers, so questions like these are nuanced. Another interesting thing in social media is algorithms, because I think that ultimately people are going to be searching for things that they become aware of, and that will change the algorithms. I mean, you can face the question differently. If you have Sasha Boldachev and Isabel Moretti performing on the same night in the same city, which concert do you go see? I'm going to go see Sasha, because I know he's playing a lot of repertoire that I'm not exposed to. He's more active in changing the story and narrative of the harp. I saw Isabelle last year, and I know her style is keeping the classical standards alive and playing them at the highest level possible. But for me, I'm not a perfect performer. It's more about the artistic experience that I'm looking for. It's more about my personal preference and what I want to see with the harp.

20-Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

My harp is a boy. It's named after Frank Sinatra. So, for me it kind of goes anyway. My grandma's harp was named Marcel, so I guess it's been a guy for me. But I know harpists that see their instrument in a more female light. I joke that my romantic relationships are really short termed, so the harp is my long-term partner. At least I have that going pretty well for me!

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

I just found a crack on my harp, so I'm worried it could be something that will be a big problem. I think is when your instrument catches up to you, that becomes a question of can you afford to keep up with your instrument? It reminded me of places that I brought the harp. I do like bringing the instrument to high society events, but I also like to bring them to raves and play in underground venues where the harp usually never steps into. For me it's my job as musician to declassify where the harp is allowed to be.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

When I was just starting my undergrad, I had a question about what roles does the harp has to play in the twenty-first century. What is the point for me just to play standard rep and only that? I didn't realize how big of a question it was in that moment, but it dictated the path of my studies. I started taking courses in the electroacoustic department to understand what it is. Composers started writing pieces for me, and slowly, I was putting myself in contexts where I was taking the harp outside of its standardized norm. And it wasn't until I was getting ready to move to Montreal, while attending Coachella festival, that I was in awe seeing ten thousand people crowd, one guy on stage and he has a bunch of machines in front of him, and the lights were intricate with his beats. And I thought, what it would be if I could pluck a string on the harp and that could trigger some kind of lighting? At that moment, I brought that to Montreal, and it started affecting the conversations I would have with the people I'd meet. Eventually I met my long-time collaborator John Sullivan, who was doing his PhD at McGill. And I was heavily involved in his thesis. My modus for performance was so aligned with his mode of research that we had two collaborations. The first was gestural control, where we developed these boxes that had sensors that would follow my motions, and we worked with a composer to write a piece for that based on different degrees of motion, like pitch, roll and yaw, and take those parameters, e.g. x controls volume and y is reverb tail, etc. But the harp is such a physical instrument that it had too many variables. I don't use a lot of percussive

sounds when I play, so I realized that, like the guys that have so many machines spread out, I couldn't do that. But I could put things on the soundboard and see what I'm able to manipulate that won't affect the way I play the harp, and it's easier to trigger things because I don't have to press things down or having to add more pedals. So that was our second project. It's more of an augmented instrument that has amplified capabilities.

23-What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

Learning curve. Because especially the first project, I was at the mercy of the composer to determine what I could play. And at that time, I hadn't been working enough with electroacoustic harp that I felt the need to discover my own identity within it. I did not want to have a composer decide who I was as a performer. So, I wanted John to help me create a system that I could learn to work myself. I work with Ableton Live, and it's a good software for live performance. I learned that I could create a type of performance where what I create can expand the harp, and create rhythmic pulses. John created a software that could communicate with Ableton Live in this context. We've talked about commercialization, but it requires a lot of self-learning. We haven't developed plugins that a harpist can just download and be able to play. Our instrument is open source, so harpists can access the research and develop their own systems. I think we're only on a second-generation controller and they have different controllers, so they probably need another generation that you can market after. It took me three years to learn how to develop my Ableton Sessions. Perhaps other harpists will learn faster if they have all the tools available, but at the end of the day, it's a super fragile system, so it's risky business.

24-What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

The first performance I gave was at CIRMMT in a student context, and there was another artist programmed that said it was cute, and that hit me real hard. But then, I had the director of CIRMMT saying that it had a lot of potential. Again, we can talk about culture and people's insecurities. From harpists I've had a good reception. I think it's a question about the angelic or the rebel world of the harp. There are some people that don't want to see the harp used in those ways, because their idea of the instrument is limited to that. But I've been very careful to create a system that wouldn't hurt the harp, and that you can take it off and play in a classical venue within five minutes. I think that accessibility of a project like this is not readily there. It would take a long time for another musician to perform these types of projects.

25-Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

I didn't study composition formally, so everything I work on takes the longer approach. I record a lot of my improvis, and then months after, they might become useful in creating a composition later. For example, my performance of the bionic harpist is more of a biopic where it's narrated from very personal life experiences, because I had an accident and metal on half my body. So, I had braces during this period, and it was motivating to think of myself as an action figure. But that's no longer the case. So, the harp gives me this context so I can tell that story. I was commissioned as part of an artist residency to create a project, and when I knew that I wanted my story to be the project, it helped create the overall form thinking of it as a symphony. So that was very influential to create the structure.

26-How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

Well, in this context I use the equipment I had developed by me/with me. First you must think how to amplify the instrument, and I was lucky to do my research at CIRMMT and use their equipment. One day I rented all their mics and placed them in different positions and recorded the same excerpts and listen back to see what is going to sound. I personally choose to work with only one or two microphones to make sure that it's easy to replicate in any kind of context. I think it's important when thinking of technology to find a way to make it easy and be ok with limitations.

27- When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

You have to talk about a financial partnership as well. When I premiered the bionic harp show I had a friend that was a visual artist that help me with the visuals, and we accomplished that. But I did not have a budget for that. We couldn't produce something that was really in line with what I envisioned because of financial capacities. I'm personally at this point where I finally have my residency, and I can produce a studio album, but I don't have a grant to produce the visuals for the show that I would tour with. I know in the direction I'm going towards, that's the next step. I think each artist knows their craft better, so you have to be ok with relinquishing control when it's a collaboration. There's always a conversation, because we work really well with limitations, and if you give too much card blanche, that also stifling of where do you even begin? When I played in Mexico for example, I was saying I didn't want a see-through body suit because my dad was going to be there. But in terms of makeup and hair style, I'm not going to do your job. I was uncomfortable when I was trying on the clothes, but it worked out really well, because I gave them freedom to do their stuff. The conversation happens in the beginning, and then there's going to be fine tunings throughout the way. Just like in a harp lesson, where you're agreeing on the repertoire and then you are changing fingerings. You have to be ok with trusting the person that you are working with, that is going to make the project better.

28-Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

I think that if the audience has the expectation that they are going to see the harp, then they will be disappointed. But normally I only get wonder and curiosity, because people that come to see the show want to experience something they've never seen. But they are also delighted where it's very acoustic and angelic. It's like giving a slice of cake, but not over saturate them with that. Audiences are smart, so you want to make sure that you create something that you would want to watch yourself. If I'm content with it, then I think my audience will be content with it.

29-Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

YES! I think about those little girls and boys that go see a show and see the instrument and get amazed. Sometimes we don't go to classical concerts, so by having more contexts where people can access music and art in general, will make them reasons to appreciate more at younger ages. And to see that the harp is versatile, playing in jazz clubs, raves, orchestra pits, it can go anywhere.

Interview with Caroline Lizotte
Wentworth-Nord, QC, Canada, May 12, 2023

1-Why did you choose the harp?

Oh my god! It's a matter of circumstances, I guess. I started with piano first, and went to the Conservatoire in piano, and I was very curious. So, I was always looking to other instruments. While I was there, the harp studio intrigued me. I had a couple of lessons in piano, but the year after I started, my father died and I stopped everything. Then, with his death, you see a lot of family arriving at your house. I was 11 years old, I did not know everyone, but people were visiting us, and my father's cousin was a harpist. I knew her name, but not that she was a harpist. Sometimes when you are young you discover things! She came into the house with her little harp because she did not want to leave it in the car. It was too hot. And we started talking about it, and my mother asked if I wanted to take lessons. So, I went every Saturday to take lessons with Gabby, my cousin, and I felt in love. What I like about it harp—which is funny because I play piano and clarinet—was that when I touched the harp, I realized you can move levers and play different scales, and I thought “Wow! This is so cool!” with the clarinet I had to think, the piano is also very hard. Us, we play in C-flat major, any key and it's always the same thing. I felt in love with that. I loved as a young person that I did not have to care about alterations.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

When I finished the first lessons with the celtic harp, she made me try the big harp and the pedals, and then I said this is very interesting, more strings. So, I entered the Conservatoire de Quebec and I studied with Madam Dorothy Weldon Masella, who was a former student of Grandjany. She was the harpist of the OSM for forty years before Jennifer Swartz. So, she was teaching in both conservatoires in Montreal and Quebec. I started learning the harp with French technique. But then, she had to keep only one school. And another harpist won the audition for Quebec Symphony, Natalie Teeven. So, the fact that she came to Quebec, she took the harp class—which was not very big, only two of us—and she was also a student of Madam Masella. But she did her masters in Cleveland with Miss Chalifoux. So, she brought me another concept. She was an amazing harpist; she still is an amazing musician. But she brought another light, because I studied for four years with Masella, and then five years with her. So, totally different techniques. A complete switch to Salzedo technique because she was a student of Chalifoux. Pure Salzedo. I also did some training in Salzedo school with Miss Chalifoux in the summers I was accepted to the National Youth Orchestra of Canada. They used to send harpists to Salzedo school in Maine, and that's where we pursued our Salzedo technique. Also, the vision of Natalie about contemporary music was very open. She was one of the first harpists in Quebec to bring contemporary music like the Shaffer, Salzedo. We wouldn't play a lot of Salzedo with Madam Masella; we would play a lot of Grandjany. So, I learned a lot of Grandjany and then I learned a lot of Salzedo and other composers like Britten. I think I had this classical background, but very rich in both French and Salzedo technique. I also told Natalie that I really preferred the French technique, and she was also very open, she was not strict and would let me explore my technique and make the merge between the two. I've been very lucky to have these two wonderful teachers.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

Yes, because I've learned the major repertoire, and I've always been experimental because I was composing since I was a child. My first communication was composition, because I first learned other instruments. When my father passed away, I opened the piano and began playing. And it was not classical. I was not far enough in piano to play anything big, but what I played was my music and I don't know how it happened, but it did. In my head, I have this kind of side composition that was there, my own medium of communication.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

Huh, if I say now, I feel that I'm bringing something new to the repertoire. My mission is to write more and more, and my influences are all the composers that I've worked on, even in the orchestra. So yes, for students I would say, you should play this and that, but when I receive the music, I look at it and think "oh this I would love to learn" but I have a shelf of music that I want to learn and it's waiting for me to find time. It's on my stand to sightread, put fingerings, pedals. But of course, my repertoire and music tend to be twenty-first century music. I kind of walk two paths. I want to write, but I also want to play other music.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

Not at all. The instrument is infinite.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

We don't know all the repertoire. There's still a lot to discover. Like I said, when I receive music, my predecessors, my teachers, colleagues from two or three generations before... Sometimes I receive their music and I find a piece that we've never heard of. And we keep

saying it's limited, but you can only imagine what's explored already. I've found a couple of pieces that are so well written, and it's just because we don't know them, we don't teach them. We've been taught in a way that we only play the standards in the repertoire; but there's more. And it takes years to discover. For example, when I was studying in the Conservatoire, neither of my teachers would say "oh play this Renié piece!" We did not play so much Renié, and it took a while for this music to emerge again, because it was at some point forgotten. A lot of harpists brought it back and thank God! Because she has amazing repertoire. Who knows what will happen with my pieces as well. Maybe in 50 years nobody will play it so much, and maybe someone will rediscover it and play it. It depends on the circumstances and popularity. There's a lot of music and time for every score to be discovered also.

7-In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

I feel that is a little bit of the same unfortunately. Not inside the harp community, but outside. The classical world usually takes the harp as a very special magical instrument. I always remember when I played once a TV program maybe ten years ago, and on the plateau, while I was preparing to play, a famous actor that was there invited on the panel said "Oh! There are still people that play that thing! We're in Quebec, 2013. That's why I'm saying, does it change that much? Are we considered by the classical music and audiences? We're still rare and inaccessible, but I think it's in the society and the way they perceive us. Because the harp has always been very wild. If we take for example Harpo Marx, he was bringing the harp somewhere else, it was really Avant Garde. But the way it's been received is what continues to limit us.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you feel are happening within the international harp community?

Inside our community we are still... Some people want very particular paths, and others want to push the boundaries. Inside the community is kind of a Y. I like your word, trend, because there are some people that are more with tradition, and others who want to go and explore more. But I think it's normal in every instrument. Everyone has its missions and goals and I think it's totally normal in the community to say if it's good or bad. I think it's normal. And if we get to have this communication, which was good today, it's because our harp community is communicating more than before thanks to the worldwide web, it helps.

9-Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

Oh my god! I think more and more. And also, I think we are interested. Of course we cannot enjoy everything together, but I'm thinking of the World Harp Congress, and you see so many nationalities! I mean, they began in the 1980's. It's not that far off. There are harpists in the world who said back in the 60's 70's and 80's "Let's join together, let's discover and be a family!" It's a way I think to reunite our community. Also, I think the harp began at the end of the nineteenth century, the pedal harp is quite new. Is not that old. So, there are such things to discover still. But thanks to these harpists before us that wanted to open more paths. Like I was talking before, with the Grandjany and Salzedo techniques, at some point there were some fights between the schools, Russian schools, even Asians. The fact that they can all communicate now I think is a step towards acceptance, and to the will of being a community. As I said, we are new. The pedal harp is not an old instrument.

10-What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

I think is the novelties that harp makers and harpists' missions they are trying to push. And to think that we shouldn't do something. I was telling you about the instrument that is not that old. Now that I've been playing the electroacoustic harp since last year, and I've owned one since 2015, I've been exploring a lot, and struggling a lot with presenting my pieces and saying, this is for electroacoustic harp. The techno concerto was written in 2003 and I'm not sure I'm going to play that because it's for electroacoustic harp. Sometimes we want to push, but we are also limited by tradition. But I mean, it changes as you grow your career and explore other music by other composers. At some point, you don't have a choice but to open your mindset.

11-What do you think differentiates the harpists of the twenty-first century from the previous generations?

I think our predecessors were amazing harpists. When you want to play the harp, you are not playing a typical instrument. You are not playing a piano or a violin, and I have nothing against these instruments, but I come from a small milieu. I was born in Quebec City and my father and mother, they grew up in small villages down the St. Lawrence River, and it was impossible to learn something other than those instruments. When you decide to play the bassoon or the harp, you are playing an atypical instrument. Not really, because if you want to play the harp in either century it's the same. The society always considers us to be rare. What is different is the way that we can communicate because of the internet, and I think today, what I see is that the harpists from the previous century had to struggle a lot more to be accepted as typical instruments. They walked the path before us a lot. They struggled more than us. They had to make the repertoire. I think it's still the same today, but we have much more access. I think the struggle is different. Today we are still working a lot, but in a different way. We have to walk in this path of technology. They did not have that, but they were new in the system, the same way we are new in the electronic world.

12-What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

I'd say, I think we should continue to communicate. This is a lot. Communication is quite something to put together and be together and discover and respect everyone's work. To open and communicate and respect.

13-How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

Hmm. Exploration. I'm always taking the harp like I was doing at the Conservatoire. I did my classical training, but when it was time to do my Bachelors and include a Canadian piece in my program and I said "I want to compose mine, I want to compose Odisée" my teacher didn't say "No" she said "Go, yes," she opened the door for me. The compositions were always following me. Opuses 1-35 are all piano and clarinet music and ensembles. 36 is a wind ensemble and opus 37 is Odisée, my first composition for harp. So, yes, exploration is my identity, as soon as I was able to give compositions to my instrument and since I knew that I loved the harp and decided I wanted to be a harpist I said: "OK, it's time to write my first piece for harp, and it has to be serious." It was not just exploration. I wanted to fix something very special. I think Odisée was really attached to this work, because it has my signature as it would have been for the piano, but it has a totally different language.

14-Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

No. As I said, even if I've seen Natalie playing in dresses, I also saw her playing contemporary music in totally different outfits. For me, when I played clarinet, I always did a lot of ensembles—wind symphony, marching bands—while I was a senior or junior. I'm used

to being a part of a big ensemble, that's why I have an identity as a harpist, but also one of being a member of a large ensemble, even with the clarinet or the harp. So, for me, what do we wear in the orchestra? Black. What do we wear? The same outfit of the person next to you. So, for me a dress is not in my mind. I feel good when I'm all in black, like I would play in the orchestra. I'm neutral and I can play. I don't refer to a special dress and think we can change our outfits. For example, when I used to play with my brother's band, who was a Rock singer, of course I would not come with an orchestra dress. I would wear leather pants. Of course, at some point you want to fit in your concept.

15-Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

There are a lot of pieces that I played in my career that I did not learn at school because I was not identified with them. For example, Handel's Concerto I had never heard of that or learned it at school. I learned them on tour when I was already a professional. I had my own ideas of exploring, I was also very attracted by the twentieth century rep, but of course I love a lot of Bach. But there are things that I always wanted—also because I was young—and others that I didn't. But once you have to learn it and make a living, if they say, "We play Handel concerto" I have to say "OK, I'll learn it." But when I dove into it, I realized it's so beautiful, and then I thought "It's such a shame that you did not learn this before Caro!" But of course, we are young and that's normal, but if we keep our minds open, and play some pieces, we realize they are gems. Questions like these, in 50 years there are going to be different answers to them. I'm still a child, even if I'm old, I still have a lot to learn in front of me. There's so much music that I still want to learn.

16-Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

Hmm... the more I go, the more I tend to be more neutral and let the music talk. A little bit, like I said before, if I'm playing rock I will put on leather pants, if I'm going to play Stellar Sonata, I will wear black, but add something more futurist. But I feel good being neutral.

17-Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

Like I said a bit earlier, I didn't want to play Handel when I was young, and I did not want to have a 23 either. I wanted to have a 30 because it was more modern, and the Salzedo afterwards. I always felt a little modern, but now I own a 23! So, things change. Sometimes rich people will use the harp for decoration. I'm sure Lyon & Healy sold harps not only to harpists, but also people who want to have it for decoration. For me, they are not instruments, they are persons. For example, my harps are named Gabby, Laurel... They have their names.

18-What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists in the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

I talked about that before. In the twentieth century, they had to struggle to open the path. We're in the new millennium and the technology is going so fast. We are right into it right now, and I think it will be worse, because technology will evolve super-fast and it will be a struggle for all society. But it gives you also a lot of opportunities like multimedia and staging. It gives you a lot of aspects, but you have to add more and more layers. And is it economical? I don't know. But it's very difficult to afford a harp, and if you have to afford multimedia extensions to it, then it becomes impossible. That's probably why it's interesting. Because in the twentieth century you were a harpist or a pianist. But in this century, you are a visioner, a CEO of your own company, you drive your own editions, you produce your own

shows. This is difficult. You have to have a circular vision of what you are doing and being clear about your identity.

19-What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

Hmm... Still like I was saying, the fact that we want to be all together and join as a community. Everyone is interested in every part of the world that the harp is active. I've been going to the World Harp Congress, and I feel like it's open. We tend to discover and respect others and be part of the party and the explorations of everyone. The gender and style are all different. I think it's open.

20-Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

No, they are gender-fluid. Their names are totally gender-fluid and can be imagined either way. But I think that it depends. You know, in Germany it took a while before they hired a woman to play in the orchestra. First the harp, the soloists and harpists composers were mostly men. And then in the twentieth century it turned upside down, and now is turning back again. I think we're gender fluid.

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

Oh yes, of course. I had to wait a long time and raise my money. My father passed away when I was young like I said. He was an opera singer, and then my mom had all the financial responsibility with two kids. But my mom was an artist at soul, and she never said we should choose a profession that would bring money. And at the Conservatoire, I was lucky I could do all my practice there. I started playing when I was 12 years old, and then I was able to buy my first harp was at 21. So, slowly but surely, I was able to get one. And I could not have imagined before that I would have these instruments today. I don't know how it happened. I guess it was a matter of circumstance and hard work. But it was difficult financially, and it took a while. After I finished at the Conservatoire I went to study in Eastman School of Music, and my mom sent me there. It was very expensive, so I had the help of a patron, and it turned to be a problem because they retracted the money. I had to quit my studies with Kathleen Bride, and I couldn't finish my degree there. I came back to Montreal and doing pancakes in restaurants for years, because I owed money to the Americans. I worked several hours just to make it possible to pay for a degree that I did not finish. I struggled but I think we should all experience that a bit.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

It is definitely my brother, because he was singing in rock bands. He's four years older than me and left the house before me. While studying in Montreal, he created his band and asked me to play with them a couple of pieces. But one year, when I graduated from Quebec, they asked to do a tour with them in Europe playing keyboards, so I said "YES!" But I had to learn everything electronical to manage all the sounds, the sampler... But now that I'm talking to you and thinking... I have to tell you that the sound of this electronic sound, this electronic aspect of my interest comes from the electroacoustic degrees. Electronic music in general. I took classes at the Conservatoire in electroacoustic and learned how to use the equipment and the tapes. I did that for three years. But also, the harp took a lot of prominence. So, my interest to add electronic instruments came from that. And then my brother asked me to do that tour. So, I went into electronic instruments and manipulated the sounds. I was always curious about using this technology. Also, after Eastman and working like crazy in restaurants, I had all my machines and my harp at my mom's place, and I was practicing a lot

with all these devices. Imagine, working all day in a restaurant, coming home to play was a need, so I composed a lot of music and did a lot of explorations with amps. That was around 1992 to 1997, trying to make my acoustic harp electronic and how to mic the soundboard etc. I wanted to have one, but they were not commercialized yet. They were prototypes. They really began after the 2000's. I was always curious how to amplify and play with drums and electric guitar. That's why I lived with my brother's band. But as soon as we turned the volume up to make a bigger sound for the harp, then it would feedback. I was trying to find a way not to have these kinds of problems, and I think a lot of people were working on the same. It takes a while to put an electroacoustic harp.

23-What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

Technical feedback. The problems were many, but I could see the potential, but technically it was a problem. And I was mostly a harpist, not a harp maker, but a lot of harp makers were thinking about it, and brought the electric and electroacoustic harp. But they had to make a lot to make it possible. It was more feasible on the celtic harp because it has less resonance, but big harps with pedals, it took time. It was a big challenge. But now they are fantastic.

24-What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

I think people liked it. Because it brought the harp to another stage. But, as we said throughout the interview, the society is still stuck with this mindset of "it's rare." Stop saying it's rare! We are bringing it to you to a bar! It takes time for society to understand that everything is possible. Like in the aspect of the programming, orchestras programs and series, they have to deal with the people who come to the concert. So, if these people are open to new music and experimentations with electric harp that will help the repertoire to glow and grow. Because for example, the Concerto Techno written in 2003, I've contacted many people after I created it with Trois Rivières Symphony, and it was kind of a premiere, but people in the hall loved it. But afterwards I proposed it to other orchestras, and it was received with scepticism. They say they are not sure it will fit with their programming. And I understand it, but if you never do it, it will never happen. We're also very squared everywhere in the world.

25-Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

I have a descriptive style. I am still considered a tonal composer, and program composer. Sometimes people say "your music is cinematic." It has to describe something. For example, the Raga, I used a rubber mallet to create a specific sound. In Stellar Sonata I will use my device and distortion to describe rage. I want to describe, so, what I hear for that I will use a specific effect. I know composers will use props and objects. If I have a topic in my mind, I will try as hard as possible to reproduce it on the instrument, or bring an object to create it. But the emotion I want to describe comes first. I usually study a lot when I receive a commission. They give me white card all the time, but I have to know from them what is it they want, what they want to say. Then I will make my research. For example, the piece I'm writing for harp and violin is about communication, and it's hard to describe that in music. So, I try to do something circular, to be close to everyone, and then I'm thinking about their identity, the stars etc. I try to inspire myself by reading what they want. And if I find a title, then I get inspired and oriented towards what I'm going to write. But it's mostly introspected, or in communication with the commissioner.

26-How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

Right now, I'm in between two worlds. Before I was using objects to add extra sounds, and these are easy to find because they are surrounding us. For example, in the Techno Concerto I used bubble wrap around my strings. But of course, that's easy to find. But let me tell you, for the electronic it's different. Nobody has the same machines, computers, software, interfaces. It's infinite. So, the Stellar Sonata, I've been working with two performers trying to figure out how to make it work. Because I have what I have, and I write for that. When you want to transpose your work with Pepe to another setup it will be hard, because of the availability of devices and technology. From year to year, you have a different device. Even if it's the same model, and they change something, it will not respond the same. It's the biggest issue in our century. But you don't compose because of that. I just compose with what I have and enjoy it.

27-When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

As I said, because I'm a composer, I'm introspective. My people are my research. My concept is with my studies and explorations. I'm a human who plays the harp, but my brain is everywhere. It's kind of a bubble, but if I have to write for a choir and harp, or other mediums, my collaborations are my instruments. One of next commissions are piano and percussion, so the harp is left aside. I can write chromatisms! For me the objects are persons. They are my partners.

28-Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

I think today people are much more surrounded by multimedia, so I think they need it. I have to say, when I play Suite Galactic and I start singing, or Raga and use the mallets, people get shocked. They want to see and receive the immersion of music. They are ready to receive multimedia. When it's too much then it's not so good, but people of today are used to having more and quicker information. You cannot listen to something on the TV or compare a movie from the 90's to one of today's. It's completely different. It was so slow back then, and now it's very fast.

29-Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

Yes, and I think Harpo was doing it back then. People are still doing it, and like we say, for the harp, it's more a matter of society than harpist themselves, because there will always be angels and rebels. In every field. So, I guess the rebels are the ones that brings every media and every type of language into something new because you want to give. The harp exists and our community is a good one!

Interview with Remy van Kesteren
Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 25th, 2023.

1-Why did you choose the harp?

I chose the harp when I was 5 years old. My mom used to play the flute and I went along with her one day and she was playing with a friend, and this friend was playing the harp. I just went along and sat on a swing, I heard the sound and was lured off the swing and went upstairs. It was pretty much love at first sight. I mean, the instrument is still impressive to me, especially for a 5-year-old boy. And the sound is like something that goes—at least for me—straight through. But it's also like an embrace. It's quite hard to dislike.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

I started playing folk music. I learned the harp through the folk melodies, and the Irish tradition has a very rich harp culture. So learned the harp playing by ear, listening to my teacher, and seeing what she was doing. Only after a few years I learned how to read notes, and that teacher quite soon sent me to the conservatory, where they had some sort of young talent department. So, when I was 10 years old, I went to this school in Utrecht where I grew up, and I stayed there for a long time studying with Erica Waardenburg. Later on, I came to

Amsterdam to finish my studies here, and spent one year in Paris after that with Isabel Moretti, which was a dream of mine. When I went to the conservatory is when I got into classical music, because that is what is taught there. This music was new to me, but I got into this world, and I had this dream of being a classical soloist and playing around the world. The dream sort of became reality in my early twenties, slowly but surely. And then I realized that it was a dream, but it wasn't my dream. I was actually quite unhappy in that period. And at some point, I had to realize that it was the music that I needed to change. That's when I started to switch things around.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

Not anymore. Classically trained but no. I wouldn't even define myself as a harpist. I am a musician and play the harp.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

Sometimes they still ask, but no. I don't really play that anymore. It's not that I don't play classical music, but only if I want to. Actually, now I'm playing a project... I'm releasing an album about my musical muses, and that's going to be from Radiohead to Jean Sibelius, so there will be classical music, because that's also an inspiration. But you won't hear me play Glière. I played it once and that was enough.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

No! I did, but the limitation was in the repertoire, not in the instrument. Every instrument has its limitations, but the only real limitation is your own imagination. To give an example, when you are improvising, people always say that the harp is so hard to improvise. And of course, if you take bebop as an example of improvisation, it's going to be hard to switch pedals around. Only Park Stickney with his gigantic feet can do that! But then, improvising in just one key, you just put your pedals and basically hit any random note and it's going to sound gorgeous. And that suddenly gives immense freedom in improvisation. So just this small example of how just a mindset or approaching your instrument from a different angle can widen the scope of possibilities.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

Absolutely, yes. I don't think there is a debate about that. If you compare it to piano or violin repertoire yes. I mean, there are some good pieces, but not a lot. I mean there's definitely repertoire and I'm convinced that there's a lot that needs to be discovered, but it will be the lesser-known composers, for better or worse reasons. Unfortunately, we don't have the Schostakovitch Concerto, or Prokofiev Sonata. We don't have those things. There's definitely repertoire, and you can make a convincing program out of it, but compared to other instruments... no.

7- In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

I think it's in pretty good position. Talking here in the Netherlands, we have a few respectable harpists who made the instrument quite known, also as a soloist instrument. It's very different in other parts of the world. Again, it won't have the same status as the piano. It's not a household instrument like the guitar, but I think it has a nice position and what I really like it's that in the community, it used to be very conservative. But now, with the younger generation, they are more open, they are discovering, and I think that's what our instrument really needs. And also, what classical music really needs. There's actually a very interesting situation in the Netherlands! In the southeast of Amsterdam, which used to be a "problem" area, we have a lot of parents coming from all over the world, who don't have the financial

freedom that other inhabitants of Amsterdam have. So, these kids don't get the chance to play instruments, and there's this foundation that offered them the opportunity to play instruments. And crazy and cool enough, a lot of these kids want to play the harp! They offered them all instruments and they went for the harp. So, we've been working on building a cheaper harp to offer these kids the opportunity to start playing. We just got 300 instruments for them, and they can't get enough of it. There's a big future for our instrument.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you feel are happening within the international harp community?

First, I have to say that I don't feel so much in the community anymore. It was great to be in the World Harp Congress last year, to get more sense of what was going on. Obviously, when I was playing classical music I felt part of this community, more than I feel now. I'm sort of the weird, odd one, out. Anyway, what I think it's positive it's that there's sort of a breadth of fresh air. When I was younger, it was the Israel and the USA competitions deciding what everyone was playing and doing and wanted to do with their lives. At least it was what I felt. So, indeed, we are all playing the Hindemith Sonata, and no one really knows why? I mean, it's a great sonata, but still! There are other options. Also, starting my own festival and the competition, we've been trying to push people to think more about what they want, what they stand for. Because the world is not waiting for a hundred new harpists, all playing Hindemith and not knowing why they're playing it. So, to think about why you want to do what you want to do. Beautiful if you are doing it with a crazy project like yourself, if you are starting such an endeavour. Also great, if you are dedicating your life to Debussy, but as long as you know why. And I feel like more harpists who are really trying to discover something new and feel the freedom to do that. Whereas 20 years ago, I remember a congress, and someone doing something out of the box and people kept saying: "Shame on her" or "you shouldn't do that" and "Go back to Renié"! So, I think that is very positive thing. At the same time, it's logical, but I think that the community is looking too much inward and should look more outward. Should want to be really a part of the world of music, more than a gated community.

9-Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

Absolutely not! I mean, the harp in itself it's unattainable. Talking about those kids for example! They have no chance to get there. And also for my parents, I don't know how they managed... by renting and getting loans. I mean, I am privileged. I've heard so many people in my life that said "I wish I played the harp, but my parents couldn't afford it, or my parents wouldn't let me. So, I think that's something that we need to work on. Well, the repertoire... like I said, it used to be decided by a small number of people who are also pushing a little bit certain repertoire to be published... a bit like the gated community. Not inclusive at all, but it's a bit inherent to what the instrument is, the exclusivity of the instrument. So, I think we need to change it in many different ways. But it happens I think from outside in, making it more accessible. Also, for harpists to explore and present people in the world that there's more out there musically that you can do with this instrument. When I'm performing somewhere, people say "Oh! I didn't know it could sound that way!" That also opens a world for them and makes the instrument more accessible.

10- What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

Whoa! Well, all of the above! It's hard to find big words, because I don't feel that embedded into the community, so I don't feel like I can say all these things and be right. I'm not sure. In general, it's in what we talked about before. About looking more outwards, but again, it's starting to happen now. But there's a sense of not everyone being aware of the actual musical

world that you are a part of. Sometimes you feel like... well, I was one of them. You feel like you are going to win this competition and that's going to give you a career, and it doesn't mean anything outside of the harp world. It doesn't mean anything in the outside world. No one cares! Sometimes I feel, again, we look too much inward and too little to what you want. What you desire as a musician. I think that's the only reason you want to play music. It's that you have this deep meaningful mission. That's all that matters. The rest is noise. We should focus more on that and a little less on all the politics. I remember once, I did this competition... and it's a general problem in the competition world, everyone had to play Bach. And you already know that playing Bach is going to be a carnage, total random disaster. You have no idea what people are going to say. Especially if you play your own cadenza like I did. I already knew that was going to be tricky. But maybe realize that no one is expecting for twenty harpists to play perfectly the same. People buy a ticket to someone who has a vision, an idea. Some will hate it, other are going to love it. But if everyone it's ok... In a competition you will do well if you score solid B's, but that's not the reason for people to come to your concert. That was the sort of realization that you need. Some people are completely excited about what you do. There's going to be people that hate it, but it's a compliment.

11- What do you think differentiates the harpists of the twenty-first century from the previous generations?

I think we have obtained a different position than we had in previous era, where it was much more of an orchestral instrument. So, I think it's far more normal for our generation to think of it as a solo instrument and to think of the capacities and possibilities from that perspective. So that has opened up. Also, technology now being so much part, of the mindset at least, of young instrumentalists. At the same time, it has become an increasingly difficult road to also make a living as a musician. The orchestra positions are becoming smaller and smaller. And I think something that we must not underestimate is the level, which is incomparable. If you listen to other harpists I can absolutely enjoy their musicality, but technically... I know from my teacher that the pieces that she would graduate with are the pieces that young performers play to do the entrance exam. It's a different world altogether.

12-What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

Our sense of adventure. I think that would be a great thing. An eagerness to explore and be excited collectively about that.

13- How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

As I said, I don't see myself now as a harpist. I see myself as a musician who plays harp. And it's a meaningful difference for me. I love the harp, but I used to get into these discussions with my teacher, where she said, "whatever you do, the harp always needs to sound beautiful" and I said "No! sometimes it needs to sound harsh. We could never agree, but sometimes the music asks for a completely different approach. I don't know if that's a good example, but... At some point, I thought that I should stop playing, and the harp should maybe be one of the many instruments. And I came to the realization that I will never get such control in any other instrument as I do with the harp, so I might as well take that to my advantage. But I like to consider myself as someone who could also express myself without the instrument. Although that is difficult.

14- Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

Absolutely! But I mean, the classical world in general, you feel the rules and regulations, which are either written down or sort of felt by everyone. Where you walk into the

Concertgebouw—and this literally happened to me—where this older lady—and I was even better dressed than now—asked, “Are you sure you are sitting here?” Wow! That’s brutal. Yes, so there’s definitely in general rules, and in the harp world absolutely! We all know some certain pieces that need to be played in a way, or one group feels one way and the other feels the opposite. And that is becoming freer and more relaxed, but still there.

15- Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

Absolutely. I write my own music now, so by default it’s an expression of who I am.

16- Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

Well, yes. It’s really important what you wear on stage and how you present yourself. In that regard, I do think what I wear on stage. It’s mostly what I like, but also what fits the music.

17- Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

Well, not necessarily. But the other way around does sort of put something... at some point I got a golden harp because of the USA competition. That didn’t feel good for me for multiple reasons, but other than that... I asked permission to sell it and get another harp. It didn’t feel right with the music I was playing, and well, talking about inclusivity... when you walk on stage playing a golden harp. I don’t think that’s really twenty-first century, but that’s my personal position. And now the harp I play was made for me, and I partially designed it. So of course, when given a chance, you might as well turn it into an advantage.

18- What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists in the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

I’m not sure that’s particular to our instrument, but it needs to be part of the music world, to get out of your own world and claim your space in the real world with your own ideas. I think I consider that a challenge. And also, the way about educating in the instrument is still based or is done by people who made careers in the previous century and the music world has changed dramatically since. It’s incomparable. My teacher would tell us stories about how she would get a job and how things worked and it’s a different story altogether. That just it won’t work now. Which is why is incredibly important to know why you do what you do, more than ever, I think.

19- What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

Well, we have an opposite thing where men usually don’t play the harp. I do find it sometimes interesting that those few men would then have high positions. Also with myself, is like this system where, because it’s so rare it gets extra attention. I think that’s true. People are always surprised to see a little boy playing the harp. I’m not sure about that, but there’s still a lot more women playing the harp than men. You could argue that in some regards—and I’m treading in very thin ice here—there are some advantages for strength, because it’s a heavy instrument, not only to move around it, but also to play the lower notes. You will sometimes see smaller harpists who have trouble getting all the resonance out of the instrument. Whereas guys tend to over pool the instrument. So, I’m not sure, but there’s definitely differences in ways of approaching the instrument. But probably the biggest difference is how people approach players who are from a gender they wouldn’t expect.

20- Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

For me the instrument is very much gender fluid. I don’t regard it in those terms.

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

We discussed this! My parents didn't have money to buy a harp but did everything in their power to have an instrument or to borrow from anyone. And at some point, they decided not to move or not to renovate the kitchen so I could have an instrument, so I was very fortunate. But I don't know. People rarely make comments to me about this. I don't think this is really a problem.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

It was a very intuitive process. Like I explained before, I thought I was living the life I had dreamt of, and I realized that I it wasn't my dream, so I had to start discovering what that was. And I ran into people who were improvising, so that got me out of the classical road, or at least tempted me to start exploring other possibilities with the instrument. And one thing happened after the other. I was asked to do an album that was first supposed to be the harp's greatest hits, and it was for Deutsche gramophone! And I did not want to record those pieces. And I started improvising and I sent them some drafts, and they thought that it was nice. And then at some point I said "I hear some other instruments" and they said "we can bring an orchestra", and I said... "well, it's more like a band" Of course, as soon as you start playing with those guys, you come into this world where they used these effects, their distortions, and I thought "Ok! What are you using? And why can't I use this on the harp? Also, trying out things... I wrote a piece, and I thought I could play it. And then realized it required three harpists, so I had completely overestimated myself. So, looping came into my life. Ok, I can loop it and I can stack and make the composition work in that way. That's what happened. It was 2016. I had my band gig and at that point, I had literally no idea what the sound was. I remember the sound engineer was... "When you are playing with drums, I can't really make the sound work together" and I said "What are you talking about? We're both playing at the same time! Just put it on top!" So, it's a whole process of realizing ah "ok this is what you mean when you talk about sound, and effects are a part of that development.

23- What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

Well, what obstacles didn't I encounter? You're just trying out things and not knowing it's great in the sense that you are discovering and opening, but of course you make a lot of stupid mistakes. Equipment is going to break down. But at the same time, that naïveté is also what you need to create something that's never been done before because everyone thinks "Oh, that's a stupid idea." And it probably is! But it might as well work and then you have something special.

24- What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

Yes! There was a lot of resistance. Even in the paper here, some of the people with whom I had a meaningful relationship with, they even called me a traitor, which was kind of bizarre. And then also in the community itself, there were a lot of people that kept saying "What is this guy doing?" After the USA Competition, they expect you to walk a certain path. It's going to be the new classical whatever and then suddenly "What is he doing looping and not even playing harp for a while?" So, there was a lot of disbelief. Also, people didn't understand and made a lot of assumptions that are bizarre. People often said, "it's probably for financial reasons" and I can assure them that if that was the case, then I should have stayed with classical music!

25- Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

It really depends on the project, which is a disappointing answer probably, but it really does. There are probably some people that have a method, but for me it starts with meeting someone else, getting inspired by someone; and I love to collaborate with different art forms, film, dance. There's a ballet company here, and I try to find some form of synergy, so I'm not so much interested in "oh, you have this art form, let's stick them together." I think that's what gives crossover a bad name. Cause usually it's done poorly. It's a thing that is really hard, because if you want to do it well, you need to completely understand the world that you are dealing with,; and that takes a lot of time. For instance, when I worked with ballet, normally the orchestra comes in the last few weeks, and the ballet is set, and the orchestra have to imitate the CD. And I said, "No, I want the same flexibility with dance as it is in music and the other way around," and the choreographer said "well, then you have to be at every rehearsal." So, I said "ok, let's do it." The dancers also had to trust how to switch tempo because they knew I knew all of them. The dance became flexible, and the music becomes flexible too. And in the end, I felt that there was synergy there. But it took a lot of time.

26- How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

It really depends on what music you are playing and what you want to do with this. The fight you want to do on stage. I'm not a big fan of having a computer on stage, but there was no other way, for at least the last show I was doing, to do without the computer. It would have meant that I would be on the floor turning knobs. So that wouldn't work for the show, or I would get the audience out of the journey, so these things have to work together. What you want and how you want to feel, how you want to move on stage, what you want the music to say. But also, in a way that works and suits the performance. You find different solutions for every time. And you are experimenting, sometimes you still switch it around.

27- When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

Yes, absolutely. I'm a bit of a control freak. I have ideas on the topics, and I find them very hard to keep them for myself. I love to be involved. So, it sparks your creativity when you see other things. But it's also a balance of when to step up and share your ideas. But there are also some parts when you must let someone else do their thing and appreciate whatever comes up.

28- Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

It really depends on the complete show. It could go both ways and that's also the beauty and the magic. Sometimes in a particular space it can't just be enough to have almost nothing going on. For instance, take an example, when there's hardly any development in the music, then suddenly one change becomes super important. You stretch out this music and the weight of the change, a chord change, a different base note, will blow your mind. Whereas if you have this very high energy music, as an audience you need something else to keep the attention. I don't know if you understand what I mean. But there's a combination of these elements. Fortunately, there's not one trick or one set that's going to work. Sometimes all these extra elements add to the joy and understanding of this music, and sometimes they

completely distract, and you wished it would have just been a harp or one person doing what it does best. I think I created things where I went too far. Sometimes I added too much stuff and realized “it was better if I just played” But sometimes if you do all these crazy things and it works, then it’s super cool. I feel like I’m revealing myself in a way... it’s all a balance, a dance, and the beauty of our profession is that there’s no truth, which is very hard. Especially when you are studying. I see a lot of students who... they go for truth. And truth is what the jury thinks or what the teacher says. And the truth is that there’s not one truth, and no right way of doing one thing. Unfortunately, there are some wrong ways, there are some thing that everyone think “this doesn’t work,” but there are so many ways of approaching something. I don’t have to tell you, only performing a piece that’s already written, there’s already so many perfect... Well, not perfect, but great ways of performing that. And let alone if you create your own show, there’s an ample possibility of brilliant shows that you can make, and also quite terrible shows that you can make out of all these ingredients. It’s like cooking! Sometimes you like it a bit saltier, and sometimes you want plain soup. No distractions, or vegetarian soup! It’s all good! Isabel Moretti always sees herself as a chef. She has a concert program that she presents as a menu, and that’s something I always liked, because I think there are many similarities between us and chefs.

29- Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

To the masses? Absolutely. These days I play pop festivals, and there are some people that will never ever buy a ticket for a harp concert, and suddenly they are at this festival and are confronted with this instrument. Many times, they come up to me, and it can be an overwhelming experience. Just putting it out of its context, presenting it in a different space, especially if it touches what they know, like, you make a cover of a Radiohead song or, I play this and they get surprised; then you can lure them into your world, and get them into a deeper understanding of our instrument.

**Interview with Alexander Boldachev
Zürich, Switzerland, May 29th, 2023.**

1-Why did you choose the harp?

Mythology? Well, I didn’t choose the harp, but when my parents and my future teachers brought me to the harp, I already knew that this was the instrument that was played by King David, Orpheus, and so on. So that was for me a kind of inspiration.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

I started at the age of 5 and there were 5 teachers in that time for me because my mother was working a lot with me. She is a pianist, so she was asking me a lot of musical aspects not exactly the harp. And Karina Maleva and Asev Barasan who was already 75 and they were practicing with me a lot. The soloist of Mariinsky Theater, Olga Shevelevich was also meeting with me. So, there were several teachers in St. Petersburg working with me constantly at the Lyceum until I left for Zurich in 2005, to study at the Academy of Arts with Catherine Michel. When I was finishing there, Sarah O-Brien arrived, but I was already on my last year of my third diploma. I did also Composition and Conducting, and some electronic music and improvisation as second subjects. I have three diplomas and it is always harp as a main instrument with different sub-subjects.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

No. Well, I say it's classical crossover harpist and composer. That means that I am classically trained, but I make the styles, and I work on different fields just bringing my instrument as a tool to create great music, bringing that to different spheres and genres and concert spaces.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

Yes of course! I like our standard repertoire. I wish to record CDs, because I still use a lot of classical repertoire on my concerts. Sometimes I still play Spohr Fantaisie, and Hindemith Sonata, and Casella, Debussy and Renié, Tournier... Sometimes I play Grandjany. I wouldn't say it is the core of my program, but sometimes I just need a very typical classical music program. I wouldn't say it's very interesting for the public, because they are now in general looking for something they know, or they understand. They can understand Brahms, Chopin or Beethoven, but if you start to tell them there were some harpists writing for the harp, they don't consider this music as important. That's why they don't listen to that as involved as they would listen to Schumann. That's the difference, and why I'm not using a lot of it. If I use these harp standards, I try to place that somewhere in a typical program like French music and then I play of course arrangements of Debussy, of old music and new music, and then in between there's some Renié.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

No, I think that the harp is the most advanced instrument of all. I think the harp has unlimited possibilities in terms of colorization of sound, of the interpretation, of working with intonation etc. Pianists and violinists have a technical advantage because the harp is a difficult instrument, much more difficult than others, not in terms of just playing glissandos, but playing with the right sound, without noises, all these things... Because there's a lot of vibrations, a lot of pedals, a lot of technical things which comparing to violin is much more difficult. But what I could say about the harp in general it's that it's now in the middle of its development. It's been three hundred years since the harp became the pedal instrument we know. It's around 1720 when the pedal harp was invented by several different luthiers in Italy, Netherlands, Austria, everywhere. The most popular was Hochbrucker, and then Erard in the time of Parish Alvars made the double-action pedals. And at the same time, you see Liszt, and Parish Alvars. And it was Erard doing at the same time the double escapement in the piano. That was a huge step forward and pianists used it at its maximum. They just made the piano the most popular instrument for all composers. I mean, every single composer, if he's composing, he's composing for the piano, that's it. But the harp, since Erard, it's more or less the same instrument, only now we have a little bit more advanced instrument. Only now the harp companies are doing the research trying to make it more particular, easier to play. I think this is a work in progress, and we will get a more advanced instrument and master our technical possibilities that will show that the harp is a limitless instrument.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

In quantity no, but in quality yes. I think there's thousands of compositions for the harp that we don't and will never play. It's not because it's good or bad music, it's just... You know.... Yesterday on the concert, I was organizing a concert and there were some Swiss composers and from St. Petersburg; and there was one of the Swiss composers, Joachim Raff, he started his career sending music to Mendelssohn. Then he contacted Liszt, then Schumann... So, he was working with them, helping them with their scores and the writing of music, and on this wave, for twenty years he became the most popular composer on Earth. He was played worldwide, top charts. But then what do we have? We play Mendelssohn, we play Liszt, we play Schumann, but we don't even know who Joachim Raff is. Last year was the release of

the CD with his compositions that were never recorded. What I mean is, there's the music that can survive through the ages and the music that cannot. And a lot of the music written for the harp can't survive, just because it was written by—and I don't mean it as a bad thing—but a second level composers. And this doesn't say anything about the quality of their music. I think that some music of Henriette Renié is much better than a lot of piano opuses of that time. Even Liszt! But the composer itself, it's not only the music he writes, but the influence he creates. And this influence makes the people later on to consider this music something that deserves to be heard. And that's why a lot of harpists didn't make it to that level. And a lot of composers who made it to that level were not interested on the harp. So we have some compositions by Mozart, a little by Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, but it's like small pieces from the table which we get sometimes; but only because they had a great harpist around. Or some composers fall in love with a harpist and then write for the harp.

7-In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

Challenging. I think it's challenging and either way critical. When we speak about the classical world, we need to understand that on the market it's 7 or 8% of all the music industry, so it's already a small market. And now, as the future it's coming, we are in a difficult situation of fighting for that 8%. So, people don't really understand now why they need to go to the classical or crossover concerts. There will be a lot of changes and new spheres which will be available in general, and also for classical and crossover. In this 'fight' the harp can survive only if we have the type of harpists you are interviewing. If we will have a possibility to integrate the harp in any kind of genre. So that's it. There's no other way. Now students coming out of conservatories are capable of going to the orchestra and this is the best of what they can think of, because they are not trained to be flexible. And I would have had the same fate if it wasn't for my personal curiosity—which I'm not sure where it comes from—but also, some of the aspects I got from my teacher, pushed me to look brighter. I also don't like the orchestra jobs. I tried it several times and did not like it.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you feel are happening within the international harp community?

We are making more projects as a community, being more active. We are still suffering from the lack of big projects, which could grab the attention of the people outside of harp world

9- Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

If you mean about inclusion of new ideas, no. It's very retrograde and absolutely mafiosi. It's like in tennis or in golf, every small field. Because harp is an expensive instrument, there is not enough workspaces. The orchestra can have 80 violins, but only one, two, three, I don't know... harpists. Five if it's a huge opera house, but that's it. Most of the communities are quite closed, and they are concentrated on planting their small seeds in order to survive as a community. But, at the same time, I see in a lot of places, a new wave is coming, and they understand that in order to survive we need to have this kind of diversity. So that's why I see that this thing is changing slowly, and the new generation of harpists is much more open to different types of usage of the harp.

10- What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

We ignore the aspect of marketing. Because I see, even big festivals are normally inside the small sphere of harpists and the friends and family. That's it. Even Israel competition which is a great thing for the country! For example, if there's a Queen Elizabeth or Tchaikovsky competition, all the town knows about it because it comes in the press and announce the

winners and so. Our world is a little bit introvert. There are a few festivals like Remy is trying to do with the Dutch festival, to bring it outside the harp sphere. So that's what we are ignoring a lot. We need better marketing; we need to put the harp everywhere.

11- What do you think differentiates the harpists of the twenty-first century from the previous generations?

First of all, like in everything, the twentieth century is the time of legends. There were musicians which are now considered superheroes. It's impossible to imagine that people were doing such amount of work and reaching such a level of respect. So, the twenty-first is the century of the marketing more or less, and of the role models. So, nowadays it's more important for the people to see you as a human being, as a professional and create this kind of bubble that people can appreciate. If you look at the biographies of the twentieth century musicians, even harpists, in our modern society it would not be appropriate or acceptable because of their way of life. People were very special, freer. Anyway, I think that now we have the luck of great people, but we now have a lot of experts in very particular fields that we should develop. And I think organizations like the World Harp Congress should concentrate—well, like they do—to show all these professionals.

12- What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

School. We don't have good schooling. We have a lot of different school by Renié, Zabel, Bochsa... but we don't have standardized school which should be at minimum level for considering yourself a professional harpist. When you compare the technical and musical level of the students in the piano, violin and harp in any university, the harpists are not at the same level. And I say this as self-criticism for myself too. It's not to insult my colleagues, I think the same about myself too. But in the time pianists come in playing all the Beethoven Sonatas, and Scriabin, and they know everything about it. They come to the teacher with the music already memorized, and discussing the musical aspects of Scriabin's life, and what motivated him to write this chord instead of another, and so on. We are sight-reading on the lessons. I know it was different periods in my life, and sometimes I was below the level I would have rather seen myself on. But that's all related to a lack of school. We need some kind of minimum level of expectations.

13-How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

I think that any instrument is the tool. Of course we spent years learning how to use it, but it's not something that should limit us. That's why right now I'm trying to see a lot of different projects to see what I'm capable of with music in general. As identity, I consider myself as a musician who plays the harp, composing arranging improvising and organizing. Sometimes conducting, but not a lot.

14-Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

I think dress code is not the topic anymore. We have now all kinds of musicians on big stage—starting with Hauser showing his chest hair with his open shirt, or Yuja Wang with her very short dresses, and so—I could say that during my training years I was. I can say I could start my real journey when I left the academy eight years ago. Before that, I was mostly limited by the stereotypes of my teachers, of myself, the culture around, my friends, etc. In Russia when I was studying, and I wanted to play crossover, I was limited. My teacher said that it was a joke and not serious. And maybe if I were in the United States it would be the other way around. At the age of seven I did the music for Sacred Materials with David Duchovny,

and when I brought it to my teacher she said, “What is that?” I started this crossover at the age of 25.

15-Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

Yes. Everything is related to my personal taste, and that’s how it should be. Of course, if you sign a contract with Sony, and they want you to record a CD of Beethoven or Mozart, Renié or Grandjany, you do what they say because they are paying for that. But if you are working by yourself, then it is all about your identity and searching for the music you would like to play. But I think there are no limitations for arrangements for the harp. All kinds of music are possible to arrange for the harp, but not all the music should be arranged for it. That’s my aspect of choice. I take the composition. I try it, and then I say “this is meaningless” and I put it away.

16-Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

Yes, of course. Sometimes I even change a few times during the concert. For example, there is a concert with the orchestra and I play different compositions, I play Rodrigo Concerto and I would like to have a Spanish shirt on, and then I play Glière and I want to be more classical in the costume; and then I play Albeniz’ Asturias and I want to be in a white and open shirt with big open sleeves, and so on. Of course, what people see influences what they hear, it is always a mix of image and music. It is always my personal taste that I believe fits the music. Maybe some people might think that Glière should be played in a Ukrainian shirt. My personal taste goes together with the music.

17-Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

I play grey and red Diva. I know that most of the special harps which are done in a unique model like white gold like the Minerva, they are normally better with their sound, because since they only do one, they are much more careful in what they do. That’s why I like to play unique models. It depends on what I want to achieve. In Moscow, it worked very well for me to play on a white gold Minerva, because I was playing normally on a big stage like Bolshoi Theatre or Tchaikovsky Hall. So, I wanted to show the harp as part of these types of stages and how they are represented, with a lot of shapes. But right now, I’m working on different modern projects in Europe, and of course this grey Diva looks like it’s made out of plastic and it’s much better representing what I’m doing right now; and it integrates better with what I’m currently working on. Maybe I’ll change later to something new.

18-What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists in the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

To understand what you are actually doing. That’s a challenge for me as well. I am doing too many things, and I don’t know what exactly my main focus will be. Some of the things are more advanced in my career, but I wouldn’t say that it’s has come to the level where I leave other things and concentrate on that. It’s constantly pushing all the lines and trying to see what my main thing will be, when I have less energy and time to do it. I think this is the challenge for every musician. To understand what their specialization and identity is, and to push this line. To push it’s easy, understand that it is the right way is more difficult.

19-What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

Ha! I just recently read a document about a new association in the harp world, and they were writing—normally in all modern documents you need to write about inclusion, equality and

all these things, because otherwise it would not be considered appropriate for the modern world—and they were writing that the harp is very inclusive because it's considered a female instrument. And I thought, no, this is not exactly how it works. We have 10% male harpists, so I think it's more inclusive than other instruments. I think the harp is a good example of the gender equality and inclusion. It shows that when we talk now about such things, we should consider both sides. Normally when we talk about inclusion, we talk about females that need to get more attention, or higher fees and possibilities, and when we talk about the harp is the other way around. And even a lot of the male soloists are well-known, and I think if you take top twenty harpists there will be a 50/50 ratio. Somehow, I don't know why it happened, the harp is considered a female instrument. But most of the male harpists are getting much more attention and this is nothing to do with, normally articulated problems of our society. It's actually showing that there are some other aspects and equations which are considered in the world. And probably understanding how it works for the harpist would lead us to understand how it works in general, because it's a very special world. I always say in every interview that harp is a very stereotyped instrument, and we are still all around the world, doesn't matter where, it's very much stereotyped. And the way we can change people's minds about the harp is very important, because if we make them change their minds about one thing, it will then be easier to cause other changes. I think the harp could be a frontline of fighting for human souls and for the revolution of a free mind.

20-Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

I don't consider the instrument to have any type of gender.

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

Of course. First, I did not have any harp, and then I had a Frankenstein of five old Lunacharsky that were somehow assembled together. I can say after so many years, I wouldn't really be able to just easily buy a harp without the sponsoring and help. I think this is in a way what makes the harp very exclusive and luxurious instrument. But it's also very unattractive to younger generations, especially in developing countries. Some of the projects like Harp-e by Joris Beets have a lot of potential, because the harp should be affordable, especially for kids. But it shouldn't be an instrument with a plastic sound. There should be a good balance between plastic harps and something more expensive that it's too professional. Something that ranges around 700 USD that anyone can buy instead of a guitar or a keyboard. Now there's no way. For the same price you can buy, even a Harpsicle—which I'm not a fan of their sound—for the same money you can buy a good keyboard by Yamaha or quite a good guitar, full size instruments. It's quite difficult to compare that especially for parents who see full size instruments and then a small creepy plastic harp. We need to have a good professional instrument on the low-level price.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

Curiosity, that's it. I like to listen to all kinds of music and experiment what is possible to do.

23-What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

I think in every story there are unique obstacles and problems. The best combinations are harp and cello, my favourite. Harp and flute, with violin you still need to be very focused on the sound, because the violin has the possibility to cover the harp, so you need to project more. Every type of mix has their pros and cons, and it's always something to consider. If you work with dancers you need to be very rhythmical and precise, and if you work with

electronics then the harp makes a lot of reverbs, so you should be very careful and muffle everything. When I play Delta, I constantly muffle everything because even with an echo it will get dirty. If you go to the fashion world there are other problems like normally the fashion designer wants to see the harp player wearing something extravagant, and you need to play in that. I'm trying not to do that anymore. For the last show I did, I was just playing the music. But before, I was doing these weird costumes, and it was hard to play with it. It's always difficult but you need to be like Sherlock Holmes and have attention to see what you can do better.

24-What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

Yes, I have one person who is very critical and also very suspicious about what I'm doing and it's always very negative about everything I do. I would be happy to get more critical reviews from people who knows their stuff. In the twentieth century it was more popular to have reviews. The public was as critical as the critics. Now I need to listen to the rumours to understand what I'm doing wrong. I need to look comments on my videos outside of my own page to see them.

25-Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

Usually, visualization is the most important thing. If you can visualize it, you can do it. You have to be flexible, because circumstances change, but if I'm doing a project, I try to see every part of it, and then if I see it it's all clear. If I don't see it, then I need to change something or get more inspiration or find someone who can help me with that. I think there are limitless possibilities for working with many styles.

26- How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

Well, recently I wanted to do AR/VR project and I was really limited on costumes because it's expensive and difficult to get, so I dropped this project for a while. Normally on my concerts, I'm trying to be natural, without anything. That's my mainstream, just coming as it is. Maybe if it's a big hall, then I might use amplification. But that's it because I want people to see that it's all my hands. If I'm using the pedals or other effects through the computer, I would normally do it in collaboration with another person, because I'm not a big expert in that. Remy has much more experience with sound changes. I know much more about technique and produce different sounds with my fingers, I'm not this type of tech geek. That's why I like to work more in collaboration with other professionals who know better what to do with that. And I think that if it's a big project where there's light, projection, and microphones, the most important it's to find the person you trust. Normally I'm the organizer, the performer, the responsible person, and then it's a hell of a time. Because you want to concentrate and spend time with the harp to prepare, but you need also to worry about many other things, and if things go wrong people will call you. Maybe in the future I'll be able to have other people working with me.

27- When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

The most important is the first trigger. If you work with someone, you need to make sure the starting point is the same, because if you give absolute freedom it could end up being something different. Normally if I prepare the project with the team, there are a few checkpoints we go together through, and the rest is freefall. I'm always curious to see what

other people can do if you give them freedom. Making a good prompt needs a lot of precision and it's the same with a person. If you try to be too particular, you will not get the result you want. So, freedom is always important.

28-Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

Depends where and what kind of public. The initial job of the artist is to create the atmosphere, and everything is included in that type of work. That means that the space, the light, the clothes, the instruments, the music, types of colleagues, are all elements of the show. Maybe in the way classical feels is not so popular, because there is less show than in pop or electronic music. If you really want to create this show as it is, even if it's in the philharmonic hall then you have to think how you want to make it. Many years ago, I was doing every year a concert in the philharmonic hall in St. Petersburg, and every time, I was trying to make the decorations on stage and control what musicians would wear, and choosing very particular programs which all connected. It's interesting! You don't have the possibility to do this in every concert. So, sometimes I just come and play without any idea behind it. But if you care about a particular project you need to control every aspect of it.

29-Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

Yes, but it's as everything. Recently we had the harp in the last Thor movie near Zeus, in Doctor Strange through the multiverse there was a harp and using the sound of it to hit. Anyway, sometimes you see the harp in different movies. If you see the time when the harp was most popular is in the time of Harpo Marx and TV. It was not even his music. Yes, he played, but most of the time there was a harpist—I can't remember his name now—that was behind him overdubbing. Harpo Marx did for the harp world much more than any other classical harpist. Today I was talking about Mario Lorenzi, always on TV. As any type of product, if you see it around on TV, on posters, on social media, there will be more people playing it, and more development.

Interview with Noël Wan

Toronto, Canada, June 3rd, 2023.

1-Why did you choose the harp?

Hm, Well, I didn't actually choose the harp. I would say my mother chose it for me. So, we had a harp already at home—a small one—and when I turned four, my mom decided I needed to start some sort of music lesson; and she did not want me to do violin or piano because that was very common, and we had this harp already. So, she found this harp teacher, who actually played the Chinese harp. I only took lesson with her for a couple of months, but she was a friend of Linda Rollo, who's in the Susann McDonald's circle. I ended up taking lessons with her for many years and that's how I got started on the competition circuit. Yes, that was my path. I didn't have that epiphany of "Oh! The harp is destined for me!" kind of thing. It was very much a child starting music lessons and the harp happened to be there.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

I like to go even before my university. Like I mentioned, I studied with Linda Rollo until 2005; then I took lessons with Dan Yu, who's now in Hong Kong. Also, at the same time, I was taking lessons with Doug Riot, who's a Salzedo method harpist. And this is when I moved to Erica Vaardenburg in Amsterdam. I took lessons with her for a couple of years before I went to college with Anne Yeung at the University of Illinois. Then Yale for two

years with June Han, and back to Illinois to do my DMA. So, lots of teachers. I think the fact that I studied with so many teachers, though it meant that I got so many different perspectives on what technique should or could be, and musical interpretation. All these teachers had different ideas about how to approach the harp, so I never had the singularity of one teacher and the stability of that, but I did get a little bit of everything.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

For now, I would say yes. I still would call myself a classical harpist. I would probably be more inclined to call myself a musician who plays the harp, or a performer-scholar who plays the harp, or the harp is my main medium. Just because the older I get the more I want to expand what I do, and to simply call myself a classical harpist feels restrictive.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

Yes.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

I would say, in theory no., I think realistically, the way it's currently been practiced, probably yes. More on the yes side. I think a lot have to do with mindset rather than the actual things that we do. For example, with chromaticism, you could perceive the harp to be limited in relation to the piano. But the harp can also do a lot of things that the piano can't do. So, is it limited? So, it's always in relation to some qualifier.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

I would say no in the sense that we don't play all of it, so can it be limited? Compared to the amount of rep violinists and pianists have then we do have less, fewer pieces, and when you get into earlier periods of music, there's not a lot of baroque pieces written originally for the harp, so yes in that sense. Just in terms of quantity compared to other instruments, but perhaps not quality.

7-In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

I think it's really in flux. We are probably more diverse than we've ever been, even just in classical, and I think there are a lot more harpists who have strained against the cookie cutter mindset, that are feeling empowered to speak out and do stuff and maybe the internet has helped. I mean social media has enabled a lot of things and I think classical harp has been one of those areas that diversity has kind of bloomed, as a result of getting rid of some gate keeping. I think that's the state of classical harp right now. A lot of harpists are experimenting and thinking about new ideas, either having teachers who are more open minded now who enable them to do that, or simply they have access to direct platforms that allow them to share their ideas more directly.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you feel are happening within the international harp community?

I don't know if I know enough about, cause I'm not actually in touch with all of it. You know, World Harp Congress is the base for the international harp community. I mean, in terms of negatives, the one thing I would say is that I don't know if the elite harp circles are changing that much. Like, the gatekeepers are still gatekeeping in that way. The number of people who care about what the gatekeepers think is shrinking, but it's still there. So that's still a negative. Positive of course, there's more exposure of world harp cultures. Again, I think globalization has a lot to do with that; exchange of information has a lot to do with that; so we're seeing things on social media that we would not have been able to see twenty years ago even! And

that's facilitating an exchange of information that is so fast. That's a positive, but I'm always hesitant to get too far into fusion. Because then you copy the style, but do you know the entire history? How much of that is part of your lived experience, or you are just taking stuff? But that's outside of harp, that's any music in general, any cultural area in general. The negative thing, with classical harp in social media, is while there is more advocacy to international audiences, and people seeing the harp on social media, I find that the repertoire, the things that people play on social media are very much reinforcing the stereotypes that I would rather not be reinforced. But that's what the algorithms like Instagram do. They'll push a pretty harpist wearing a big puffy dress playing angels in the sky, I don't know! They will push that more than a harpist who's not conforming to that. So, as much as we're diversifying and experimenting, I don't know if non harp audiences are getting the message. I think they are seeing more of harp, but what they see isn't necessarily helping the people in the profession, it's just increasing exposure. It is happening in a certain aesthetic direction that I have mixed feelings about, and I think that's a negative. We can't control what the algorithms push, and they tend to push what professional harpists don't like. And again, that's not exactly the international harp community, but it's how the harp is featured in a wider world.

9- Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

They are trying! I would say they are really trying! I think new administrative leadership in some organizations like American Harp Society with Angela Schwarzkopf, I can tell she's really trying to increase diversity, equity, inclusivity initiatives. I think it's dependent on what circles you run in and what are your close professional networks. I would say the ones I would tend to run in... For example, both my teachers Anne Yeung and June Han, because they've always marched to the beat of their own drum, some of the students that they have attracted have also been like that. So, I personally haven't felt a lack of encouraging diversity if we are talking about musical diversity. If we are talking about racial diversity, that's another can of worms. I would say it's still a very white, female—put all the other adjectives—profession, and many competitions show that. I don't know if it has anything to do with music, but it has to do with how we build communities around and within a certain genre or field. So that's a big question, but I think the way around it, pockets of communities get built, but do they get infiltrated in the big communities? So, hopefully more so with time. I remember competing in the Young Division of the AHS a long time ago, and I was the only person of color competing, no men. And then in more recent years, maybe 5 to 7, there's consistently been more male harpists, more openly queer harpists, and more harpists of color competing. I think that has more to do with harp demographic changing, and good harpists being more diverse too and changing the landscape, so I think it will with time.

10-What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

Again, I think it has to do with where you are. I can only speak for the US, maybe a little bit of Canada, cause I've been here a couple of years. I'm not sure we are always favourably talking about Identity. I think a more general conservative musical perspective, it's about the music. If we're going to pick a black or woman composer, it's because the music is good. And I think the music should be reasonably good, but there's something to be said about how this music plays or says something about an idea. That whole dialogue should be considered when we select a program or a certain presenter. So that's one thing. Our relationship with identity in the harp world is still very fraught. I think that's less to do with being a harpist than it has to do with people who are not harpists, who are leaders in the harp community, and their personal and political, cultural and social perspectives. That could be also a generational thing. I think music is very itemized. There are some harpists who are into new

music, who do that stuff very well. But that doesn't tend to bleed over into the mainstream community, which is still very much about the canon, and the same 20 pieces that we all play. So, I think that's one of the issues. I don't know if the solution is to integrate or talking about decolonization, or de-centering of our main thing. I don't know if the centre needs to absorb more; or if the centre needs to be another node in a bunch of small nodes. But I guess it can't be called the canon if we think this way. But the canon just becomes another body of repertoire that people draw from. This is what we call the canonic repertoire but it's not THE Canon with capital C.

11-What do you think differentiates the harpists of the Twenty first century from the previous generations?

Oh, I don't know if I know enough about it. I would say we are more diverse. It's not really fair to say it, because there was a lot of great repertoire that harpists of the twentieth century collaborated with composers on. But I do think—not specifically to harp—there's more mixing of genres. You see more harpists open to mixing jazz and classical. I notice, again, it's not specific to harpists, but a lot of harpists of our generation are saying we collaborate with composers. I know very few harpists of our generations that don't put in their bios that they are advocates for new music. I mean, not every harpist does it, but a lot of us do. Whereas I'm not sure that most harpists of the twentieth century felt the need to advocate for new music. But I don't know enough about every single harpist of their generation to really know this. I just think that the idea of new music and music of the future is really part of a mindset in the twenty first century, for some reason; in a way that the teachers that I have, that would have identified as the harpists of the twentieth century, would focus on how do we make the harp good? How do we make it live up to the standards of the other instruments? And how do help it prove itself? And I think at this point we don't really need it. I don't feel the anxiety of having to prove the harp and be defensive about it; mostly is saying the harp is good and more people should know about it; and what can we do to discover more about it? But it's not that kind of insecurity of the harp needs to have a place. That's very broad generalizing, but I think that is consistent too with the philosophical and sociological trends that are happening; where the twentieth century was about modernize the harp and how do we create a narrative of modernization, and in the twenty-first, we are going post-modern and do whatever we want, take the things that we like and put them together.

12-What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

I think we can be better about being a community. What I noticed is that there are certain groups that rely a lot on competitions. Harp is one of them; guitar apparently is one of them; saxophone, where it seems to be just competition, competition, competition... Because we don't have that many jobs, I guess. So, there's competition and job scarcity. And because competitions are a huge thing, they of course breed a competitive mindset already. I think even worse is the job scarcity mindset. When you go to a job, and you are already concerned "Oh, what new harpist is going on my turf? And how do I protect my job?" Because there are many few of them to be fair, and everyone needs to make a living. My personal perspective—and I don't know if it comes from a place of privilege of being a pretty good harpist and not feeling insecure about my ability—that, for example, I moved to Canada and the pandemic started very soon after, I ended up having a non-harp related job to pay my bills. But my mindset has always been not to fight with people for those two opportunities that are there, but to figure out what can I do that adds to the community and it's kind of my own thing, so I don't have to feel like I'm disrespecting someone's hard work of many years. But I think there could be better ways to create a sense of solidarity and working together on these things. Yes, there are only three jobs, and a hundred harpists who are interested in getting, but

just because 97 of them won't get that job, doesn't mean that those 97 can't contribute something incredibly meaningful and valuable. They still have to find a way to make a living, but I think it's really important to recognize that in each other. Because I have a teaching job now, one thing that is important to me is that I don't become siloed in that job, but to become a hub. Tallahassee is already isolated, but I want it to be a place where people can come and share their ideas. And I want specifically to invite people in the geographical area, because I think it's important to be regional as well; and to know that sharing ideas is always better than hoarding them and being protective of them. I think we can do a better job of working as team, and I've seen more of that. I think people want it. Again, a lot of people I talk to my own age have expressed that we've been relying on our teacher for a long time to provide a community, whereas is the Julliard crowd, or the Indiana crowd, or the Alice Chalifoux crowd... We've relied on that for a long time, and we are feeling the need to break away from all that and say, "well, how can we build new communities not based on method and lineage, but on some other things?" I think we can work on that.

13-How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

Ahh, the first thing that comes to mind is being a cerebral musician. Someone who's been always very academic, and not necessarily nerding out on music, but nerding out in general, and then, because I am a musician it crosses over. My husband and I are both musicians and he's very music nerd type of person. I was talking to him, and I told him: You care about the music itself, which I don't feel like I do. I like playing music, I love expressing on the harp, but what I'm really interested in is music and people, music and society. Why do we do the things that we do, and how music plays a role in that. I think overtime, that's a huge part of the music I chose to play, so whether it's, I'm picking this piece because it will resonate with my audience in a certain way, or I'm choosing to write this article about this thing because it talks about music and society in some way. It ends up going back to having a very deep interest in people, human psychology and why we do the things we do, and the harp just finds a way in that.

14-Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

I have never been in a situation where I felt extremely restrictive. But again, I've never been a meaningful part of communities that were doing a lot of that restricting. I've gone to schools that did not have such a strong culture. I would say I have felt, that even if I was able to just be myself, that that wasn't always being validated. Which meant that people didn't always understand it. It wasn't that I couldn't do it. So, I don't know if that it's just my personal aesthetic, or if it speaks to a broader restriction of things should be done this way; and you fall under the stuff that we don't like, or we specifically don't like you! I don't really know what it is. But I have heard enough stories about very conservative musical organizations that impose having to wear long dresses and long sleeves if you are a woman. But I personally have not felt that I have experienced that directly, because I haven't moved in those circles as much.

15-Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

Yes, at this point. I would say because I'm out of school and I don't have a teacher, I feel like I can do whatever I want. And because of that, then why not do things that are important to me? So, a lot of the programs I do now fall on a couple of themes that I think are identity related. One is, I'm very interested in creating big narratives in a program, and I think that comes along from me personally having an interest in film. I don't know if that's an identity, but really enjoying a film and identifying with that approach, or artistic perspective of the

world, rather than thinking like a musician. I've always thought I would love the sensation of watching a movie and looking at the director's shot, the way they pay attention to text or sound, or color. Always wanting to figure out how you can do that as a musician, without necessarily pulling out visual elements. So, for me, what that has turned into, instead of programming single pieces that stand alone, I figure out how they connect to each other, so that I can present them as a whole concept to my audience. That's one thing that has changed. I never did that in school. I was just checking my boxes. The other thing is, a lot of the music that I pick is related to what I read, which in turn, I choose the things I read because they are connected to my identity. I read a lot for my academic work, theories on race and gender, poetry and literature on people's experiences in life, particularly from people that tend to come from marginalized populations. So, for example, the program that I am playing a lot now is by all women composers, and one reason I chose that it's because I think it's very important to highlight what women have to say, especially for harpists. Yes, there's tons of female harpists, we are everywhere! But do we feel like we are empowered to speak? I wanted to pick pieces where women were able to speak about what they thought of the harp. And as a female harpist, it's more meaningful to play that than Salzedo, Salzedo, Salzedo! I wanted to be a woman and play a woman's perspective, and in turn weave my own experiences through all that narrative. I think identity at this point plays into that human element. Identity can also be a very political tool; I think it's also what people connect to. To use it in the way not necessarily to divide people, but to say, "Hey! This is who I am." When you hear my music, you are also hearing this part of me. And how do I make that more explicit to them. I think it speaks to other trend, which is audience engagement. Audiences now are hungry to get a more personal interaction with the person on stage. So, that plays really well with that too. I think that way of approaching identity and music—especially when there's the third component of who's on the other side listening and how can they connect—that's very helpful.

16-Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

I don't know. I think that what I choose to wear reflect my personal fashion interests, which of course is my personal identity. But I am not choosing a piece of clothing because I want to make a specific political statement. It's more, "I chose this because I like to wear this." And maybe the fact that this is my preference is a political statement, but it's not a direct point. So, if I wear pants on stage, I'm not wearing them on behalf of all women who won't wear pants, but this is what I am comfortable doing. I recognize that what I like to wear will change as I go through life and my phases. I would say though, I've never been the type to wear the big ball gown. I don't know if not wearing it is a political choice, I just think it's so bulky! I choose to wear things that I'm interested in. Sometimes those things are political, so indirectly it's kind of a choice.

17-Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

No. not currently. I think I care more about the sound of the harp. I wouldn't choose a harp that looks cool but has a bad sound. So, I think it's so important that if we want to be taken seriously as musicians to also attend to musical elements in what we do, so there's not all fireworks, but there is some substance in there too. It helps us get taken more seriously.

18- What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists in the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

I think honestly, it's a very economical problem. There aren't a lot of jobs. So, career development becomes this very existential crisis, because... For example, I teach this introduction to music entrepreneurship class, and I think a lot about what I am teaching my students. Because at the same time we want to teach them how to survive and make a living. But that in some way is separate to teaching them how to be artists. You need to have something of substance to offer. I think being able to balance developing yourself artistically, even though you are also worried about making a living, that's a big challenge and I am completely sympathetic to the fact that it's hard. When you go from gig to gig, and react to whatever music you have to play for that gig, you don't have time to sit around and think about what I am contributing artistically to the world. So, I would never say that every harpist has to do that. For some, they don't want to or need to. But I think there are probably a lot of them who would want to, and because of these jobs' constraints, it becomes really difficult. Again, we're not violinists or pianists who can always have a studio of some sort, and with violin, there are more orchestra jobs and possible students. So, for harpists, the economic difficulty, poses an obstacle, but also forces us to be very creative about how we approach everything we do.

19-What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

Oh, it's such a big question! I think there are multiple perspectives around it. There's a post gender mindset that says why are we even talking about gender? Women and men are both successful. I think there's something to be said about the imagery that's very subliminal. It's very subconscious, so, do we expect women harpists to be a certain way? To look a certain way? To play a certain repertoire? Represent them in a certain way? In a way that we don't expect male harpists to? And how is that double standard? I think a lot of my issues with gender is feeling like we are constantly subject to a lot of double standards, of women have to work twice as hard to be recognized. A man does one thing, and we say oh my god! You are amazing, and women are working very hard trying to be recognized, and the only way we feel like we can be recognized is to become more like the male harpists. So, to be super edgy and whatever. But that's in terms of gaining power and recognition in the community. On the other hand, there's the question this feminine imagery that I don't think helps diversify our profession. I don't want to use the word progress, because I don't think it's a fair way to describe it, but conforming to a stereotype doesn't encourage diversity in the field. Which is the same issue of just having a narrow understanding of what people do. Men get to be flashy and free and that's what we expect a professional harpist to look. They have to be a genius in some way. But the general public also has a very restrictive mindset of what the harp should be. And I think there is a lot of conversation that has to happen. It's not helpful to say, "these are stereotypes, let's all resist them," when we are not talking to the people who are reinforcing the stereotype. A lot of them are the public, people who don't know anything about the harp, other audiences. One thing I say in a lot of my concerts is: "It's important for me to show you what the harp is, and what it could be rather than what it should be." So, what that means is that I want my audience to have an open mind when they hear this instrument, which is both easy and difficult. Easy because they don't know much about the harp, so they don't have that much to draw on, but difficult, because they don't know, they have no way of relating to it. But in terms of mindset about gender, a lot of it comes from media portrayals of the harp. How many articles have I read that are either "Look at this angelic harpist!" or "This harpist is trying NOT to be angelic" Is either one or the other, and it seems it's a continuum. But we're being portrayed one or the other. I don't know if we harpists can change. We have to change with people, through scholarship, through performance, so that people start to understand how the continuum is, rather than defaulting to one side or the other.

20- Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

I'm probably biased because I'm a woman, but I would say it's a very feminine instrument, but not in the weak, domestic kind of way. I think it's feminine in the sense that it resonates with you. It's close to you and it's an intimate instrument. And without stereotyping, as a woman I'm more inclined to want to be close and intimate and get to know people. And maybe because I identify with it that way, well "Oh the harp feels like me and I am a woman". But that's my perspective. Other male harpists might say otherwise. Emmanuel Ceysson has been quoted saying that the harp is a very masculine instrument and it's best played by men because it's a big instrument, and he's looking into different qualities. And what he sees... I don't care about those as much. The harp is a big instrument in a way that is suffusing rather than imposing. You embrace and you are embraced by it, and that kind of language is very feminine. But that's kind of my perspective. So, whether you see it as feminine or masculine, comes from your bias as a performer, rather than what objectively it is.

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

I don't know about directly affected. My parents have always been very supportive, and I didn't come from a super wealthy family, but they have always been able to financially support my musical education. I would say where I notice it a lot is as a teacher. I am always conscious how much it costs to be able to be a harpist, and worrying "can my students afford it?" And what are some opportunities that we take for granted. For example, you are supposed to buy this, you are supposed to go to these festivals, and not realizing that not everyone can afford it. So, if I have a student who can't do that, what are ways that I can bridge that gap, so that if they can't attend a summer festival, they can at least reach the same level as the people who have those opportunities. Again, that ties into I bring people to my program so that they can gain some experience. I notice it most when I'm thinking about my students, and the way I give them advice. I tend to give them very financially conservative advice where I tell them, "Don't take tens of thousands of dollars in loans to go to your dream school." Coming from someone who did not go to an elite conservatory that costs that much money, I know that it's possible to get a good education, as long as you find a good teacher who's willing to invest in you. I'm more inclined to give that kind of advice than say go to a fancy school that costs a lot of money.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

The impetus is because I already read a lot, and then I have a very busy brain. So, the minute I read something, and I happen upon an idea, I start thinking, "What can I do with this?" So that's part of the reason that starts the experimentation process. It goes the same with music too. I listen to a lot of non-classical music, and I always think about the way those artists and producers use sound and what I like about it. And how can I figure out how to bring this in my own work. Sometimes it makes sense and sometimes it doesn't. That's the point of experimenting, to go for trial and error. But a lot starts from what lights up my ears or my brain, and then go from there.

23-What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

I didn't really start getting into the philosophy, social theory until grad school. So, one obstacle is feeling that I don't have all the body of knowledge for those fields. I constantly feel I'm playing catch up. If I want to use an idea, I have to read twenty books to really feel

like I understand what that thing is about. But I think that is the beauty of doing cross disciplinary work. I remember reading some theorist that said that she's not a philosopher, but she uses philosophy, and part of the beauty is that you never get too bugged down by the baggage in your field. You are just a visitor, and look at what you like, and explore it. But you're not going to struggle with the gatekeeping and the drama. I think in some ways, I would think of myself as using non-musical concepts in a very applied way. I read ideas and I try to learn about them as best I can, but my ultimate goal is using that to frame my perspective of whatever I'm doing on the harp or whatever I'm writing.

24-What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

There's been this continuum that I've been involved in this community, and I've tried lots of different things, and what I noticed is that the scholarship that I do, I don't know if that harp community is accepting it, or we're just in this cultural moment where the stuff that I'm interested in, is things that people are realizing "Oh, we should be publishing scholarship like this, or maybe we haven't done anything like this before, so we should publish it." So far, since I've gone in the direction that I consider to be more me than just being a student, I have gotten reasonably good feedback. But again, it has a lot more to do with people who are receptive to these ideas being in positions of power. That kind of lining up. If it had been two or three years ago—even pre-George Floyd let's just say—talking about race would have been something that no one would have cared about in a broader, main classical music community, and that whole social reckoning that happens. Suddenly they realise that we should talk about this. So, yes, people who have positions of power, plus the cultural moment, and then what I'm doing lined up well. I could attribute positive feedback more to that, than the ideas itself. The conditions were right, not like the ideas are objectively good.

25-Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

It's all very concept-based work. When it comes to choosing programs, I have like fifty notes on my phone of different programs that I come up with while I'm driving, or in the shower. They are all incomplete or variated versions of each other. But a lot of it is based on an encounter. Every time I encounter a new piece, "Oh, I've never heard of this composer" and I scribble down something about that. Then, if I have enough scribbles, sometimes I sit down and take all of these and figure out "Do these go together?" or "these go together but it's only 25 minutes of music, and I need another 25." And then I'll go and look for other stuff that I think might work. And sometimes it goes through a lot of conceptual iterations. I like to keep in mind what's the overall theme for the program, and how can I create a story out of this. So, I pick things that can fit that narrative. It's a very partial process. Sometimes there's a concept, sometimes an encounter, but other I build it over time, and if I encounter new things, I will incorporate them. My scholarship is the same way. Oftentimes I'll just have a germ of an idea and it'll stay like that for a long time until I say, "Ok, I'm going to write this"; which happens a lot! I think about something for a long time, and I never actually make it happen until someone keeps me accountable and says, "Now you have to publish this" and I have to sit down and work on it. When I do, I find a bunch of books that I think will have something to say that will inform me, and I read that front to back. Maybe not very deeply, but if there's anything in there that looks like it could work well, then I'll bookmark it. If it's a term I will look it up, read more about it. It's more from one place see where it takes me and then how do I bring it all back together. It's very journey like, rather than one master concept that I turn into something. I'm always surprised!

26-How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

I am starting on a project that will use tech. I think budget is a concern. So, I will choose on how practical it is to invest in something that is extremely expensive, versus what do I need to get this thing going and then can I get some more? Funding works in a weird way. You have to show something before you can apply more funding. So, if I can get enough of something to show for, then maybe I can get more funding to buy something that is more long term. In terms of tech, and I'm not working with a ton of tech right now. If you ask me this question in a year I might have a different answer. But I imagine I would choose it the same way I do everything else: one thing, and then going down the rabbit hole and choosing based on that. I would choose tech based on what I really wanted, rather than what other people tell me is good for the instrument. Kind of I am going to do it my own way. Even if it's a sound that people don't really like, I would still choose it because I like it. That would be for actual tech. One other thing is, I do like the found object philosophy. What are the things I have lying around the house, and different perspectives of looking at something, and how can I create something from that? It doesn't necessarily mean buying the fanciest thing but looking at the harp a different way and maybe doing something about that.

27- When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

Currently yes, because I haven't done anything big that would require other people. But I have a project coming up that will have at least one collaborator to play some music with me, and one person who'll do electronics for one of the pieces. So, I'll slowly start to need more people to help me, and delegating is helpful.

28- Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

I think talking, if that's considered extra musical, I think that's helpful. I would say in the times I've put visual images, having one thing is typically good, as long as I can contextualize why I'm putting it there. I find that when things get too busy, it changes the nature of the performance. If there is too much, then it's not a harp recital with a bunch of stuff, it's something else. It's a multimedia show with the harp on the side as one of the actors. So, then it has to be portrayed that way.

29- Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

Yes, I think it does. More exposure changes people's relationships with it. And going back to the elitism question, some people do think it's a very expensive and elitist instrument and seeing it in a different setting changes that particular perception of it.

Interview with Valérie Milot
Montreal, Canada, June 5th, 2023.

1-Why did you choose the harp?

Ha! Why did I choose the harp? Because it was different, that's the main reason. I have always been in contact with music since I was born. It was something that connected me to my dad, because he was working a lot and he was quite shy, and it was our language. So, he taught me music because even before I was able to read, so music was really a part of me. Also, because I was very sensitive, I was reacting a lot to my teachers, and I had a harsh piano teacher, which created some sort of barrier between me and the piano. Although it's one of my favorite instruments now. So, I was looking for another instrument. That's the main reason. The general reason I give is that I was curious, but it was really because I felt I could not connect with my instrument, and that's how I found the harp. I was lucky to be in contact with orchestral music since I was born, I was going to my hometown orchestra concerts, so, I could see the harp. I remember it was Caroline Lizotte playing, so I had a very positive view of the harp, and I wanted to explore that. I was lucky enough that my parents said yes to go to a harp concert, and I was struck! I felt it was the instrument for me. Later on, when I look back on this experience, I realized it was in fact like a piano but with more connection, and maybe that's what I needed at that time. To have the impression of being cuddled by the instrument, and this connection with the harp it's just so special. I actually hesitated between the harp and the cello, and it's very similar because the soundbox is very close to your body,

and you can feel the vibrations. That's how now as an adult I analyze why I play the harp, which is not maybe what I consciously did at that moment, but I think that's why I chose the harp.

2-Can you describe your musical background and harp training?

Hm, my musical background was very regular. I had music lessons every week, and it was quite early in my life. When I was young, I was doing a lot of competitions like piano competitions and everything, so I had a lot of stage training this way. With the harp, I started at ten in a private school with Marie Jose de la Price. I was there for four years with celtic harp, and then I entered the Conservatoire de Montreal for four years with Manon Leconte. And then, when I decided it was clear to me that I wanted to study music, I started with my CEGEP in music in Montreal. Then I switched to Conservatoire de Trois Rivieres, with Caroline Lizotte, with whom I studied until my master's degree. Then I did two years of private courses with Rita Constanzi in New York. That's it.

3-Do you define yourself as a classical harpist?

Yeah, absolutely. That's my core and that's where I am the most comfortable. Classical music. That's the way I was trained. I love to explore other things, but I am aware that that's not where I naturally bloom.

4-Are standard repertoire performances part of your professional endeavours?

I do. I used to play those a lot. Maybe a bit less these days because I play a lot of contemporary music. It just depends on what I'm touring. To me it's very important to play harpists' music because I feel that's way the harp is the most expressive, at its best. So, yes, I do play a lot of those masters.

5-Do you consider the instrument to be limited in comparison to the rest?

Haha, well, it depends on the angle you take. Sometimes we can feel that the harp is limited because the music was not... people didn't think about music the way the harp works. For years, the occidental way of thinking about music was really related to keyboards, which is quite different from the way a harp works. And if you imagine Mozart, Beethoven, Bach writing for the harp, it would have been totally different. I think the approach has put the harp in a certain box. And now we are out of this box. I am sure you have had this experience, when you talk with composers and have to explain things, we always compare it to the piano, so we feel that we are limited compared to piano. But we are not! We can do a lot of things that a piano can't do. So, I don't think the harp is limited. That's what I always try to say. But of course, when I'm trying to do a transcription of something that is very chromatic, I feel that it can be limited. But in fact, I don't think it is, no.

6-Do you think the classical harp repertoire is limited in quantity and quality?

Hmm, I think starting from 1900 until now it's not limited. I think we have a lot of very interesting stuff. Before that, of course. We don't have the same repertoire as the piano or violin. So, for historical repertoire, yes. We are very lucky to have something from Mozart. We could have been totally forgotten in that way. At the same time, I don't think I will have the time in my life to play all the repertoire for the harp, so, you know...

7-In your opinion, what is the current state of the harp within the classical world?

I think it's much better. Well, I am talking from Canada and what I see from maybe Europe and other places. I think it's better than it has been. But it's still very hard to convince presenters for a harp show. And still now in Quebec, even though I have toured a lot, I realize

it's always harder to book a solo recital than a recital with other musicians. People always have—well, most of the time—have the feeling that it has to be supported by something else. And this is really the opposite of what I think. When I play solo that's the moment where I feel most connected to what I want to say. Not that I don't like playing with others. I really love playing with my colleagues, but it's just that solo is pure expression. And most of the time, solo repertoire is more eloquent, you can say so many things and prove so many things that we can do with the harp.

8-What are the positive and negative trends that you feel are happening within the international harp community?

Oh, that's a hard one! Positive and negative! Well, let's start with that. As for every instrument, I think competitions are not helping the harp world, but I think it's the same for every instrument. Although, we have a very small community, so it's hard to be anonymous and just go to a competition and nobody knows you. I just felt that with all those international competitions I did, there is politics, as in every instrument, I guess. But I think it might be stronger with the harp because it's a small community. And through my experience, I think it's sometimes—and it's very normal, I did that too—we put a lot of energy in those competitions, but they are not decisive for the rest of your life. I think this is something negative. Positive, there are a lot. I think, when you choose the harp, you have to be quite out there, very expressive, because it's something different. It's a choice you make wanting to be very different right? So, there's a lot of creativity related to that. And I see so many interesting things, and different things. I think it's something that I guess happens with piano or violin, but there are so many people that we don't get to make a comparison. But in the harp world there's a lot to watch and listen to, to be surprised every time. People are being very creative, and I think that's great!

9-Do you consider the pedal harp world to be inclusive?

I guess it depends on the part of the world you are in. In Canada we are very inclusive, I guess... Montreal specially. But I didn't feel that much in the US. But it's coherent with how the US is. If you live in New York, it's very different than if you live in Salt Lake City. So, I felt it was maybe a bit more conservative. Is the harp world inclusive? I would say yes, internationally, but the experience is different if you live in Paris, Europe or North America. But I think here we are very inclusive.

10-What are the aspects (social, musical, artistic, multicultural) that tend to be ignored by the harp community?

Well, I think all the research about ancient music, like baroque and classical music, as we've been out of this portion of history. At the time it was happening, some ways of thinking this music are still a bit dated. Although there's the total opposite. There are harpists that play very historically researched music. So, this can happen. But is it typical in the harp? I don't think so, I think some people just decide to make a lot of research to play historical music, and other people don't. I don't know. I feel it really depends on the individual and is not really related with the harp.

11-What do you think differentiates the harpists of the twenty-first century from the previous generations?

Well, being able to be a woman and make a career. That's a huge difference. I guess the fact that many women play the harp for so long now, because it didn't start there. But the harp was a court instrument, it was a feminine instrument, and we sort of kept that. So, I guess that the fact that most of the harpists were women didn't help the harp to be upfront. It's much

easier now to be a woman in North America; not in other parts of the world. And we still are a minority, but ok.

12-What do you think still needs to be improved as a group?

Oh, hmm, I really don't know what to say. I think we have a great community. Nothing major, I guess. Some things happen because we are a small community, but usually I meet a lot of very open people who want to share things.

13-How do you define yourself and your musical identity in relationship with the harp?

Well, it's just being true to myself. Trying to not put barriers with my instrument. It's really linked to my choice of the instrument. Something very pure, and that's how I grew professionally with the harp. I just see it as an extension of my body. So, when I play the harp, I am just myself. When I see all the clichés related to the harp, I don't relate to them in my personal experience with it. My experience is very intense, it's very physical. It's more related to sports than romanticism. It's something that's very engaging, and that's how I would describe it.

14-Did you ever feel limited by the classical harp norms in terms of repertoire, cultural associations, dress code etc?

Well, yes. Sometimes I do meet some people that I feel have some strong reactions, because I don't play in gowns anymore. And it's a matter of being comfortable for me, because I don't dress like this in normal life, so that's my vibe with it. I always tend to think that people—and that's really Canadian and I would even say Quebecois way of thinking—I always assume that people will accept me in whatever way I want to dress. And I realize it's not even the case every time. Especially from women. Not harpists, of course, because we are open people. But sometimes, older women, I've gotten comments like “well, you are not really going to dress like this,” and I respond, “Oh yeah!” And it's just that in their head, it's just not possible. And I do have a lot of... in French we say blockage, with how a human being can be judged by the way they are dressing. I have problems with dress codes, of course, and you know... I think, the beauty of elegance is not related to social norms. And I think somebody can look very classy with jeans, and the same outfit can look ordinary on someone else. It's just a matter of us having boundaries with that. I think we should not have them. And usually, when there are boundaries, I tend to want to break them.

15-Is the repertoire you perform influenced by your personal musical identity search?

Ah, yes and no. It's more with do I want to play this piece for a long time? Because we get to play many different pieces, and we have to learn some rep, and there are some pieces that I realized I did not really want to play. Because when I play them, they are too far from my identity. But identity as a classical musician is more about the way you interpret things. So, there's a form of creativity in that. I feel it's quite large by how all the things you can do to feel that the piece fits in your body. It's quite rare that I go, “Ah, I don't really want to play this piece anymore,” but it happened with some pieces. Usually like, some French repertoire from nineteenth century.

16-Is your choice of dress attire for performances a statement for your own personal identity?

Yeah, totally. Yeah. When people come to my concerts, my only concern is that they have access to the human being that I am. I don't see what's interesting in putting a barrier between me and them. The reason why I make music is to communicate with people, so why would I put a mask on? or why dress a certain way? I am not a comedian. I'm a musician and

I'm there to create emotions. And I feel that if I dress in a way that I don't like, or do things that I don't like, then I am not myself, and cannot have this contact with people. When you experience this, when you really communicate with people, you don't want to go back. Because to reach that you have to get to a certain comfort with your instrument and your playing, and that takes time. And when you get there, well, I don't want to put anything between me and them that could interfere with that.

17-Do you choose a harp model based on visual representation? If so, do they reflect some part of your identity or the stage persona you want to embody?

Well, totally not. Because the harp I have, the Apolonia Salvi that was bought by a patron for me, I would have never, ever, ever have chosen this harp if it was not for the sound. What happened was that I was in Chicago, and I tried all the harps I could buy because I wanted to change my harp to have a more powerful one. Powerful and warm sound harp. Very hard to find for a new harp. I think I tried 30 harps and before I left, I said to myself, "I'm going to try the premium ones." And it's so not my type, those very gilded instruments! It can fit for some people but me? It's just not the way I am. But it just happened to be the best harp I've ever played on in my entire life. So, I thought... "Oh, I have a problem. It's very expensive and it looks very cheesy." It's beautiful, but it's not the reason why I chose it at all. If I could have a look and then a sound, then I would have—I guess—a very simple harp. There are some harps that are so beautiful! I don't think I would have a harp made especially because of the looks. I think the sound is more important. With my harp, many times people say, "Wow! It's so beautiful!" And I always have to say, "and it sounds so great!" It's so part of my personality. I am so not into physical appearances. I don't judge people on that, and people I find beautiful are not normal standard of beauty. I like difference, people with big nose, things that have character. To me something very elegant can be a bit boring. But this harp is beautiful, it's a masterpiece. I am much more interested in the fact that it takes so much time and effort to build this harp and when I look at it that's what I see, more than the fact that it has gold on it.

18-What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for the harpists of the twenty-first century when it comes to musical identity and career development?

Hmmm, so many. Well, as for every musician I guess, it's not easy to make a career out of music. But as for every artistic career, when you feel you have to do it, you HAVE to do it. It's so strong! You know, I have friends who are actors, painters; and every decision to make and artistic career is the wrong decision. But it's a natural decision, and in the end it's very positive. I think it's much worse if you choose to avoid this because you want comfort in your life. You will always be unhappy. So, try for happiness. We are very lucky in Canada to be able to make a living out of music, but what I discovered in my life through my career... When I started, I was thinking that I would make a living of concerts and playing on stage. Well... To me it's a bit frustrating to realize that it's not. I mean it's possible, but if you want to have a comfortable life, you have to be ready to do many different things, even though they are all related to music. Sometimes I feel that I would like to have entire days playing harp. I would be so happy! Maybe when I retire, I will do that! But, to have a comfortable life, it's not possible.

19-What are your thoughts on the gender inequalities within the community?

I do think that still now, if you are a man you have a lot of advantages. I still think this. Maybe not here, but it depends. In the harp world, I think they have an advantage because we are so many women. And men, they are naturally stronger, and the harp is very tense and when I see them, I say to myself, "Oh wow! I wish I had those arms!" And actually, it's a

men's instrument in some ways and we have to work a lot to make it rock you know! But, there is still for some people who thought it was impossible to play the harp for men, people from out of our community, so there's both. Still, I think nowadays it's easier to be a man than a woman in any type of society. Even in Canada sometimes.

20-Do you consider the instrument to be feminine or masculine?

Hmm, to me the harp is masculine. Yes. What I relate to is masculine energy. To me, my harp is a man and it's me dancing with a man. It's very far to what we consider feminine. What I consider feminine is grace and beauty, but also this calm... I think women, we have strong and calm energy. To me the harp is more of this lion energy. It can buzz., it's always on the edge of explosion. So, it's very masculine.

21-Historically, the harp has been considered elitist and is always linked to financial status. Have you been affected by this assumption on a personal level?

Well, it's something I am trying to fight against a lot. I come from a wealthy family, so I am aware that it has been maybe more accessible to me, because my parents were able to buy a harp. Well, even though it took some time to buy it, and it was more about family values, and I always had to work hard to get things. Of course it's an expensive instrument! But at some point, we all fit into the same category, because if you want to be a professional, if you want to play the violin, you cannot really have a violin that will cost 2k and make a very big solo career. You always get to the point where our instruments are expensive. So, maybe the progression hasn't been developed enough. I'm trying to work on that. Children have access to very basic harps to work with. But we are not the only instrument that has this problem. The bassoon is the same thing. Buying a bassoon is very expensive, so you cannot have children get interested in that and then have the parents spend 45 thousand dollars for the children to just try it, you know? The problem is that parents always think, oh my god! I'm going to have to buy a 30k harp, so my daughter or son can try it. But that's not the case. You can do a progression. So, I am working on solving that. The problem is that now harps are much more expensive than ten years ago. So, I have a project with a foundation that would help music students who play expensive instruments, to have grants to help them pay, because I think it's very important to own your instrument. Of course, it's great when you have a harp that was paid by a patron. But I am very happy to have my own harp too! And I would be very stressed to have just a harp that doesn't belong to me. It's a matter of organising things with schools. They always offer grants for studying, but we can also work on that. I think classical music is elitist because of that. Because if you buy a drum set or a guitar, is more accessible yes! It might sound a bit elitist of me, but it's like fast food and gastronomy. Doesn't mean that if you come from a family that doesn't have the money to pay an instrument you shouldn't be able to play it. And that's why beautiful programs like El Sistema exist. And all those beautiful ideas should just flourish, but there are things that need to be done for the harp.

22-What were your personal motivations to start experimenting with technology and/or other forms of art?

Well, I am very interested in the way we present music. I go to a lot of concerts. I have my tickets for the opera season, and I try as much as I can to go with my mom and family to concerts. And every time, if I like it or dislike it, it's always very constructive. I am very interested in why people who have not been in contact with classical music feel shy to go there. That's something I wanted to work on a lot in my career; because, again, I'm always trying to get to that communication aspect of people feeling that they can communicate with the artist. So, of course I don't only listen to classical music. I do go to other types of music

shows. And it always got to me the difference between the comfort of the listener in classical music shows, and the listeners in rock or pop music shows. So, I wanted people to be comfortable with the experience, and just feel that they were into something. Initially, there are two reasons why I wanted to do that. The first one is because I am a big fan of Peter Gabriel, and I watched all the shows he did when I was not even born. He used a lot of visuals that are very poetical and have a purpose with the message. He worked a lot with Herbert Lepage, another great artist that I love. So that got me interested in adding visuals. And also, because I wanted to reduce all those moments when you are moving chairs, or you are waiting for the artist to come on stage, and it takes forever... "What's happening?" Or you must listen to one hour and a half of music, without knowing what you are listening to. So, all those things I think can be approached in different ways. Doesn't have to be very complicated visual elements, but I like to have both in my offer. For now, I have "Transfiguration", a show with big scenic elements, but it also influences the way I do more traditional recitals. I try to put a rhythm in it and try to reduce those moments for people. It's more things like if people clap between movements, the way you react to that. I try to be very welcoming in my way of being on stage. For the visual elements it helps. You know, for this show "Transfiguration," it's just Canadian music. And sometimes it can need a certain context to appreciate it. So the fact that we added visuals, and we also have a live program on cell phones that people can follow, they have more elements to appreciate and understand the music. It's not something that's educational, it's like going to the museum with a guide, instead of going there and seeing this beautiful painting, but... You are going to appreciate it a bit more if you have some kind of hints about it. So that's why I developed that. I consider this as some kind of experimentation all the time, and I try to listen to people after about their experience, gather their comments and try to fix in my head how I want to communicate music.

23-What obstacles did you encounter while exploring these new avenues?

Hmm, money! Big obstacle. It's so hard in the classical music business. "Transfiguration" is a 250k dollar show. It was a huge budget! Well for us. If you go to another type of show it's nothing. And I am really fascinated by those shows. Every time I go to a non-classical show, I always look at the trucks. We travel we one truck, three technicians. To me, for my company, it's very expensive to bring on tour, even though we try to reduce the expenses. For a classical music world, it's a very heavy show. Money is related to a lot of administrative and social work. You have to meet with some people, and ask for money, and fill out papers. In the end, we ended up with a very small deficit, but it's a lot of stress and it's a lot of risks. I always compare myself to my sister, who is a teacher at a university for social sciences. When she asks for a grant, if she doesn't have it, it's not money that she has to invest herself. It's on the university's back. But for us artists, we ask for grants for projects and there's always a point where you have to choose, "Ok, I don't have all the money needed to do that, am I still going there?" And usually, we say yes! So, it's a lot of stress, risks, but it's definitely worth it.

24- What was the initial response from the audiences and/or colleagues? Was it positive or negative? Did you experience any form of resistance?

Hm... Mostly positive. The most positive aspect to it, while I was doing my first show "Orbis" which was the hardest, because it was my first one and it was financially very hard because you have no proof that you can do it. For "Transfiguration" it was easy because I could say, "I've done that before, I can do it!" So, it's much easier this way. But for the first show I've never regretted that, because it really helped me to consolidate my identity. So, all the interviews I would do related to that were linked to how I was approaching music; and

that was so much fun! And it really helped me clarify my identity as an artist, and I am really happy with that. But yes, sometimes there was some resistance. I learned from doing the first show, because it had some crossover in the repertoire, and I was using electric harp at some point. So, I felt that classical music people would feel a bit far from what they are used to, and people who are in other types of music would find it to smooth. For “Transfiguration,” we made no concessions. It is a classical music concert. That’s what we are doing. Yes, we have amplified our instruments, but we did some research so it would sound really like acoustical versions. We are not really selling something else than a classical music concert, and I think that is more efficient for us. But, yes, sometimes when you try to do new things, some people will resist it. Of course! It’s natural.

25- Can you explain in more detail your methodology for creating these shows/compositions/performances? For example, do you choose the topic first, or experiment with others and then work on your own?

Hm. Do I have a methodology? Well, it’s funny because I am now starting to work on my next show, so, it gets more precise as I go. The first show, I did it the other way because I wanted to do something different. So, I connected with a production company, but they had their ideas, so we made a show together. But then I bought the rights, and I just redid it my way. And later with “Transfiguration” I started with what I learned, so it depends. What really modifies the way I work is the people I work with. For “Transfiguration,” the fact that I work with my friend Stéphane really changed many things; because he has his angle of working on things, and we are quite similar, and the energy is different because we are a duet, so I don’t really have a methodology. It’s much more about time frames. This portion of time will be dedicated to practicing music and then we will work on scenery, and then so on. It’s really about where I am in my life at that moment. “Transfiguration” for example was created during the pandemic. We had the project of doing something together, but then the pandemic arrived. So, the fact that it is Canadian music is clearly influenced by the pandemic; because we were into thinking, “What is our identity? and how do we encourage people from here?” So yes. My next show is about the space and the stars, and it’s a topic that I am discussing so often with my boyfriend. So, it is surely linked to that! My conception of the human with the universe, and religion, and how it interferes. It really is about where I am in my life.

26-How do you choose the equipment you want to use in a specific project?

Well, now the priority is touring, so does it fit? Is it big? Is it easy to move? Will it be fun for technicians to work with? Comfort and efficiency are the priority, those are two major things I am trying to work with, because I think it is very important. And I hate to see when the people I hire hate working on my show, or think it’s too complicated. I always aim for efficiency and something as simple as it can be.

27-When preparing a project with other forms of art, how do you design it? Are you fully involved in the design/experimentation/collaboration process?

Yes, so far, I’ve always been very involved in it. I have a little problem with control! And as I will be on stage in that visual element, I have to be comfortable with it. I am not that type of artist at all. I really know what I want; but even more, I know what I don’t want. So, when something goes in a direction I don’t like... Well, it is so important to me the connection with the people who are listening, that I have to feel it’s natural with me. For example, I have a show on tour with a singer that she produced, but we have some texts written that we learned by heart. And we are talking about our experience, and it’s very personal. It’s about us women and our relationship with the night and music, and our experiences being mothers. And I had the text change a lot! Because there are some things that she wanted me to say that

are so far from the way I would say things. So yes, I don't see myself not being involved even when working with other people.

28-Do you find that the audience has a better experience than the typical recital setting when you include extra musical elements (other art manifestations) on your performances, or do they get distracted?

Well, it's very important that it doesn't get to be a distraction, so I always consider this when adding visual elements. It's funny because I don't think those visual elements are necessary, but I think they help with the attention people give to the performance. Sometimes what we give them can be very dense, and just having extra elements can help. It depends on the way it works. I've attended concerts where the visual elements were distracting, and other times I felt like I was abandoned because I was listening to very hard music and had no explanations, and felt, "Ok... what am I supposed to feel right now?" I think it can be done in a way that is helpful.

29-Do you think that using the harp in different settings can help make the instrument more accessible to the masses?

Of course, yes! Although it's funny, because it's something I've thought about with a former agent I had while we were working on "Orbis." What he was telling me was that we had to sell something other than a harp show. Starting with the point that it's true that some people that don't know the harp, will look at programming and see it's a harp recital. And the chances that you will go to that concert is because you are interested in the harp. And knowing that a lot of people don't know what the harp really is about and have some misconceptions of what it is. Or some harp shows may fit with what they think the harp is, but they can also be very surprised. So, for that show, of course it is a harp recital. But it's much more selling the experience of classical music concert with other elements. So, I think this way we can get more people interested in the harp; and that's something I think I get to achieve, even though it's only a few people every time. But it's a comment I have often, and that I'm always happy to have. Some people come to the concert because their partner wants to come and they are like "Ugh..." and then they say, "Wow that's not what I expected!" Well, yes! The harp is not just what you think and there are so many things! And often, at this point is when I share other harpists' names, and I say, "Go and see what this person does." And yes, I think there's a lot that has to be done, even now, so people don't think that we are a light and cheesy instrument. Misconception is an aspect of the harp that I like, but it's not what the harp is about. And I do believe that some people who get interested in the harp come to the concert, but they don't want to at the beginning. So, the visual elements, and the way that we put the harp in context where it's not supposed to be can help, but it's a long road. We have many things to change! This image has been built over centuries. And that's quite sad, because the harp is one of the most ancient instruments, but the conception of the harp should be like the most accessible instrument. Why is it the violin or the guitar? It's string instruments but with modifications, but the harp is the most natural instrument, and it should be the most accessible. But it has been, in French we say, *s'embourgeoiser*. It's been more fancied, unfortunately. But the harp is a witness of our evolution.

Pepe Gavilondo: Reflections on the composition of “Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics

When you approached me with the idea of making this piece, I immediately knew it was going to be a great challenge. Because at first glance the world of Afro-Cuban music and the world of the harp do not have many similarities, to say the least. I immediately knew that it was going to be a great challenge for the composition of the work. Certainly, the preliminary idea that it was going to be not only a harp alone, but a harp with voice and with the possibility of electronic processing and looping always made my work easier, but even so, before and during the composition process I encountered several challenges.

First, because Afro-Cuban music, the Yoruba to be precise, from which we are getting these chants that make up the suite, is a music that is made up of two elements, the vocal composed by the Akpwón (soloist) and the choir, which have a responsorial dialogue throughout time and the percussion part, which there are several ways to do it, but the most common is to have the set of three batá. The thing about batá drums is that they attack, decay and release very quickly. The sound does not stay vibrating and with the harp it does. Because it's not like the piano that has dampers. That was already going to be a challenge. To meet this challenge, fundamentally for the process of assembly and interpretation of the work, I had to know the amount of timbral effects and intonations and touches that exist on the harp. Certainly, the whole experience of several days playing the harp and watching you play at McGill enlightened me a lot, as well as the experiences and demonstration classes and meetings we had with the harpists in Montreal. In any case, the objective was never to translate the percussive effect objectively, but rather to adapt it to the harp and to an

instrument that is melodic harmonic, and that has other sound characteristics compared to a percussion instrument.

Before composing I knew that the system that was going to ensure that I could translate very well into the harp's language had to do with my aesthetic vision of that music, because one can really fall into clichés, repetitive forms, simplism, etc. But I always knew before starting to write the first work that the adaptation methodology was going to be the one used by the synthesis musical group. It is the band I work with, and it has become a reference for its work with Afro-Cuban music. Over the course of 10 years of working with them I have become aware of certain patterns and formulas that the arrangers have used to carry out the same process of starting from such a particular folk music and translating it into another aesthetic language. Say rock, jazz or in this case concert music. Their methodology is that everything one needs to fix and reimagine is in the music itself. The rhythmic part is in the batá, with six rhythmic lines, which change depending on the orisha's touch. This produces an amount of information that is enough for one not only to know what the main rhythmic elements are, but also to have enough material to start from in the composition process and the melodic harmonic part is in the voice.

This music is not harmonic, it is a single line song. It is responded to in a choral way, but not harmonized in a Western way, but rather as a kind of cacophony where it revolves around the melody, but the music does not respond to harmonic concepts. But even so, the harmony is implicit in the melody. It is highly pentatonic for the most part. With those elements very clear it was very easy for me to start. I knew what the harmonious world should look like. I knew when you sang the melody it had to be as faithful to the general structure used in those songs, but the harp part, whether recreating the melody or making accompaniments, layers, etc., had to start from the pentatonic world and make it a little more interesting using resources of bread and polytonality. The rhythmic part came out of the batá, then on top of these pulses or percussion loops that give the necessary beats to be able to maintain the tempo and be able to make the most exact loops, etc. Everything the harp does in a certain way is anchored to a greater or lesser extent to the polyrhythm that the batá make in each particular toque or chant. In the work we agree on an order of the orishas, because they must follow a particular order, because there are rules that must be respected, such as opening and closing with Elegguá, Shangó and Oshún cannot be together, etc. Once we had that order, the next one was like telling a story in the general image that has ups and downs, with intense moments and breaks. And so, the work was developed with that end, knowing that it could not be flat, everything could not be too high, everything too low. And that really starts from the same touch of saint that it is a process, a story. The chants are stories that are sequenced and not all stories have the same character, not all saints demand the same energy, therefore the suite explores that concept as well.

Returning to rhythm, throughout the work it can be seen, especially in the accompaniments, a synthesis of the toque. It is not always six lines at a time, but a rhythmic summary of its nature. Each toque within that rich polyrhythm has a structure, some patterns that are very characteristic of each, and which have been evoked or placed in a more explicit way because they are already very characteristic rhythmic formulas and are present throughout the work. Now, there is no direct transcription, it is an evocation, and it was always an important goal. We are evoking a sound world, but taking it to a totally different plane, the harp. Which is a challenge. But within the challenges is the good thing! It is the combination of the natural timbres of the harp, with electronic processing. When you multiply all those options you have many resources at your disposal. In Yemayá, the most appropriate resource was to play a flanger that emulates that sound quality of water as a volatile, malleable element and I am not at all establishing a relationship for the first time. It's used but effective. In Shangó it seemed appropriate to use a distortion effect, because we are

talking about a warrior and that is how that timbral world was created where the layers help to have the timbral resources be separated to understand them well, because when the work has loops they are emulating the different batá, They really sound similar, but each one has a different size which produces different registers, and instead of translating it into registers on the harp I translated it into timbres. It is not a direct transcription in each layer of each robe, it is a synthesis. With all these resources and composition formulas the piece flowed quite well but it was not an easy process because the harp's language is not made to maintain all these highly polyrhythmic stable rhythmic atmospheres. It is very difficult, but it will be more difficult to interpret it.

APPENDIX B

The Five orishas Elegguá, Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá and Oshún.

Their legends, religious facts, chants, and toques used as musical material in “Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics.

The five orishas Elegguá, Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá and Oshún.

To better understand the musical and extramusical elements, and the narrative of “Orishas” Suite for Harp and Electronics, as well as the reasoning behind many of the conceptual choices, is necessary to take a deeper look into the legends and religious tradition of the five orishas used as thematic material for the piece. This appendix contains relevant information regarding the legends, attributes, chants and the batá toques of the five orishas Elegguá, Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá and Oshún. Most of the written content, including the patakíes (fables) and some of the chants, are extracted from Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui *Orishas del Panteón Afrocubano*. As explained in the body of the text, each deity has several chants and toques that are performed during religious ceremonies, but only the ones used in the piece are included here. Regarding the chants, it is important to note that not all the phrases have exact

translations, therefore, an approximation of meaning is given in such cases. The source of the translation will be given for each one.

Elegguá

Elegguá is the orisha that holds the keys to destiny and opens and closes the paths in life. He is the son of Obatalá and Yemú, and the first of the four warriors (Elegguá, Oggún, Ochosi and Osun). Olofi (the Divinity) said: “You, being the smallest, youngest and my messenger, you will be the biggest on Earth and Heaven, and nothing will ever be possible without counting with you first.” It is revered and offered food before any of the other orishas, and it is always the first when entering a home. It is generally accepted to have 21 *caminos* (avatars) and it is a good friend of Oshún. His days are usually Mondays and Tuesdays, and any days that happen on the 3rd day of a calendar month. Its celebration happens on January 6th and June 13th. Elegguá lives in a clay basin, where a stone with three eyes is positioned in the middle. It is usually greeted by knocking three times on the floor in front of its basin. Any kind of object that is used by a kid can be offered to him; his colors are black and red, representing dualities like life and death, the beginning and the end, war and peace, etc. It usually dresses with a jacket, pants cut at knee height and a red hat with a shape like that of a culinary chef.¹⁵⁰

Patakí: (Fable extracted from Natalia Bolívar’s book)

On this path, Elegguá was the son of Echu Okú Boró and Añaguí. One day, when he was a young boy, he was walking with his entourage and saw a bright light with three

¹⁵⁰ Natalia Bolívar *Orishas del Panteón Afrocubano*, (Cádiz: Quorum Editores Asociación de la prensa de Cádiz, 2008), 41–47.

eyes, which was on the ground. As he got closer, he realized that it was a dried coconut (obi). Elegguá took him to the palace, told his parents what he had seen and threw the obi behind a door. Shortly after, everyone was amazed to see the light coming out of the obi. Three days later, Elegguá died. Everyone had a lot of respect for the obi, which continued to shine, but over time, people forgot about it. Thus, sometime after, the town found itself in an unexpected situation and when the Arubbó [elders] met, they concluded that the cause was the abandonment of the obi. It, in fact, was empty and eaten by bugs. The old men agreed to make something solid and lasting and thought of a saint's stone (otá) in the place of the obi, behind a door. It was the origin of the birth of Elegguá as an orisha.¹⁵¹

Chant to Elegguá: (literal translation extracted from Natalia Bolívar's Orishas del Panteón Afrocubano)

[the formatting isn't clear here:]

<i>Bara Suwayó omo Yalawana</i>	<i>Vital force that appears far and wide,</i>
<i>Mana Keni Irawó E</i>	<i>child who separates and divides the path, do not cut the good.</i>
<i>Bara Wayo eke e Esu Odara</i>	<i>Vital force that you come to give us. Echu the one who works</i>
<i>omo Yalawama Mana Keni Irawó E</i>	<i>wonders. Child who separates and divides the path,</i>
	<i>Do not cut the good.</i>

Toque de batá Alubanché (to open)

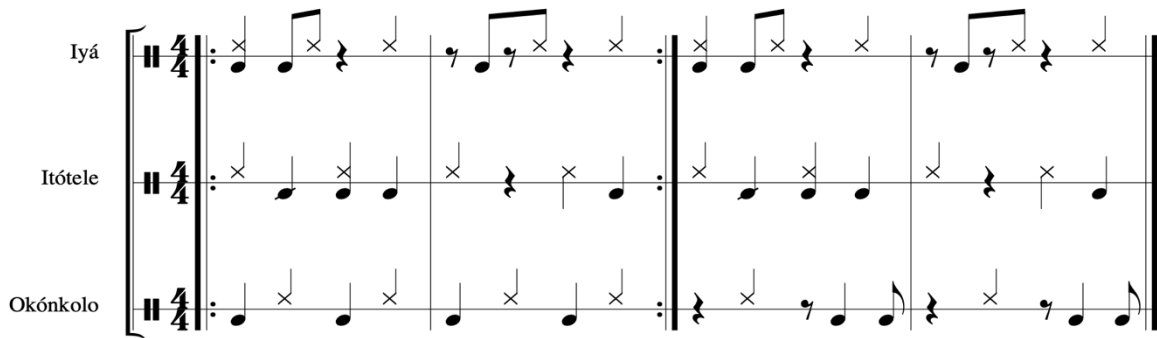
¹⁵¹ Ibidem, 43.

The musical score is written for three parts: Iyá, Itótele, and Okónkolo. The time signature is 6/8. The score consists of 8 measures, divided into two 4-measure phrases by a repeat sign. The first measure of each phrase contains a repeat sign. The Iyá part has a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Itótele and Okónkolo parts have rhythmic patterns marked with 'x' and eighth notes.

Measure	Iyá	Itótele	Okónkolo
1	Quarter rest, eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, eighth note	Quarter rest	Quarter rest
2	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
3	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
4	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
5	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
6	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
7	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note
8	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note	Quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note

Toque de batá Iyesá (to close)

Eleggua No. 2 (Iyesa)



Obatalá

Natalia Bolívar describes Obatalá as the creator of the earth and human beings. He is the purest of deities, owner of everything white, governor of heads and critical, conscientious thinking and dreams. He is the son of Olofi and Oloddumare, sent to Earth to do good and be the ruler of this planet. He is merciful and lover of peace and harmony. This deity has twenty-four caminos or avatars and is the owner of all numbers that are multiples of 8. He lives inside a white soup bowl filled with four *otás*, and the basin's stones are not allowed to catch sun, air or dew. He is always dressed in white, same as the necklace beads. It is the owner of silver and all white metals. Obatalá has caminos where it is represented as female instead of a man.¹⁵²

Patakí de Obatalá:

¹⁵² Ibid., 107–129.

In the beginning of things, when Oloddumare came down into the world, he was accompanied by his son Obatalá. Under the sky there was only water. Then Oloddumare gave Obatalá a handful of earth stuffed in the shell of a slug and a chicken. Obatalá poured the earth into a mound in the middle of the sea. The chicken began to dig up the earth, scattering it and forming the world we know. Olofi also commissioned Obatalá to form the body of man. He did so and finished his task by placing his head on his shoulders. That is why Obatalá is the owner of the heads.

On one occasion, the men were preparing drastic parties in honor of the orishas, but due to an inexplicable oversight they forgot about Yemayá. Furious, she conjured the sea that began to swallow the earth. It was scary to see her riding, livid, on the highest of waves, with the silver fan in her hand. The men, frightened, did not know what to do and implored Obatalá. When the roaring immensity of Yemayá rushed over what was left of the world, Obatalá intervened, raised his opoayé and ordered Yemayá to stop. Out of respect, the owner of the sea cut off the waters and promised to desist from her anger. And if Obatalá made men, how is he going to allow anyone to finish them?¹⁵³

Chant: (translated by Julio Hong)

Iyá lawa orisha o

Mother, us, divinity.

Iyá lawa aká ti oke

Mother, we are on the top part.

Tani o Bo yue ye roba Obatalá Orisha o *Who hid behind the creation of divinity.*

Awa ilé Orisha o

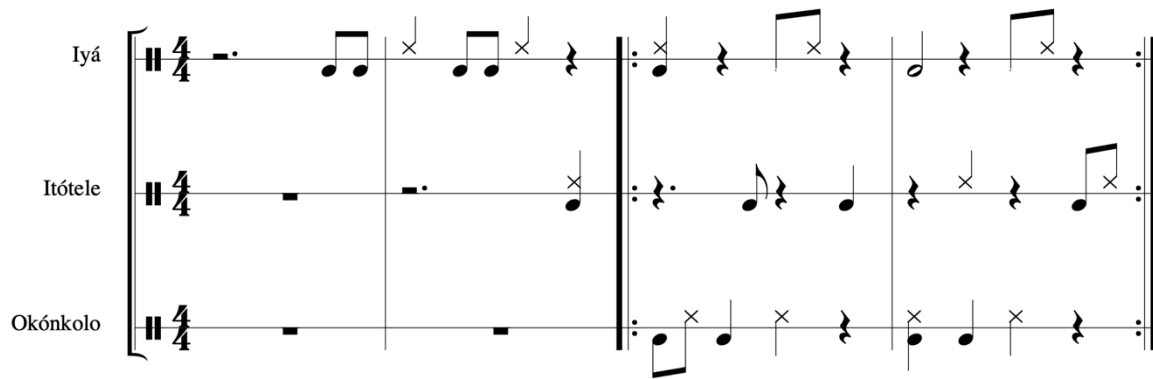
Us, from the house of divinity

¹⁵³ Ibid., 189–197.

Iyá lawa aká ti oke

Mother, we are on the top part.

Toque a Obatala (Iya lawa)



Shangó

King of Oyó, Nigeria, and god of fire, rays and thunderbolt, war, dance, music and masculine beauty. He is the patron of warriors, son of Ibaíbo y Yemmú. His number is 4 and his days are Fridays and every 4th day of the calendar. His colors are red and white. Shangó represents the biggest number of human virtues and imperfections. Great worker, brave, good friend, prophet, but also a liar, womanizer, quarrelsome, boastful and gambler. He lives in a wooden washing trough, preferably made of ebony wood, in red and white, where otás in numbers of fours and six' will be placed inside. Wooden tools will be placed on top of the lid in numbers of six. He is dressed in a loose shirt and pants in vermillion red color. He is bare-chested with a crossed band over it and wears a crown on his head.

Patakí de Shangó:

Aggayú, the owner of the river, had a love affair with Yemayá and Shangó was born from them. But Yemayá did not want him and Obatalá took him in and raised him.

Recognizing him as his son, he gave him a white collar and punched him, told him that he would be king of the world and built him a castle. Shangó went down to the Congo and became such a rebellious boy, that Madre de Agua Kalunga had to expel him from there. Then he took his board, his castle and his pylon, with which he had come down from heaven, and began the path of exile. Walking and walking, he met Orula, to whom he gave the board because he knew that he was a man of respect and he was going to take care of him.

Changó was left guessing with snails and coconut, singing, partying and picking fights. He married Obba, but he also lived permanently with Oyá and Ochún. Oyá, as is known, was Oggún's wife, but she fell in love with Shangó and allowed herself to be stolen by him. This kidnapping gave rise to a tremendous war between Shangó and Oggún. On one occasion Shangó had to hide from his enemies, who wanted to cut off his head, and he went into Oyá's house. Oyá cut her braids and put them on, dressed him in her clothes and decorated him with her clothes. When Shangó left the house, his enemies, very respectful, believed that he was the saint, made way for him and let him escape.

They say that since Shangó was fighting and had no weapons, Osain, who was his godfather, prepared the secret (ingredients) of the güiro for him. When he touched it with his finger and put it in his mouth, he could throw a candle for her. With that he defeated his enemies. When you hear thunder, it is said that it is because Shangó is having a party with his wives or that he is riding through the sky.

Shangó has three messengers: Araúa (the thunder), Mana Mana (the lightning) and Birí Aimeyé (the darkness). He is called Eletimo, which means 'owner of knowledge and the Bright Eye.'

He fights from the top of the odán tree (male jagüey) and, from there, he saved Oddúa with his oche when his enemies were pursuing him. He also owns the ere iré (lages rubber) tree which he calls tente en pié. With the moruro sticks and sunset he prepared the secret of Osun. He knows the remedy to cure leprosy, since with the help of Osain, he saved his brother Babalú Ayé when he fell ill, and he is identified with a leopard or a tiger that washes itself with the blood of the ram. The name of the sorcerer of Shangó is Lakín Shekún and, they say that with his breath, he kills and saves.

The anvil that Obba carries among his tools and which is made of acana wood, was given to him by Shangó as a wedding present and, the Yorubas say, that he made it the same day he carved his oche.

Shangó in Eyilá Chebora (12) prohibits smoking, since it was in this oddun where he cooked all the yams with the air that comes out of his nose, and he puts on a white and red necklace, with four snails and four blue glories. For this orisha there is no closed path and he really likes figs, both fresh and dried. He lives in trees that have curujey on them. He and Elegguá talk at dawn.¹⁵⁴

Toque de batá:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 191–192.

Meta a Chango

The musical notation for 'Meta a Chango' consists of three staves, each in 6/8 time. The first staff, labeled 'Iyá', contains a melody of eighth and quarter notes with 'x' marks above. The second staff, labeled 'Itótele', contains a pattern of eighth notes and rests with 'x' marks above. The third staff, labeled 'Okónkolo', contains a melody of eighth and quarter notes with 'x' marks above. The music is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines.

Yemayá

Is considered mother of all life and all the orishas. Owner of the waters and represents the seas, fountain of life. She is indomitable and smart, her punishments are severe, and her ire is terrible but just. There is only one Yemayá, with seven caminos, and that is the number that represents this goddess. Her necklace contains seven transparent beads and seven blue. The shade of this last color will depend on the camino (avatar). Her dress is adorned with blue and white streamers, a kind of wide belt and rhomboid bib. She is kept in a soup bowl colored in different shades of blue and white with flowers, where the otás and tools are kept. Seven linked, round bracelets are placed on top of the lid, and a crown, if she asks for it.¹⁵⁵

Patakí de Yemayá:

At first, there was only fire and burning rocks down here. Then Olofi, the Almighty, willed the world into existence and turned the vapor of the flames into clouds. The water came down from the clouds and put out the fire. In the huge gaps, between the rocks, Olokun was formed, the Ocean - which is terrible and whom everyone fears.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 146–160.

But the sea is also good, because it is the source of life, and the water made veins in the earth so that life could spread. That is Yemayá, the *Mother of Waters*. That is why it is also said that before anything existed, Yemayá was lying, stretched out as she was and suddenly said: 'Ibí bayán odu mi: my belly hurts,' and from her came the rivers, the orishas and everything that feeds and lives on Earth."¹⁵⁶

Prayer to Yemayá: (The following chant is sung as a prayer to invoke the deity. No translation found)

Akolona o yale,

Yale yaluma o

Yale Omi ole ayabba Omi o.

Chant to Yemayá:

Yemayá Asesún, Asesún Yemayá

Yemayá is the beginning of Spring)

Yemayá Olodo, Olodo Yemayá.

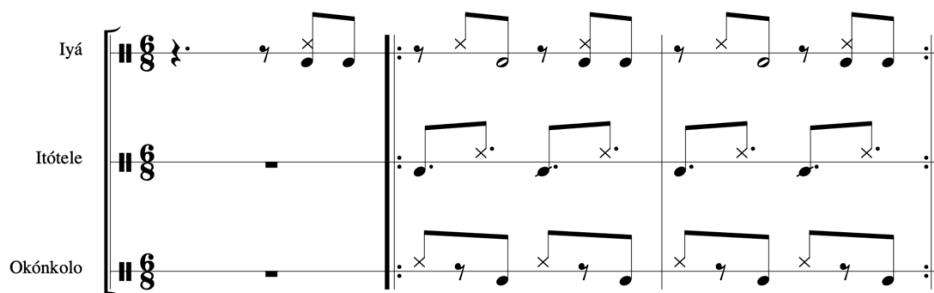
The mother of the children of the fish

Is also the owner of the rivers.

Toque de batá:

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 149.

Yemaya (Asesu)



Oshún

Deity owner of fertility, femininity, and the river. It is a symbol of coquetry, grace, and feminine sensuality and sexuality. It is the wife of Shangó, and close friends with Elegguá, who protects her. Always accompanies Yemayá, lives in the river and protects pregnant women. It is usually represented as a beautiful woman, good dancer, eternally happy, always wearing tinkly jewels. It can either provoke or resolve wars between the orishas and humans. It is usually kept in a soup bowl with colors predominantly yellow and gold, filled with five otás (stones) taken from the bottom of the river, and then filled with water from the same place. It is usually greeted ringing a bell in front of it. The color of her necklace is yellow or amber; she is represented wearing a yellow dress held at the waist by a corset, with a rhomboid design in front of the womb. Her numbers are always multiples of 5 and the day of celebration is September 12.¹⁵⁷

Patakí de Oshún

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, 167–178.

Oshún, the beautiful among the beautiful, liked to walk through the mountains. She sang and played with the animals because she tames the beasts and not even the scorpion stings her. One day Oggún, the tireless blacksmith who lives in the wild, saw her passing and felt his heart pierced. Impetuous and brutal, he ran after the one that stirred his desire, determined to possess her. Oshún, who was in love with Changó, ran away scared. Agile as the deer, in her crazy race, she crossed the green fields of watercress of Orisha-Okó, which ensures the fertility of the earth. But Oggún, enraged and violent, was about to catch up with her. It was then that Oshún, desperate, jumped into the river. Carried away by the whirlwind of the current, she reached the mouth where she encountered the powerful Yemayá, mother of all the orishas. Compassionate, Yemayá took her under her protection, and gave her the river for her to live on. To cheer her up, she [Yemayá] covered her with jewels, corals and infinite riches. That is why Oshún lives in the river and loves Yemayá so much.¹⁵⁸

Prayer to Oshun:

(The following chant is sung as a prayer to invoke the deity. Translated by Julio Hong)

Iyami Ilé ogbo

Iyami Ilé ogbo

Iyagbob bo ashé

Ishe mi nsarama woe

Iyami Ilé ogbo

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 167–168.

Mother, here is your daughter/son in good faith, who needs to speak with you.

Toque:

Ochun No. 1 (Iyamile)

The musical notation for Ochun No. 1 (Iyamile) consists of three staves, each representing a different instrument or vocal part. The staves are labeled Iyá, Itótele, and Okónkolo. The notation includes rhythmic symbols (x, z) and musical notes (half, quarter, eighth notes) in 4/4 time. The Iyá staff starts with a double bar line and a 4/4 time signature. The Itótele staff also starts with a double bar line and a 4/4 time signature. The Okónkolo staff starts with a double bar line and a 4/4 time signature. The notation is arranged in a system with four measures per staff.

Chant to Oshún:

Ide were were ita Oshún

I am Oshún wherever I stand.

Ide were were

Ide were were ita Oshun,

I am Oshun wherever I stand,

Ide were were maloiyá

no one can take me down.

Oshakiniwa, ita Oshún,

In the land of the Osha, I am Oshún

cheke, cheke, ita Oshún

Ide were were

No one can take me down.

Toque Daddá a Oshún:

5

Iyá

Itótele

Okónkolo

D. C.