

Jonathan Wyner

No Harping on Stereotypes

By Bija Gutoff



Deborah Henson-Conant during rehearsal. Photo by Diane Carroll Burdick.

Harpists wear flowing robes and tresses. From their perch behind the orchestra, they draw ethereal chords from angel-toned instruments. They speak in whispery tones and sip herbal tea. Isn't that right?

Not for Deborah Henson-Conant.

A classically-trained harpist though she is, she has little truck with stereotypes or barriers of any kind. As Jonathan Wyner — her partner, producer, musician (they play tuba/harp duets) and mastering engineer — puts it: “The concert harp was this edifice she had to sit behind. And she was never content with that limitation. So she took up the Celtic harp and invented a harness. She wears it like an electric guitar and dances around the stage.”

Henson-Conant, best known as a jazz harpist, brings an eclectic fervor to her compositions and performances. “She draws from a complex musical vocabulary — from Prokofiev to blues to Latin,” says Wyner. “She appeals to fans of symphonic music while pulling in elements from other cultures. She’s a quintessentially American artist.” What’s more, says Wyner of her unconventional harp style, “sometimes it’s this wailing, soaring sound that’s more like a David Gilmour/Pink Floyd-type guitar solo.”

“If you look at the performance graph on our G5, we were barely scratching the surface. Even with DSP, EQ, and compressors all working, the CPU wasn’t blinking — the computer didn’t break a sweat.”

Pushing the Boundaries

Henson-Conant is a restless talent. “As soon as she became successful as a jazz player she got bored,” says Wyner with a laugh. “So she learned how to orchestrate her compositions. She played them with the Boston Pops and other symphony orchestras. Then she decided to get back into musical theater, which is where she started, and added storytelling and singing to

Pro/Music

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“Invention and Alchemy” Release

The DVD “Invention and Alchemy: Deborah Henson-Conant with The Grand Rapids Symphony” will be available May 10, 2006 on [Deborah Henson-Conant’s website](#).

“Invention and Alchemy” Credits

- Sponsor: Peter Wege
- Performer/Composer/Arranger: Deborah Henson-Conant
- Executive Producer: Jonathan Wyner
- Creative Producers: Jonathan Wyner and Deborah Henson-Conant
- Grand Rapids Symphony: David Lockington, Music Director/Conductor
- Director: Bob Comiskey, BCTV
- Line Producer: Dan Frank, Moody Street Pictures
- Audio Engineers: Tom Bates, Jonathan Wyner and Matt Azevedo
- Lighting Director: Bob Peterson, Real World Lighting Design
- Online Editor: David Bigelow, Moody Street Pictures
- Special Features Editing: Rick Digregorio
- Mastering: Jonathan Wyner

About Jonathan Wyner

Jonathan Wyner holds a BA in French horn and composition from Vassar College. He teaches at Berklee College of Music in Boston and owns a company called [M Works Mastering](#) in Cambridge. He has worked with artists both well known (James Taylor, David Bowie, Aerosmith, Kiri Te Kanawa, Pink Floyd, Cream, Richard Stoltzman, Miles Davis, Nirvana, Aimee Mann, Juliana Hatfield) and esoteric (Tiny Tim, Snakefinger, John Cage, Rahsaan Roland Kirk). Wyner mastered the first interactive CD game (“Play It by Ear”), the first recorded opera (“Madame Butterfly,” recorded in 1912 by the BBC), and what’s believed to be the longest CD (80:32 for Razormaid Records).

her stage performances.”

Now Wyner is producing a concert DVD called “Invention and Alchemy,” in which Henson–Conant performs with the Grand Rapids Symphony. He’s proud of the project’s top–drawer production values. “It was shot in 1080i/59.94fps HD in a nine–camera shoot, using the Sony HDC–900 and 950 — the same video cameras used to shoot the Super Bowl. We were lucky to get the CBC’s brand–new \$20–million premier video truck — actually, it was the only one available during the fall football season. We recorded in 5.1 surround sound, cut and posted in 1080i on Final Cut Pro HD, and mixed 48 channels of audio in Logic Pro — all on a Power Mac G5 Quad.”

Henson–Conant wrote all the music; she also acts, sings, and tells stories. To make the DVD, Wyner culled the best instances of the 12 pieces she performed on three occasions, adding effects to heighten the artistry. For instance, he explains, “when Deborah plays a blues solo, we run the sound through a distortion pedal so it sounds like she’s playing a tenor electric guitar — it becomes a rock tune. The symphony orchestra is still there, but now it’s about the rhythm of the instruments, rather than the harmonies.”

A Premier Truck

Wyner fairly sighs with pleasure as he describes the high standards he was able to employ on “Invention and Alchemy.” “I said, if we’re expending all this effort to use nine cameras and the premier CBC truck, we need to make sure it’s HD,” he explains. “We got gorgeous images. And we recorded to the Sony HDCAM SR deck, which was the first video format about which some major studio directors said, ‘I could go with that as a replacement for film.’”

For Wyner, Apple was the only choice. “All the tools that allow you to do the work you need to do are built for the Mac,” he states. “The OS is elegant and efficient, and the visual presentation lends itself to creativity. The most incredible thing,” he adds, “is that we have these tools from Apple, with amazing technological capabilities and such high res — and they’re so affordable.”

Despite intense production demands, Wyner wasn’t able to stress his Mac–based system. It wasn’t for lack of trying. “We were working with 48 channels of acoustic instruments playing simultaneously,” he remembers. “And if you come from the old school, you’d think this thing would be gasping for silicon air. But if you look at the performance graph on our G5, we were barely scratching the surface. Even with DSP, EQ, and compressors all working, the CPU wasn’t blinking — the computer didn’t break a sweat.”

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Jonathan Wyner, left, with Bob Comiskey, who directed “Invention and Alchemy.” Photo by Rick Digregorio.

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