

reinventing deborah

She is one of the most recognizable figures in the harp world. At first glance, Deborah Henson-Conant appears to be the same cowboy-boot-and-mini-skirt-wearing wild woman of the harp that she was when we first interviewed her nearly 12 years ago. But DHC has spent the last decade as she has spent her entire life—evolving.

by Alison Reese

Most people can be pretty well summed up with a few well-chosen adjectives. Deborah Henson-Conant is not most people. It would take a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary to come up with enough words to describe her, and even then, words alone would fall short. Deborah Henson-Conant is more than words—she is an experience. An experience that pushes the bounds of nearly every one of your senses. This harpist-composer-pianist-writer-jazzier-gardener-arranger-singer-runner-storyteller used to write for musical theater productions. Now she has come full-circle, starring in her own musical of sorts—a newly released DVD recorded live with the Grand Rapids Symphony. We visited Deborah on a warm spring day at her home and office outside of Boston. Lounging on the

cool grass of her back yard overlooking the Charles River, Deborah caught us up on what has changed and what has remained the same since Harp Column first interviewed her nearly 12 years ago.

HARP COLUMN: When we first interviewed you in 1995 you were primarily known as a jazz harpist. But you've completely recreated yourself in the last ten years.

DEBORAH HENSON-CONANT: That's right; I have.

HC: So my biggest question is, I'm wondering, why? Were you bored?

DHC: Yes and no. I wouldn't say "bored", I would say "trapped". And if you knew me when I was a kid,

you would know that, in fact, the jazz was a departure. It was an attempt to try to find freedom, and—I've found this over and over and over again in my harp career—that I attempted to try to find freedom, got myself into a box, discovered the box, you know, felt the top against my head, and said, "Wrong box. I've got to get out of this one and try something different." And hopefully at this point I've now gone close enough back to what I originally started to do with my life, that it's no longer a box, I hope. But what I think people hopefully see on this DVD is the beginning of what I set out to do when I was 12. It's about stories and music for me, and it's always been about stories and music. And I think there are a couple of reasons I got enamored of jazz. One was that I loved improvisation, I loved the concept of taking a form, a strong form, and using it to create freedom. I love that philosophy. I mean, like, I love it in many, many, many ways. And I still do improvise, even when I'm playing with an orchestra, and I do encourage people to improvise. So that's one of the reasons I think I love jazz. I also loved jazz for its aggressiveness. I loved it because it was an incredible challenge for me on the harp, and it was a great way for me to get familiar with the instrument. And I think I also loved it I heard a jazz player and I said to the boyfriend that I was with at the time, "Do you think I can do that on a harp?" And he said, "Nah, you can't do that."

HC: That was a challenge.

DHC: It was a challenge. And it's so interesting that I play the harp, because I'm so aware of stereotypes, and the harp is so stereotyped, and there's so much prejudice surrounding it. I knew I was a musician, I knew I was a composer, I knew I loved to perform, I didn't like the idea of being a chick singer,

and so one of the things that I loved about jazz was how aggressive it was, and that I could really prove myself to myself in it. So I thought this was a great thing, then discovered, of course, that's a trap. If you just go to prove yourself to yourself, well, then you prove yourself and then where are you? So I think the question is less, "Why did I reinvent myself?" as "Why didn't I just come here in the first place?" Of course I know why I didn't. I mean, I couldn't conceive of it, I mean, even the instrument that I play now, it didn't exist, and therefore it wouldn't have been possible. Before the electric harp was invented, I could not have written the kind of orchestral music that I write, because I don't want to write the Handel harp concerto or even the Debussy *Danses*. I mean, that's great, but if you see the DVD, I love bombast...

HC: You kind of touched on a question I wanted to ask you; I was talking with another harpist the other day, and we were talking about the Handel Concerto.

DHC: Oh!

HC: So in talking to this friend about the Handel concerto...

DHC: Which, I must say, I've started playing again to practice.

HC: Well, very interesting! Because we were talking about how there are a couple editions everybody plays, and they were written...you know, it's a baroque piece, and they were written in the early to mid-20th century, and they're all kind of 20th-century takes on the Handel concerto, and she said, "We need a 21st-century take on the Handel concerto." And she said, "I wonder what Deborah Henson-Conant would do with the Handel concerto?"

DHC: Well, you know, it's so funny, it's so funny because actually, lately, what I have been doing with the Handel concerto...because I love it as a practice piece. Here are some of the things I do with it: I love to get another player and have that player play it in B-flat and I play it in B. And we play it together at the same time in perfect, perfect rhythm. I love that. The other thing that I've been doing lately that I found fascinating was to put completely wrong pedals and play it, because, of course, you know, I mean, I'm very visual; I want to look at it. I also wanted to see, "How much would that throw me off?" There are a lot of reasons I wanted to do it. I wanted to do it because it would be more interesting to me, I wanted to do it so that I could stop thinking about the Handel concerto as I know it and try to see what else was there in terms of "What is the form here?" What else I might find. And also to just approach it as a purely physical thing.

HC: So might we someday see a published Deborah Henson-Conant edition of the Handel concerto?

DHC: You know, that never even occurred to me. I would think what you might find is a book of "Deborah Henson-Conant's Tips to Playing *with* the Handel Harp Concerto." How to use it as a game, or how to use it as a toy. The point for a "real harpist" would be to understand the piece at a much deeper level, so that when you do play it, you have a greater resonance with the piece. I'm not trying to learn how to play it and perform it, I'm using it to help inform my physical ability to play. So I approach it differently than other people would. I mean, I'm never going to get up there and play this.

HC: Do you practice in the traditional sense of the word?

DHC: I wish that I practiced more, because I love how it feels when I do practice. But if I had my druthers, I would be practicing, you know, probably two hours a day I think is sufficient for me. And I base that also on just my physicality, because I also run. Do I practice like other people? I think yes and no. Because I try to go back to how...I recently started playing with scales, and I find them really fun now, for the first time. But I have a different way of playing them, and it uses fingers differently, a little bit differently. I do it in a special rhythm. I can't remember how it is, but it is such that the strong beat always falls on a different finger, and the crossover point is always on a different finger. So I'm constantly trying to do two things. Well, there's many things I'm trying to do when I'm practicing. One is I'm trying to, of course, like everybody, strengthen my fingers and get over the built-in fact that the thumb is different than the other fingers.

HC: Right.

DHC: And, you know, so that that doesn't pose a problem when I'm playing. I'm also really, really fascinated with these two opposing concepts, or paradoxical concepts: the independence of the hands and the interdependence of the hands. As a jazz player, as even a classical player, you know, Mr. Left Hand is the bass line and the confident Mr. Right Hand is the melody line.

HC: Like gender roles, for your hands.

DHC: It is, it is! That's a great way of putting it! Gender roles for your hands. And I love switching those, because I love seeing what happens to my brain when I do it. I love switching all kinds of things; I like switching the harp around to the left-hand side of my body, I love switching around and



photo: D. Carroll Burdick

playing on the other side of the harp, and I love, you know, switching the hands, making the right hand do what the left hand was doing and so on, because I feel that all that strengthens. But I'm really fascinated with interdependence: is there a way to make my hands work as though they were one hand? To think as though they were one hand? And if there was a set of exercises that I wish I could write, and I've been meaning to write, it's a set of exercises that would eventually allow you—I think; this is a theory—that would allow my hands to think as one hand. I'm interested in that not only physically, and what it would mean in terms of speed of playing a certain kind of line, but I'm also interested in what would happen to my brain once those two things would become one.

But also, for me, it's really important to just play, and for that I really like, for example, to play the blues over and over and over again. As a concept, it's so simple that you can get it in five minutes, and that's when it becomes really fascinating, because that's when you start discovering, "Okay, what is this about? Is this about rhythm? What else is in here?" You know, you start like you do on a microscope, then you start going into it, deep, deep, deep into it. And that is another reason why I'm glad I've had jazz training. Maybe this is an interesting question as to why jazz was important to me. I think it was really important for me to learn—and I don't know, as a classical player, I think we often think that the work

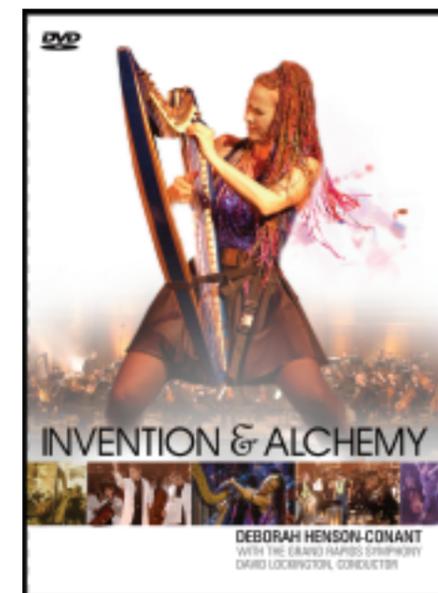


photo: B. Price

Deborah Henson-Conant (top) plays the "cymbals" during "The Garbage Man" on her new DVD *Invention and Alchemy* (bottom).

Henson-Conant glides across the stage as she sings during her live DVD recording with the Grand Rapids Symphony.



photo: D. Carroll Burdick

is, you learn to play the notes, and then you have the beat, and then you put in the beat. As a jazz player, you learn that the notes aren't hard, but what's hard is to find the music—to really find the music. And I think that a lot of times the difference in classical playing, you spend all the struggle, with all this time learning the notes, getting the notes underneath your hands, and then you think you have the piece and you play it, and I think that's one of the reasons why maybe...you know, I don't always see classical playing as being that musical, and I think in part it's because they haven't played the piece long enough, they don't have their relationship to it yet. And one of the things that I love about jazz training and about blues in particular is that the form is so simple that you can get beyond the form and the notes, and then really investigate the music, and really invest in the music. And it's something also, of course, that I've learned from taking the same tunes and playing them over and over and over and over again. I almost never get bored. None of the stuff on the DVD is stuff that bores me. It fascinates me, and I'm still struggling with it. I've played it for 10 or 15 years, and I'm still looking to bring it alive. I have this belief that if I can just play something, that I could actually bring it alive. I mean, I know there are characters in many of my pieces, and that the audience would actually see those characters, or the scene, what the song is about would begin to really exist for the audience. It's not just them sitting there and looking at me doing it and thinking, "Oh, yeah, that's good," or "She's a good player, she's fast," or what-

ever. I feel like I'm a conjurer. That's my job, is to conjure that into existence. And that's the reason for the title (of the DVD), "Invention & Alchemy", that it needs to come to life.

HC: I know you've touched on this DVD project already, but I want to go back to the beginning for people who aren't familiar with it. Tell me about the project, how it got started? Take me through it from the beginning.

DHC: Okay, let's go back 11 years, to a New Year's Eve when I was sitting on my porch and I was drinking champagne and I said, "I see myself in front of an orchestra." And I had no idea how to write for orchestra or anything. I mean, that's when that all started. That's in a whole other story, but suffice it to say I learned how to write for orchestra, I started playing with orchestras, played with the Boston Pops, started soloing as a soloist with a lot of orchestras around the country. And one of the orchestras that hired me as a guest artist was the Grand Rapids Symphony. After that show, a guy came up to me and he said, "What I saw up there, I love that. I want everybody to see that." Okay, well, people say that. But this guy, Peter Wege, actually meant it. Like, really meant it. Anyway, we became friends, and I started going out playing for his birthday, and I began to know what he was about, and he's an environmentalist, and he's a philanthropist. He said, "Look, I really do want you to do a project with this symphony." And you could tell that there was this chemistry between me and this symphony. So finally the Symphony and I got together and we said, "Okay,

what do we want to do together?" And it literally could have been anything. It could have been that I went out as an artist-in-residence and we played in the schools, whatever. But we decided...it was actually Bill Reiberg, the president of the orchestra, said, "We should do a CD together." I didn't get it at first. I was like, "Why should we do a CD of my music with orchestra? I don't understand." And he's like, "This is what we should do." So we sat down, we told Peter that we wanted to do it, Peter Wege, and he said, "Great. Do it." You know, "Write me up a proposal," and, you know, "then we'll look and see about the money."

HC: And how long ago was this?

DHC: This was probably in 2003. It was either early 2004 or 2003. Because he said, "Write it up as a proposal." Then my husband/boyfriend/spouse, you know, said, "Look. Why are you making a CD? Your show is so visual; it's about theater. I mean, to see you, people have to see it. This needs to be a DVD." And again I was like, "Why do people want a DVD?" Finally, he convinced me, and then I started to understand it. And this is the part of the project that, in some ways, I find most interesting, because at first I was emotionally resistant to writing this all up, to making a proposal. On my birthday, as my birthday present in 2004, we agreed that we would spend the entire day starting to write the proposal process, and we did. We actually went to someone to help us, and we spent the whole day doing that. It took me like a month to write the proposal, really lay it all out: this is what we want to do, this is what we

want it to look like, and this is what this is going to cost. When we finally finished it, after a month of, like, 40-hour weeks, I swear, I know this seems weird, and it's even weird in retrospect, it's weird to me that I was able to do that. Once I finished it, and I looked at it, I thought, "This is going to happen, whether this man sponsors this or not, this is now so real that it's going to happen." And so we sent it off to him, and within 10 days he wrote back and he said, "Yeah, it's great. Let's do it." So does that answer the question?

HC: Yeah!

DHC: I don't know how you'd say that in a nutshell.

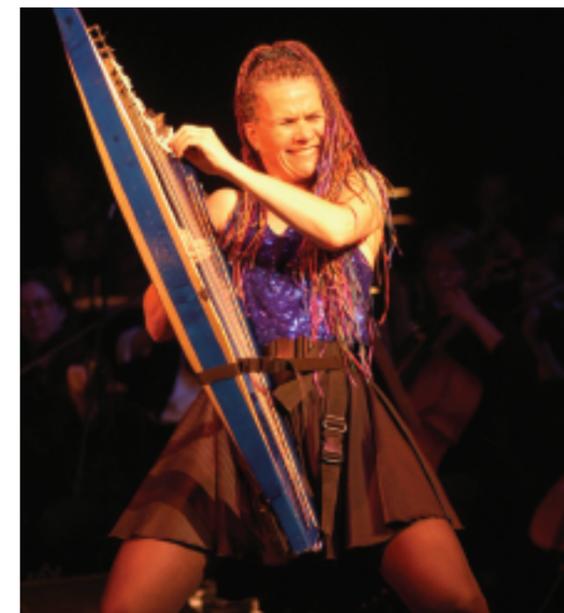
HC: How did you decide what you wanted to put on the DVD?

DHC: Well, that's a really good question. We knew that we wanted to do—that we had to do some of the things that were people's favorites, because they would be mad if we didn't.

HC: Like going to see Madonna and she doesn't sing anything you know.

DHC: Right, exactly. Plus I really love some of that stuff. So we knew that, but we knew that we wanted to do some new stuff. I knew that I wanted to do a piece that was specifically in collaboration with Peter because collaboration is really important to him, and that's part of where we meet. And so I wanted to do a piece that was about what's important to him, which is in the environment. I knew that it was important to him and to me to have pieces that were

(continued on page 26)



Henson-Conant gets down with her Baby Blue electric lever harp during a 2003 performance with the Orlando Philharmonic.

photos: B. Price