

A New Era of Music

Deborah Henson-Conant takes electrifying approach to harp fare, from Boston Pops to rock's Aerosmith

By **JULIA ANN WEEKES**

NH Weekend Editor

Deborah Henson-Conant's got that rock-star vibe. Striding across the stage with her multi-colored braids whipping in her wake, she launches into an electric riff before powering her way through the opening tune's vocals.

The only thing that doesn't quite fit the stereotype is the light-weight portable harp strapped onto her body in place of the ubiquitous lead guitar.

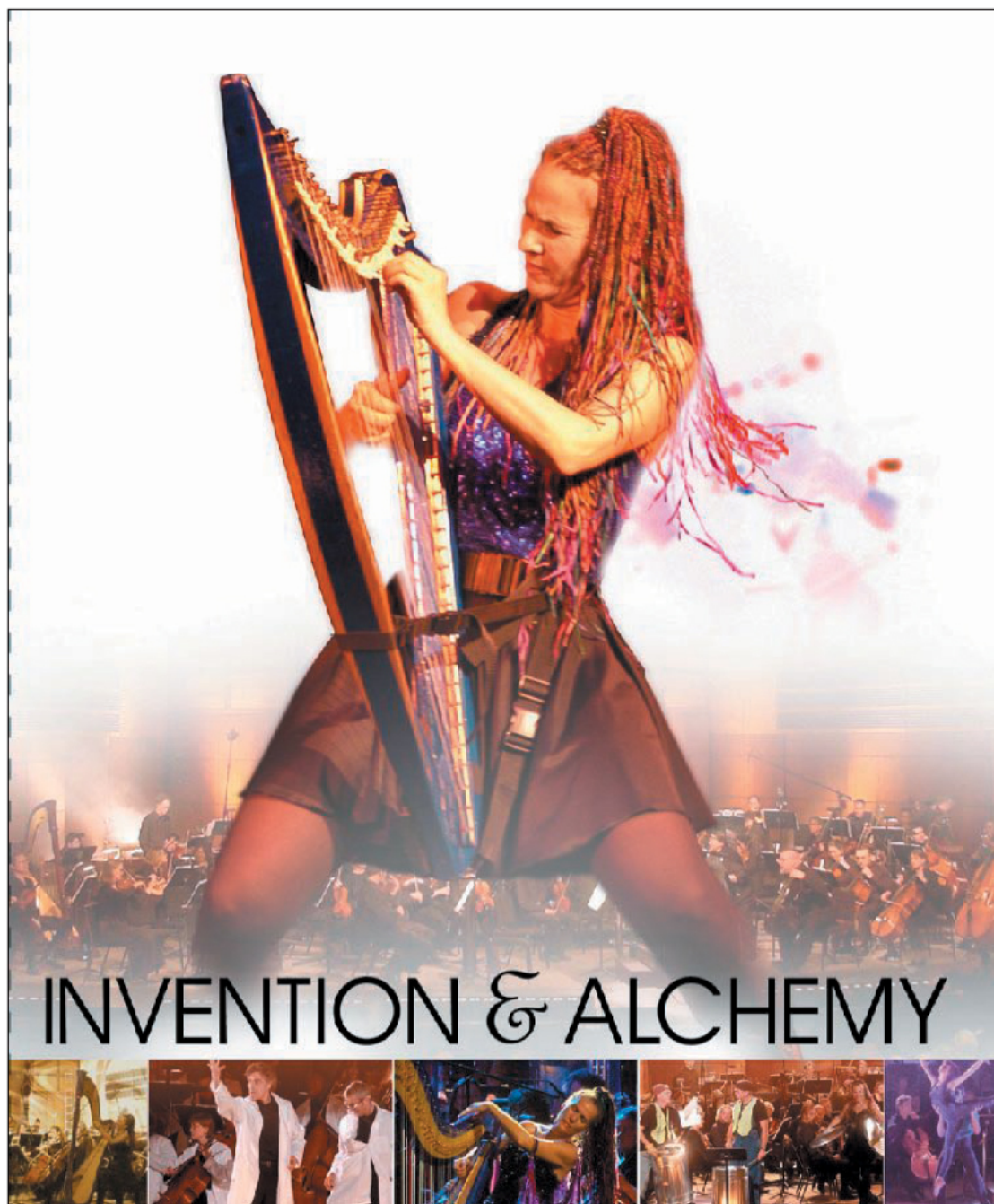
But Henson-Conant, set to perform Saturday, Feb. 28, at Tupelo Music Hall in Londonderry, isn't looking to fit into any sort of entertainment industry formula. This Grammy-nominated artist is in a genre all by herself, having transformed traditional Celtic-harp fare into a 21st-century repertoire of rock, blues and jazz through solo concerts, ensembles and an original one-woman music-theater show.

"The stereotypes of the harp were a huge challenge for me, personally," Henson-Conant said in a recent interview with NH Weekend. "I had to get over my own preconceptions of what the harp could and couldn't do, and breaking down my own prejudice has given me a huge sense of personal liberation."

The energetic performer was drawn to the harp first in college when an innovative campus band enticed her to give a traditional 47-string version a try. She paid her way through the music program at the University of California-Berkeley by playing in cocktail lounges, then headed to New York City with hopes of taking her original musicals to Broadway.

Becoming enamored with jazz, blues and improvisation, she traded in her cocktail dresses and heels for mini-skirts, sparkling tops and cowboy boots and formed the Jazz Harp Trio. She won a Boston Music Award and earned a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study jazz. She was offered a recording contract by GRP records and began hauling her 75-pound harp to performances across the globe.

But an introduction to the rather cumbersome instrument's smaller relative, the infinitely more portable Celtic harp, suddenly had Henson-Conant thinking about a way to make the harp the next cross-over instrument in today's music scene. She envisioned an electric version that could be strapped onto the



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body, and in the mid-1990s, began a collaboration with a European harp builder that resulted in the development of a commercial instrument called the "DHC Blue-Lite."

"That led to literally changing the shape of the instrument itself," she said. "All that is very exciting to share — and every time I collaborate with a new artist or a new genre, I realize how lucky I am to be living inside the reinvention of this instrument."

When The Boston Pops came calling, Henson-Conant not only served as soloist but wrote and arranged the orchestral charts for the

performance. The success of that and other appearances led Henson-Conant to create the "Invention & Alchemy" project (2005-2007), for which she earned a Grammy nomination and was featured in PBS broadcasts throughout the United States.

"People are often surprised that the show is so funny, or that I play the blues, or that I belt out songs," Henson-Conant said of the reactions she gets from audience members. "Men often pull me aside conspiratorially after a show and admit, 'My wife dragged me here kicking and screaming — but I

absolutely loved the show!'"

Last year, the electric harpist melded her popular live-performance style with a love for musical theater with the debut of her one-woman production, "What the Hell Are You Doing in the Waiting Room for Heaven?," which has been featured on stages from Boston to Budapest.

"One of my favorite reactions is when people tell me they were inspired by the show to reconnect with something they love," Henson-Conant said. "Something about the show seems to give them permission. People tell me they pulled

their guitar out of the attic and started playing again, or started singing or drawing or writing more. I love the dynamic that seems to happen, that when I give myself permission to engage with the audience as myself, it seems to translate a sense of permission in their own lives."

In recent years, Henson-Conant has continued her musical evolution, striving to change conventional notions about harp music. She has toured with the Boston Pops, opened for celebrated soul singer Ray Charles, starred in the PBS special "Celtic Harpestry" and jammed off stage with Steven Tyler, lead singer for rock band Aerosmith.

Her mission is to push the envelope not only in terms of what can be achieved instrumentally on her electric harp but in the eclectic and varied formats in which her repertoire is presented to the public.

"I loved working with (a cappella vocal master and Grammy Award winner) Bobby McFerrin and would do it again in a second," she said. "I'd love to work with a great rock band, or a blues band. There's a director in Paris named Alain Sachs who I'd love to work with. And I'd love to work with a great choreographer on a story-dance (production) that would allow me to create the music, be a character and be integrated in with the dancers."

"I've always been interested in cross-discipline performance, and music-theater is in my blood, so performances that mix theater and music in various ways are very compelling for me," she said. "But I also love working with dancers and, of course, humor is very important to me, so I'm always looking for ways to expand into those areas."

Also among her hopes for future collaborations is Eddie Izzard, a multifaceted British actor who has appeared in films including 2006's "My Super Ex-Girlfriend" with Uma Thurman and Luke Wilson, 2007's "Ocean's Thirteen" with George Clooney, Brad Pitt and Matt Damon, and 2008's "Valkyrie" with Tom Cruise. But it's the Emmy Award-winning performer's Monty Python-esque stand-up comedy, and his penchant for cross-dressing for stage shows, that intrigues Henson-Conant. "I'd love to do a show with him in his stand-up 'executive transvestite' persona," she said.

◆ Tickets to harpist Deborah Henson-Conant's 8 p.m. concert Saturday, Feb. 28, at Tupelo Music Hall, 2 Young Road, Londonderry, are \$30. For more information, call the box office at 437-5100 or log onto www.tupelohall.com.