

Deborah Henson-Conant

Fine Tuning Performance

Rogues and Rascals

I'm no historian, but I know that the Harper-Bard is an essential character in the history of entertainment—the creative ancestor of all present-day entertainment from movies to radio plays. While many people think of harps as angelic instruments, I think of harps and the Harper-Bards, who were rogues and rascals—and surely great entertainers.

In either case—angel or rogue—if you want to play for an audience, you need to learn more than the music and the instrument—you need to learn how to express yourself as a performer. That means learning to feel safe on stage, learning to communicate to an audience and, most importantly, finding out how to make the music your own, how to tell your own story.

What's Your Story?

I personally love to hear a performer talk, to tell the story behind the music, but my performance teacher, Tony Montanaro, was a mime, so he gave me a much broader idea of what it means to “tell your story,” and it doesn't always mean talking!

Many times it simply means learning the music well enough that you can “speak” through it rather than struggling to keep up with it. Sometimes it means choosing music that's technically within your reach. Sometimes it means putting down the instrument and simply talking to the audience. Sometimes it means knowing the reason you love this piece, even though you don't tell the audience explicitly. At all times it means we need to remember there's a reason they call it “playing” and that performance is a form of communication, and that what the audience wants is to experience your personal relationship to the music you're playing.

This is true whether you're playing a lullaby or a Jimi Hendrix riff. And I firmly believe that each person has a unique and powerful voice and a fascinating story to tell—if they can find their authentic voice. And by “voice” I don't mean singing voice, though that might be part of your personal voice. I mean the way you express your personal experience of life through your performance.

Finding an Authentic “You”

How do you find the authentic “you” when you're learning from others? It's so easy to drift into simply copying what we've seen other people do, especially people we admire. And why shouldn't we copy? That's how we learn! When I first went on stage, I had no idea how to walk, to sit, to wear makeup, or to dress. My mother had been a performer, but never explicitly taught me to perform—so, in a panic, I just pretended I was her. I literally moved, acted and spoke like she would have, and that got me through my first experiences on stage.

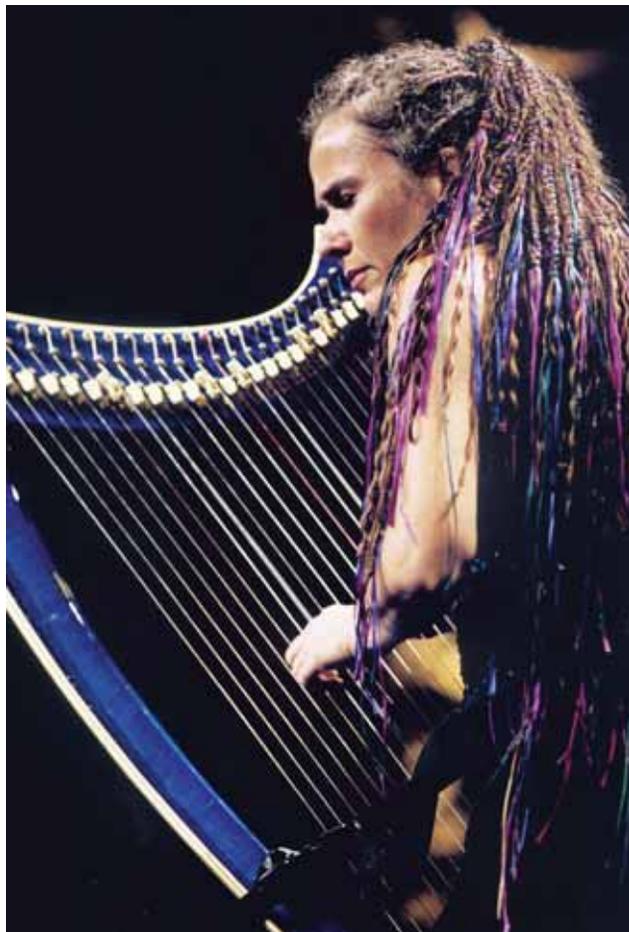


Photo credit: Roberto Coggiola (Italy 2001) Harp: CAMAC “Baby Blue” body-harp

The same thing happened for me with the harp. When I finally committed to the harp, as an adult, I was so impressed with myself! I loved everything from the long black gowns to the mechanical tuning machines. I felt like all these things helped me “pass” as a real musician.

As a real “girl” for goodness sake! Heaven knows I was never going to be a ballerina. So being a harpist was the next best thing.

I had an idea of what a “harpist” was like and I tried to embody that—and that got me through my first few years.

But then the real me started rumbling, like when you hear the natives getting restless in an old adventure movie. And that’s when things got dicey....

Up at the Barn

One of the songs on my 2003 album *Artist’s Proof* is called “Up at the Barn,” and I wrote it about the Celebration Barn, which is where I went at that critical moment when I had to make the leap from being a “real harpist” to being the “real me.” And the funny thing is that, as I made that transition, my relationship with the instrument became deeper. That’s also when I began to make the transition from the pedal harp to the lever harp. But let me tell you how it happened...

I was frustrated with my own playing, and while I knew how to play the harp, I didn’t know how to express myself with it. I’d started talking in my performances, but I was still afraid to sing and I knew I was awkward on stage. I’d heard about a man who worked with performers to help them find their own voices, a man named Tony Montanaro who had a big Barn up in Maine where he held summer workshops. He was known as the Performance Guru.

He himself seemed to be a paradox. He was a mime—but he talked and he didn’t wear white face. That should have given me a clue right there. Tony had grown up following the same circuit as Marcel Marceau, but then he began to drop the clichés of his art form—the whiteface, the silence, the striped shirts—and focus on the essential, internal, fundamental skills—what he called “Physical Eloquence.”

To build an incubator for his new form of performing and teaching, he bought an old farmhouse in Maine, turned the Barn into a performing/teaching space, and started taking in students.

Over the years, Tony taught, directed and coached many performers of physical comedy, juggling and storytelling. His students ranged from “America’s Funniest Home Videos” host Tom Bergeron to Sesame Street’s Brian Meehl to ... well... to me!

Every summer we’d all troop up to the barn—musicians, actors, contortionists, jugglers, storytellers, dancers—and spend weeks working with Tony, doing the floor exercises he called “rolls,” impersonating inanimate objects, developing stories and doing “rounds,” which were games where we’d take a single object and spend hours exploring all the different ways to play with it.

One day I dragged my old Wurlitzer harp from the corner, put it in the middle of the barn floor and said, “Use this for a round!” That was a turning point in



“Performance for Musicians” Workshop (2007)



“Artist’s Proof” album (2003)



Photo credit: D. Carroll Burdick (Grand Rapids Symphony)



Deborah and Karen Montanaro (the guest coach for her summer workshop)

my life and my relationship with the harp. At first everyone was afraid to touch it, but gingerly they started—and then they got more and more creative. The harp became everything from a witch’s broom to a battering ram to the turret of a castle, a prison cell, a Femme Fatale, a bicycle. The point of the game was to get me to rethink my relationship with the instrument, to break my old patterns of thought, to see it more like a partner, to start to understand its infinite possibilities and to begin the long journey of finding my own personal voice with the instrument.

For years I studied with Tony, and after he died I continued working with his wife, Karen, who was also a longtime student of Tony’s. Eventually, we realized we had the chance to continue and pass on Tony’s work together, and we developed a summer workshop specifically for musicians, called “Performance for Musicians,” at the same Celebration Barn where I first studied with him. Our goal is to help train a new generation of students, passing on the experience that changed our own lives as performers.

Karen and I presented the first “Performance for Musicians” workshop in 2007. It was filled mostly with harpists, but also included a harmonica player and a fiddle player.

The first thing we did at the workshop was take people’s instruments away for nearly three days and focused on our main instruments: ourselves and our bodies. Little by little we moved back to the harps, the fiddle, the harmonica, first through a series of games and then in some jam sessions. By the night of the final performance, where each student performed a two-minute piece, one after the other, we were all blown away by how different each person’s performance was from the others, and how much more deeply each person embodied their performances than when they came! The audience was amazed and when we ended with a rhythmic jam they were all instantly on their feet.

One of the people who most impressed everyone was an adult beginner who’d only been playing for six months. She was willing to play within her own ability level and had chosen very simple pieces. She was able to present them as real music because of how she invested emotionally in them and because she didn’t try to make them any faster or flashier or impressive than they were. Other players’ music was suddenly shining—people were dancing with their instruments, one had strapped on my electric lever harp and sang an original song that brought the house down. Each person was able to bring themselves more fully to their instrument and their performance, and it was without a doubt the most exciting harp concert I, personally, ever experienced in my life!

That’s when I knew for sure that we can each develop a unique, beautiful and powerful voice—and how profoundly moving I find it to help other performers do that.

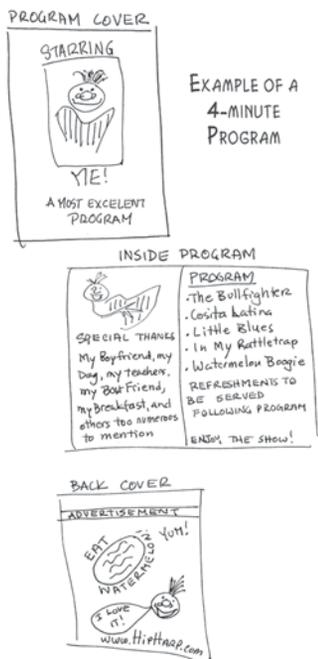
The Show Game

It’s exciting to be at a workshop, in a safe, supportive environment where you can experiment and play, but you can also play at home as a way to start finding your own voice, reframe your relationship with your instrument and learn to communicate with an audience. Here’s one of my favorite games:

Make a Show

First, create a program. Choose five short pieces you enjoy playing and put them in any order, but try to start and end with the flashiest ones and then make each piece as contrasting as possible (follow a minor tune with a major one, or a fast one with a slow one, a song you sing with an instrumental). Use a letter-size piece of white

typing paper folded in half for your program—and don't take more than five minutes making it!!! See my example. At first, make your show just 10-20 minutes long—or even just five minutes long. And try to keep the pieces short—one to three minutes long. You don't have to use a “whole” piece—you can use just one minute of it, so long as it sounds like it has a beginning and an end.



Get the Costumes. Find something you're scared to actually wear in public, or something that makes you feel like a different kind of person: red high heels, a scarf, a hat, a bow tie, a pair of glasses, some rhinestone earrings, a jacket—things that make you feel “different,” even a different gender. These are your costumes.

Create an Audience. Set up three or four chairs or stools and put your audience on them. Have fun creating your audience—use a pillow, a hat and some glasses to make one person. An orange can be another audience member. If you have stuffed animals somewhere in your house, they make excellent audience members.

Set the stage. Make sure your harp is in a position so the audience can see your face, your hands and the strings. It's no fun for them to look at the column. You can quickly decorate the harp, if you want, with a scarf around the column, or a vase of flowers near the base, or something else very simple. Check from the audience's perspective to see if you like the way it looks or whether it's distracting. Make sure you can easily walk to the harp and sit or stand at it.

from the audience's perspective to see if you like the way it looks or whether it's distracting. Make sure you can easily walk to the harp and sit or stand at it.

Lighting. If you want and if you can do it easily, create some simple lighting effect. That might mean moving a lamp, or putting a scarf over a lampshade to change the lighting color, or just dimming the lights in your room, or lighting a candle, or duct-taping a flashlight to a musicstand. But don't worry too much about lighting unless it's easy to set up.

Now you have a program, stage, costumes, audience, lighting. So all you need to do is ...

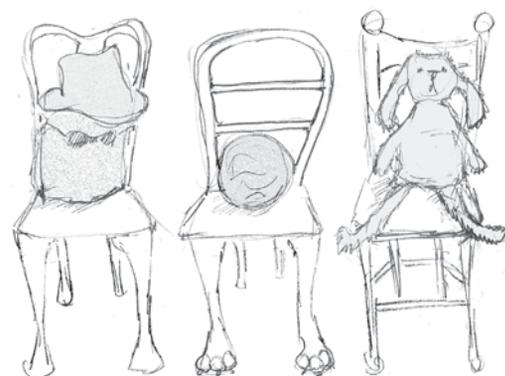
Let the Show Begin!

Choose one of your costumes – just one, put it on and then walk onto the “stage,” bow, look at each audience member, smiling and acknowledging them. Imagine them clapping. If that makes you laugh, go ahead and laugh. But don't laugh at them. The audience is sensitive to your opinion of them. Even Mr. Pillowhead.

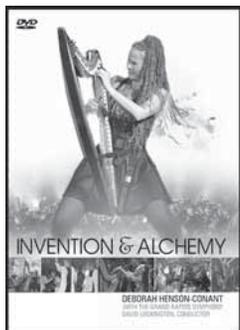
Sit or stand and perform your show. Don't stop, don't correct anything – just go through it, playing the best you can, feeling as comfortable as you can. After you've played the first song, acknowledge their clapping. Actually look at them and smile at each so they know you're happy they're clapping. Then tell them about the second song, why you love it and what it makes you think of. Be brief and don't worry about getting it perfect. This is make believe! Do the same for each of the rest of the songs. After the last song, stand and bow. Thank the audience for coming. Tell them you'll be out in the lobby, happy to meet them and invite them for refreshments. *(continued)*

“Find something you're scared to actually wear in public, or something that makes you feel like a different kind of person...”

AN EXCELLENT AUDIENCE



DEBORAH HENSON-CONANT is a Grammy-Nominated performer, composer and songwriter known for her renegade image, evocative singing voice, and shows that fuse music, theater, stories, humor, virtuosity and entertainment. Her playing ranges from full-out blues to heart-wrenching ballad.



Henson-Conant has toured with the Boston Pops, opened for Ray Charles at Tanglewood, jammed onstage with Bobby McFerrin and offstage with Aerosmith's Steven Tyler. She's written concertos and premiered them with major symphony orchestras and writes and performs her own One-Woman shows. She's been featured on shows from CBS' "Sunday Morning" and NBC's "Today Show" to NPR's "Weekend Edition" and the Food Network's "Warped," and has been inter-

viewed by hosts and journalists from Scott Simon, Susan Stamberg and Studs Terkel to Charlie Rose and Joan Rivers.

Her own televised music special, "Invention & Alchemy," has appeared on PBS stations throughout the U.S. and the companion CD received a Grammy Nomination.

Videos at YouTube (search for "hipharp")

Tour schedule, audio, video, etc. at HipHarp.com

For more info on Celebration Barn Workshop:

http://hipharp.com/EvntPg_pgs/cbarn07_wkshp_1sht.htm

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Then go into the kitchen and have some refreshments.

If you want to do it again, choose a different costume, move the audience around a little, change the lighting and set just a little bit and start all over. Do not try to recreate the things you said, don't try to "do better"—just do it again and let yourself loosen up.

Make it simple, but fun. Don't obsess over any of this—it's a game. It's pretend! It's not about creating anything for the future. It's about finding your voice.

There are many variations on this game—let yourself vary it, but don't "try" to vary it. Remember that feeling "stupid" is really important! Until you actually achieve that feeling, you're skimming the surface, you're staying in your safe zone. You often have to move through "stupid," "embarrassed," "clumsy" to get to "having fun" and eventually to a deep and authentic performance. So start pretending. And if you can join us at up at the Celebration Barn this summer, bring your costumes and your program and get ready to roll (literally and figuratively!). [n](#)

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