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Tucson Lifestyle

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featured

Tucson Humanities Festival

Oct. 4-30

The UA College of Humanities presents this series of topical lectures, panel discussions, events and special guests, all revolving around the topic of "secrets." Check the website for dates, locations and details. humanitiesfestival.arizona.edu.

Ruby Anniversary Gala

Oct. 6

Aviva Children's Services is the beneficiary of this fundraiser, which will feature cocktails, silent auction, dinner and music. 5:30 pm. JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa. 327-6779, ext. 13. www.avivatucson.org.

Tucson Modernism Week

Oct. 6-14

A series of tours, lectures, exhibits and other activities that support Mid-Century Modern art, fashion and architecture. For details see page 42. <https://preservetucson.org/modernism-week>.

Zoocson

Oct. 12

This annual gala for the Reid Park Zoological Society features food from Tucson restaurants, auctions, live entertainment and animal encounters. 6 pm. Reid Park Zoo. 881-4753. <https://reidparkzoo.org>.

Tucson Meet Yourself

Oct. 12-14

The community gathers together to highlight our diver-

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Event listings run without charge as a service to our readers. Because of possible last-minute changes, readers should confirm schedules by calling the telephone numbers in the listings.



Oct. 12-14

Yolanda Kondonassis with the TSO

See page 30 for details
Photo by Mark Battrell



Yolanda Kondonassis

Photo by Mark Battrell

Oct. 12, 7:30 pm; Oct 14, 2 pm

TSO Classic Concert

Brahms Symphony No. 1

“Alberto Ginastera’s music is kind of the equivalent of Aaron Copland’s music in the United States,” says Yolanda Kondonassis, one of the world’s preeminent harpists. “It is the sound of Argentina. When you hear something by Copland it’s like, ‘Ahhhh ... America!’ And Ginastera even now is kind of a rock star in the country of his birth.”

Like many great composers, Ginastera had his share of struggles, some of them brought on by the political climate of his homeland. “As I go along in the arc of my career, I so admire the stamina and persistence of people who manage to create and do what they do through great obstacles,” observes Kondonassis. “And Ginastera certainly had that. While he was in Argentina, he was basically prohibited from teaching at the conservatory that he founded. One of his operas [*Bomarzo*] was deemed too risqué and was banned.”

But the great composer had a fascination for a certain icon of Argentine life, and a hidden way to fight back against his oppressors. “His fascination with the guitar chord ... those six strings of the guitar. That’s like his signature, the way an artist might put his name in the bottom corner of a painting. That guitar chord is present in just about every one of his pieces, somewhere, in some configuration,” explains Kondonassis. “It’s very prominently featured in the harp concerto. What I learned in conversations with his daughter is that it wasn’t just a cool thing that resonated with him. There was a lot of

deep, political implication there. It’s what we could call the *gaucho chord*. Because the gaucho—the rebel, the cowboy, the master of the pampas—was this real, but almost mythical, icon of the Argentine spirit. There was so much political unrest during the years of his compositional life in Argentina. That chord was almost like a symbol: ‘We will not be repressed and silenced. That spirit of the fearless gaucho will always be there.’”

But there is much more to the harp concerto—which will be featured at the TSO concert along with Brahms’ *Symphony No. 1*, and Evencio Castellanos’ “El río de las siete estrellas”—than simply a hidden symbol of defiance. “It’s very celebratory. It’s a long piece—a little more than 25 minutes—and what I so love about it is that you journey through an awful lot of atmospheres. It’s by no means an easy piece, but at the same time, Ginastera thought so completely about how he was writing for the idiom that it is possible, especially after playing it as many times as I have, to find a groove and lose yourself in it, in a way that’s practically impossible in any other harp piece that I play. The harp is a very finesse-dependent instrument. Incredibly touchy. You’ve got to be with it at all times. It’s kind of impossible to go ape. There’s always got to be that control element. But I would have to say, of all the pieces in the literature, you can lose yourself with this one a bit. You gotta stay in control of the ship, but at the same time, there are times when I feel like I can transcend all the practicalities of execution and just be one with it. Which is why it’s my favorite piece, hands down. I would play it another 200 times if I’m so lucky. That cadenza is just like this magical mystery tour. It travels through all these places, and at the end it kind of erupts into this crazy celebration. The last movement is fierce; it’s a defiant celebration. What I love about it is that it comes after this incredibly introspective, quite dissonant second movement. I would imagine as a composer it’s difficult to achieve a real arc and lyricism in the context of dissonance, and he does that in the second movement, and it’s quite possible to lose yourself in that arc as well. That architecture that he approached everything with—every time I play the piece I see it more clearly. It’s like a building that just now I can see in my mind in every detail, like walking into this fabulous, magical structure.”

Possessed of an eternal youthfulness and drive for discovery, Kondonassis is not only in great demand to play the established works of the harp repertoire, she also is premiering new major pieces, and has even written a book for composers who want to better understand her instrument.

One of the recent works is Jennifer Higdon’s *Harp Concerto*. “It’s really fun to play. It’s a very joyful piece in four movements,” relates Kondonassis. “The first movement is called *First Light*, and the harp gets to play by itself. That’s probably one of the most important elements of a harp concerto—that an audience gets to hear a harp by itself and then they know what to listen for in the big texture of the orchestra. I think most educated audiences are accustomed to hearing a harp in the context of an orchestra, but are not completely aware of where that texture is poking out, and what it is. And the third movement is absolutely gorgeous and magical.”

Kondonassis spent a considerable amount of time with Higdon, demonstrating what does—and doesn’t—work in composing for the harp, and the talented composer obviously took the conversation/demonstration to heart. That doesn’t always happen when a

non-harpist tackles writing for the instrument. Kondonassis muses that somewhere there is an “Indiana Jones” dusty trunk full of harp concertos that were only ever played once. “When it comes to classical music, the harp is like a candy store. It can do so many things and imitate so many different instruments. But there’s not a tremendous amount of understanding of the instrument. It’s either intimidating to the point where composers use it little and conservatively or not at all. Or else the writing is wildly unrealistic and un-idiomatic. Neither circumstance helps the evolution of the instrument.”

Kondonassis hopes her new book, *A Composer’s Guide to Writing Well for the Harp*, will help to encourage more composers to see the harp as an amazing solo instrument, as well as a terrific member of an ensemble for chamber music. Certainly the desire from the listening audience is there. “I hear so often: ‘the harp is my favorite instrument.’ There’s something magical that draws people,” she says.

Of course, being one of the top harpists in the world, a teacher, and recording artist means that she has to grab every bit of downtime in her hectic schedule that she can. Kondonassis loves to spend her days off hanging out with her husband Michael Sachs, who is the principal trumpet for the Cleveland Orchestra, and their 16-year-old daughter Amanda. “Our schedules are a little crazed these days,” she concludes. “We consider a dinner together as the closest we can get to a vacation!”

**TCC Music Hall. 882-8585.
Tucsonsymphony.org.**