

## In the Heights

### Harpist Reaches New Levels with her Music

Yolanda Kondonassis is one of the most recorded harpists in the world and environmental protection advocate, Yolanda Kondonassis of Local 802 (New York City) will donate a portion of her royalties from her latest album, *Air*, to the Environmental Defense Fund.

Harpist Yolanda Kondonassis of Local 802 (New York City) fell in love with the harp during a family trip to Chicago when she was nine-years-old. Admiring the Valentine's Day window display of harps and angels in the Lyon & Healy store on Ogden Avenue, Kondonassis and her mother were captivated by the instrument. Soon after, Kondonassis ordered a small harp and began to take lessons to eventually become one of the world's most recognized harpists, performing throughout the US, Europe, and East Asia.

Part of what makes Kondonassis unique is how she continues to push the envelope for people's expectations of harp music. "I like to equate the evolution of the harp with the evolution of women," says Kondonassis. "The perception is that it is very sweet, lovely, and kind of like wallpaper music—I want to reveal what the harp can do with all its color, power, and range, depending on how it is played."

Before she was pushing the limits as a concerto soloist and recitalist, Kondonassis took lessons from The Cleveland Orchestra principal harpist Alice Chalifoux of Local 4 (Cleveland, OH), who inspired her to look beyond the instrument's pretty exterior. Chalifoux, who was with the symphony from 1931 to 1974, encouraged Kondonassis to take the harp "out of the salon and into the main arena."

A harp with gilded flowers and cherubs never really fitted her personality, says Kondonassis. She plays on a Lyon & Healy Salzedo Model harp, which she compares to a looming and striking piece of art deco.

Although Norman, Oklahoma, was limited in its arts organizations at the time, it also had its advantages for Kondonassis, who was asked to play harp at other local schools and high schools when it was needed. When she was in middle school, being the only harpist, Norman High School needed her to play with their orchestra. "I thought it was all very cool that I wore the orange blazer that all Norman High School musicians wore," says Kondonassis. "I felt very grown up mingling with high schoolers."

Kondonassis chose to attend the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan to continue her music studies. At that time, she still shared her time equally between the harp and piano, but decided to continue solely studying the harp. The deal-breaker for Kondonassis was that she could probably accomplish more with the harp, and it needed more ambassadors than the piano.

She continued her music education at the Cleveland Institute of Music for her bachelor's and master's degrees where she now teaches. She is also a professor at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. "I have to pinch myself sometimes because I feel so fortunate to have the combination of activities," says Kondonassis. "Teaching



helps my playing, which helps my recording, performing, and writing books, so it doesn't feel like I have nine jobs, rather, it's one really interesting, diverse job.”

Her job involves a lot of travel, recording, and other activities like writing books like *On Playing the Harp* and *The Yolanda Kondonassis Collection*, which are now part of the repertoire of instructional harp literature. Kondonassis has appeared as a soloist in symphonies all over the US and the world including the New York Chamber Symphony, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, and Orquesta Sinfonica de Puerto Rico.

Kondonassis made 13 CDs and is looking forward to the release of her newest album, *Air*, in which a portion of her royalties will go to the Environmental Defense Fund. The Oberlin Conservatory of Music has pledged to match the funds. “I am fairly alarmed about our environmental issues right now,” says Kondonassis. “Even though what I am doing is small, it feels better than doing nothing and if everybody does just one small thing, we would probably be a lot better off.”

Friends and colleagues like flutist Joshua Smith of Local 4 and violist Cynthia Phelps of Local 802 will join Kondonassis on the *Air* album, which features songs that remind her of her environmental cause. The bucolic themes of the Debussy trio and tracks like “Air,” “Toward the Sea II,” “And Then I Knew ‘Twas Wind,” directly relate to Kondonassis' message of preserving the environment. “We don't have to know or do anything to receive music in nature, it's all around us,” says Kondonassis. “I think there is nothing more core to our being and existence than receiving pitched sound— there is nothing more basic.”

Another important organization in her life is the AFM. Kondonassis first joined Local 4 in college when she subbed in the orchestra, and later switched her membership to Local 802 when she moved to New York City. Her husband, Michael Sacks, principal trumpet for The Cleveland Orchestra has been a long-standing member of Local 4. “I think the union is a good thing,” says Kondonassis. “It unites all musicians' objectives and it's vital for every member to have this organization.”

Her newest project will be performing and recording composer Bright Sheng's “Concerto for Harp and Orchestra” written specifically for Kondonassis and commissioned by the San Diego Symphony, The Dallas Symphony Orchestra, The Grand Rapids Symphony, and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. She will perform at those venues in a few months after she practices the piece and perfects her style. Kondonassis is looking forward to the balancing the vibrance and soft, mystical quality of the harp. “This is really exciting for me, being at the genesis of a creation,” says Kondonassis. “Sheng composes with such power and color and weaves in haunting and evocative Asian elements—it's really going to be magical.”