

## Q&A with Yolanda Kondonassis

*When one of my managers suggested that I have a Q&A available on my website, it sounded like fun to compile some of the most interesting interview questions I've been asked through the years and put them all together.*

### **Q: What is the toughest thing about playing the harp?**

A: The toughest thing is probably dealing with the mechanics of the instrument. Most people don't know that the harp is a machine inside. I've had to learn to be a bit of a mechanic myself because I do not like being helpless in the case of equipment failure. In the end though, you just have to forget about it all and pretend there aren't hundreds of moving parts that all have to work properly. There's a lot of trust involved.

### **Q: How did a girl from Norman, Oklahoma get the idea to play the harp?**

A: When I was a young girl, my family was visiting Chicago one Valentine's Day weekend and we saw a fantastic display of harps in the store window of what was then Lyon & Healy Music (now Lyon & Healy makes only harps). It really struck my fancy and was the first time I had ever considered that the harp was an instrument one could play. Soon after, we ordered a small harp for me to try and that was it.

### **Q: How do you get your harp around when you're on tour?**

A: These days, time is at a premium so I will usually borrow a harp in whatever city I visit to perform. I have a wonderful network of harp friends who really help me out. On occasion, I will still drive my minivan and take my own harp if an engagement is on the East Coast, but generally I fly and borrow harps at this point in my career.

### **Q: What was the turning point for you in deciding to make the harp your life's work?**

A: I started my musical training on the piano and assumed that it would be my instrument. Even after starting the harp, I kept the piano up through high school but eventually got to the point where I was stretched too thin and had to narrow my focus. I guess my choice to play the harp over the piano was a rather practical one in that I felt there would always be tons of great pianists in the world, but the harp needed advocates and performers a lot more than the piano did. I also love the way it feels to play the harp and I have huge hands, which is an advantage.

### **Q: You tour around the world, you teach at two conservatories, you record, you write books – that's a lot of stuff on your plate. What keeps you going?**

A: I think I have a strong motivation to try and be as creative as I can. There is a lot of stuff swirling through my mind most of the time, so unless I do something with at least some of it, I start to feel off-balance. I also love what I do.

### **Q: You have a young daughter. Is all the travelling difficult?**

A: Certainly. I think about her constantly when I'm on the road. But I also think it's ok for her, even though it's not ideal. My husband is great with her and she learns some independence. We talk nonstop when I get home and we constantly feel an appreciation for each other. I also make my trips very short. I am rarely gone more than 3 or 4 days. My longest trip in recent memory was a tour to New Zealand a few years ago. It was a wonderful trip but I missed my daughter so much. She asked me to take her favorite stuffed animal along and as a result, I have an entire photo album of Baby Elephant shots throughout every city in New Zealand.

**Q: What is it about performing that you like best?**

A: I really like the idea of sharing my work. When you are an artist whose work has to be freshly generated for someone to enjoy it, there's a pretty strong motivation to get out there on stage and re-create what you've worked so hard to bring to life.

**Q: What is your advice to young musicians who want to become professionals?**

A: Work like crazy, do it because you love it, and make sure it's your own dream and not someone else's.

**Q: You've published several books on harp technique and harp repertoire – how do you have the time and why do you do it?**

A: You know the old saying – you can't take it with you. It would seem wasteful and foolish to spend a lifetime perfecting one's approach to an art form and then not pass everything you've learned down to the next generation. I was also extremely lucky to have wonderful training myself, so I guess teaching and writing is my way of paying it forward in appreciation for what was given. As for time, the books sort of write themselves, to tell you the truth. I enjoy writing and organizing thoughts, so the books are a bit like therapy for me.

**Q: What part of your career gives you the biggest thrill?**

A: I would say that my biggest thrill these days is the rare occasion when I have an entire day stretched out in front of me with nothing to do but practice. I just love that learning zone.

**Q: You've recorded prolifically over the course of your career. What is it about the recording process that draws you?**

A: Masochism. No, seriously – I think as musicians, we all have a desire to capture our art in a more permanent form than the ephemeral context of live performance. That's probably where the basic drive to record comes from. I also love the process itself, even though there are times when it comes pretty close to a form of torture. It's very different from live performance where it's all about energy and the big musical picture in a large sonic context. With recording, you are playing to an "ear" that is so sensitive and true that it tests your artistry to the limit and forces a higher level of intention and commitment. When I record, I want to know that whatever I put down on tape is the very best musical concept I can produce at that moment in time. Do I listen to recordings I made 10 years ago and say to myself, "Wow, I really do that phrase quite differently now, don't I?" Of course I do, but I feel good about every recording I've made as being a snapshot in time that has validity, even though the musical process of interpretation will always be fluid and evolving. And thank goodness it is, or we all might as well quit in our twenties.

**Q: Do you get nervous when you perform?**

A: Sure – to some degree. When I was just starting out in my career, I remember getting more nervous because I felt more pressure to be perfect. But not that surprisingly as I have gotten older, I get much less nervous and on average, come a lot closer to perfect than I did when I was trying so hard. Funny how that works. Of course, one eventually realizes that “perfect” is a stupid concept. Not really the goal one should have at all.

**Q: What do you do for fun?**

A: I spend any free time that I have with my daughter and husband. Doing just about anything with my family is fun, but since I travel so much, probably my favorite thing is to just stay home, bake pumpkin muffins, and do an art project with my daughter.

**Q: What kind of music do you listen to when you’re not studying or working?**

A: I love Earth, Wind, and Fire, Chicago, Aerosmith, Harry Connick, Anita Baker, the Beatles, James Taylor, U2, tons of stuff. I also love listening to Beethoven or Mozart String Quartets when I need to balance myself.

**Q: You are very devoted to the cause of earth conservation, you’ve donated royalties from some of your albums to earth causes, and you just wrote a kid’s book on earth conservation called *Our House Is Round* – what attracted you to this cause?**

A: I’ve been interested in earth conservation for some time now, but I really became passionate about it after I had my daughter. I think when you become a parent, you start to think in new ways about the future and what kind of world we’re leaving for the next generation.

**Q: You’ve become a children’s book author with your release of *Our House Is Round: A Kid’s Book About Why Protecting the Earth Matters*. What motivated you to write this book?**

A: A couple years ago, I went looking for a book that would give my little girl some user-friendly and visually stimulating info on the “whys” behind her earth conservation efforts and I thought I’d find a dozen choices out there. But oddly enough, I couldn’t find what I wanted anywhere, so I decided to write it myself. I really believe that kids need to know not only what they can do to save the earth, but also why they’re doing it.

**Q: Your recent album, entitled *Air*, was nominated for a Grammy. What was that like?**

A: It was an incredible honor to be in such great company and to experience the amazing array of musicians who attended the awards ceremony. The whole thing made me feel very proud to be a musician.

**Q: How have you changed as an artist through the years?**

A: How much time do we have? It’s crazy, really, how I started out thinking I was going to make it through the whole process without much trial and error. I was always a great observer of others, so my plan was to learn from everyone else’s processes and try to avoid as many pitfalls as possible. I think a turning point in my growth came when I finally gave myself permission to fail if necessary. It freed me up to explore what I wanted to do and say, and allowed me to enjoy myself a lot more. I’ve certainly gone through lots of different phases in my playing. We tend to be influenced by so many things as artists. But the most important thing in all of it is to stay open and always give 100%. If you hold back, it’s cheating.

**Q: You seem equally devoted to performing as a soloist and as a chamber musician – why both?**

A: Solo playing and chamber music flex different artistic muscles. I find that in most instances, playing chamber music does a lot for your solo playing. It perks up your listening, it gives you the benefit of working closely and equally with colleagues, and it keeps you humble – all very important elements in staying balanced. I do love solo playing, though, because the results are so personal. The process of preparing a concerto or a recital program is almost spiritual. I also love that the solo process can be relatively free of negotiation.

**Q: The composer Bright Sheng recently wrote a harp concerto for you, commissioned by the San Diego Symphony, the Dallas Symphony, the Grand Rapids Symphony, and Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Do you plan more commissions?**

A: Absolutely. I have three new commissions in the works right now. A big part of my professional mission is to help inspire the creation of new music and increase the repertoire for the harp.

**Q: If you could only leave one legacy behind for the next generation, what would it be?**

A: My daughter.

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