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Musical dynamo

Yolanda Kondonassis will change the way you think about harpists -- and the harp.

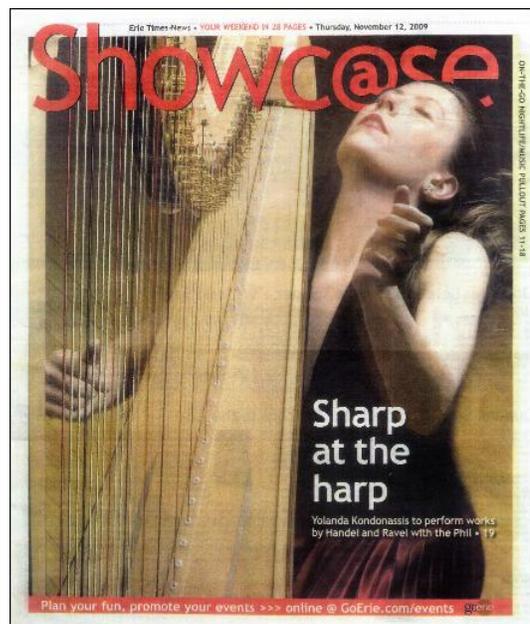
By John Chacona
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For better or worse, instruments have personalities that inevitably attach to their players.

There is perhaps no better example of this phenomenon than the harp. Say the name and a picture of an ethereal, almost unearthly woman (it's always a woman) comes into -- but not entirely into -- focus.

If that woman has a totally fantastic name, say Yolanda Kondonassis, so much the better.

Such expectations are made to be overturned, of course, and so they were when a telephone interview with Kondonassis revealed a hugely energetic, relentlessly pragmatic, and buoyant woman.



Kondonassis, who will play the Handel Harp Concerto and the Ravel Introduction and Allegro with the Erie Philharmonic on Saturday, could hardly be otherwise.

In addition to having a career as an internationally prominent soloist, she is head of the harp department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, a record producer, an author, an environmental activist, and a force for the commissioning of new works for her instrument.

She is, in short, a dynamo. So how does she do it?

"I find that the secret to my life has been to compartmentalize," she said on the phone from her home in Cleveland where she lives with her husband, Michael Sachs, the principal trumpet of the Cleveland Orchestra, and their 7-year-old daughter.

"Through my own design, there are a lot of interests in my life. Performing is important and can never be compromised, but you have to take care of your body and mind. I find it less effective to plan a day where I do a little bit of this, then something else. I tend to plan a couple of days where I can throw myself into a project."

Kondonassis' pragmatism can perhaps be attributed to her upbringing in Oklahoma where her mother taught piano and her father, Alexander, was an eminent and beloved economics professor.

A trace of Oklahoma twang lingered when she described her childhood introduction to music, not on the harp, but the piano.

"I was really heavily committed to the piano ... in the way that it relates to all other instruments.

"That will either clarify things in your life or be a big mud bath. But I love the harp. I love the way it feels. I looked at the landscape and decided that I could make more of a difference in the world of the harp."

That she has done, with appearances on concert stages and recital platforms worldwide and more than a dozen recordings to her credit. The latest of these, "Never Far Away: Music of Bright Sheng" (Telarc 80719), saw Kondonassis doing double duty as soloist and producer, the latter a role she relished.

"I had my first education with Alice Chalifoux, but my real second education as an artist was picking takes for 15 albums. You learn everything there is to know about your own tendencies, and where it's coming from. That's really when I started figuring everything out ... and then I could teach myself. Sometimes you have to have that objective distance to say, Let's fix this."

There isn't much to fix. Kondonassis' technique is sovereign in works that range from the lacy ornamentation of the Handel concerto to the diaphanous clouds of sonority of the Ravel to the cross-cultural rigor of the Bright Sheng concerto.

It's a mastery of her instrument that is, for want of a better word, heavenly.