

CIM Orchestra at Home October 8: a conversation with harpist Rebekah Efthimiou

by Carlyn Kessler



The one thing Rebekah Efthimiou wants everyone to know about Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera's *Concerto for Harp and Orchestra* is that it contradicts all stereotypes audiences may have about her instrument. On Wednesday, October 8 beginning at 8:00 pm in Kulas Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Carl Topilow will lead the CIM Orchestra in a concert featuring Ginastera's skillfully-crafted concerto. The concert also includes Johann Strauss II's *Overture to "Die Fledermaus"* and Jean Sibelius's *Symphony No. 1*.

Currently a second year master's student at CIM, Rebekah Efthimiou is a student of Yolanda Kondonassis. I had an enlightening conversation with Rebekah this past weekend and she began by telling me a little bit about her history with the concerto.

Rebekah Efthimiou: I actually performed it with the Oberlin Chamber Orchestra, where I did my undergraduate work, in the spring of 2013. So I'm very excited to be playing it a second time!

Carlyn Kessler: Did you pick the piece yourself, or did your teacher recommend it to you?

RE: Ms. Kondonassis recommended it to me. She frequently performs this concerto with various orchestras. It has been incredible to work with her on the piece because she really goes into it in depth.

CK: Do you feel your interpretation has evolved since you first performed it?

RE: Yes. I recently listened to a recording of my first performance and noticed the changes I have made over time. I'm sure there will be more differences once I put it together with the CIM orchestra as well.

CK: Is the concerto challenging to put together with orchestra?

RE: There is a lot of percussion and thick orchestration, so the balance between the harp and orchestra can be challenging. I'm eager to see how it feels for the first time in Kulas.

CK: Were you familiar with Ginastera's music before you began working on his harp concerto?

RE: I hadn't played any of his music before. He did feature the harp in his concert variations for orchestra. There is a variation with bass and harp and also a variation with cello and harp. In these, he quotes the open strings of a guitar. He also does this in the cadenza of the harp concerto, so it's interesting to see how he ties this together in both works. There is a pretty close relationship between the sounds of the two instruments.

CK: Does Ginastera use unique techniques in the concerto?

RE: Yes, there are a lot of extended techniques! There are many glissandi, including a unique type in which the fingernail is used. Ginastera uses glissandi very rhythmically in the piece. There are also harmonics and a whistling effect produced by an open hand on the bass wires. There is a passage in the first movement that calls for the soloist to hit the soundboard of the harp as if it were a percussion instrument.

CK: Are there other elements in this concerto that are unusual compared to other pieces in the harp repertoire?

RE: I just love how Ginastera completely turns the stereotype of the harp on its head. I like the rhythmic intensity and that it shows how powerful and virtuosic the harp can be. The piece is kind of a marathon; it is about 25 minutes long, but you're playing against gravity, so it's definitely an undertaking.

CK: Are there many concertos written for harp? Is this one your favorite?

RE: This is definitely my favorite! There are not many in the repertoire—there are shorter pieces for harp and orchestra by Debussy and Ravel, and in terms of big concertos, there are compositions by Glière, Dittersdorf, Dohnányi, Mozart (for flute and harp), and Handel. But the Ginastera stands out as being the most virtuosic.

CK: Is there anything else that you would like audience members to know about the piece?

RE: The piece is very rhythmically driven. In the last movement, Ginastera evokes the *malambo* dance rhythms of the Argentine gauchos. He often drew inspiration from the folk music of his home country.

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