

## BlueWater Chamber Orchestra: a conversation with harpist Yolanda Kondonassis

by Mike Telin



“I think everybody who plays an instrument has a piece that when they heard it for the first time, they said — this is what I want to do with my life because I want to play this piece as many times as I can,” harpist Yolanda Kondonassis said during a Zoom call.

On Saturday, March 16 at 7:30 pm at Church of the Covenant, Kondonassis will perform Ravel’s *Introduction and Allegro* with the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra. Under the direction of Daniel Meyer, the program will also include the world premiere of Takuma Itoh’s *Kohola Sings* for harp and chamber orchestra, *Roland’s Suite* by

Lully, and selections of Fauré’s *Incidental Music to Pelléas et Mélisande* with soprano Amanda Powell. Tickets are pay-what-you-wish.

Kondonassis recalled hearing the Ravel live for the first time at the Cleveland Institute of Music while she was still in high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy. “My teacher at Interlochen brought me to Cleveland with her on spring break. She was a student of Alice Chalifoux — who would become my mentor and teacher. I stayed with Alice and would go with her to CIM when she taught. I happened to go to somebody’s degree recital and I remember hearing the Ravel in The Pavilion, where Mixon Hall is now, and thinking it was the most phenomenal ear candy I had ever experienced.”

While *Introduction and Allegro* — which Kondonassis has recorded twice — is often performed with a string quartet, flute, and clarinet, Saturday’s performance will be with a

chamber orchestra-sized string section in addition to the two winds. “I like it with orchestra a lot, because it is a piece that can benefit from a conductor. And honestly, I like the slightly more lush carpet of string sound that you get. And it’s so beautifully written and orchestrated. There are pieces that we wish were a few minutes shorter, but this one you wish were a few minutes longer.”

Takuma Itoh’s *Kohola Sings* — Kohola is the Hawaiian word for humpback whales — had its genesis in Kondonassis’ *Five Minutes for Earth* (volume one), the first collection of five-minute works that are the signature initiative of her foundation [Earth at Heart](#). One of fifteen works on that stylistically diverse album, *Kohola Sings* became a breakout hit, topping Apple Music’s streaming list the first week of the release.

Kondonassis said that until she was introduced to Takuma Itoh through her publisher at Presser Music, she was unaware of him and his music. And when she heard an early version of *Kohola Sings*, she knew it had to be included on the album. Since then it has gone from being a five-minute work for solo harp to a full-blown concerto. “It’s pretty close to seventeen minutes and completely expanded — the only things that are lifted from the solo harp version are the opening, the ending, and one of the themes which is heard in a little bit of a different treatment a couple of times. And there’s a new middle section with a yearning melodic theme — which is just the kind of thing that the harp does so beautifully — with harmonies that’ll melt your eyeballs.”

The harpist, who has commissioned many works including concertos from Jennifer Higdon and Bright Sheng, said that working directly with the composers has been the most rewarding aspect of the *Five Minutes for Earth* project. “Takuma’s wonderful. Just the other day we had a back and forth where I was telling him that there’s one section that I just can’t make it sound as good as I’d like, so I asked if he would consider changing this or that. And he said absolutely, whatever you need to make it sound good. And that’s what you want in a collaboration.”

She said that she is also grateful to Daniel Meyer for programming *Kohola Sings*. “It’s always tough to get a music director to commit to a piece that, A, they haven’t heard or B, doesn’t have a recording. But he was willing to kind of take a leap of faith on this.”

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