

**BlueWater Chamber Orchestra:
a remarkable program with Kondonassis (Mar. 16)**

by Peter Feher



The Carnival of the Animals is missing a movement. You could easily believe this listening to *Koholā Sings*, an enchanting new piece by Takuma Itoh, which uses a harp to conjure up the voice of a humpback whale.

In a sensitive solo turn, harpist Yolanda Kondonassis gave the world premiere of Itoh's work at University Circle's Church of the Covenant on March 16, joined by BlueWater Chamber Orchestra and conductor Daniel Meyer. Their collaboration was the highlight of a program that was all-around remarkable for its delicate touch.

From the start, it was clear Kondonassis had something special in store. *Koholā Sings* — in an earlier, shorter, unaccompanied version — was the standout track on the harpist's 2022 album *Five Minutes for Earth* and became a streaming success. Itoh responded to demand by expanding the score substantially, building up the solo harp part and adding string orchestra accompaniment. The result is a gentle concerto that works its magic through a variety of special effects.

To evoke the whale song of the piece's title (*koholā* is the Hawaiian word for the animal), Kondonassis manipulated the strings of her instrument with a screwdriver. Her calls were followed by seagull cries from the cellos and bass — another extended technique that sounds exactly like what it's supposed to.

But don't be disoriented. Where other composers have embraced the dissonance of these sorts of devices — like George Crumb in his landmark 1971 work *Voice of the Whale* — Itoh has crafted a thoroughly tonal piece, with each new effect simply adding to the

pleasure. The violins floated harmonics over the tranquil seascape sustained by the rest of the strings, only sometimes disturbed by waves of tremolos across the ensemble.

And Kondonassis contributed many passages of conventional beauty throughout, returning to her instrument's whale song just at the very end, after every other ambient sound had faded away.

Like a brilliant encore, Maurice Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* came next on the program — and covered just about every technique the harpist hadn't gotten around to with her first piece. Kondonassis gave a comfortable and commanding performance of this repertoire staple that Ravel composed in the spirit of a challenge. Each flourish, from the opening arpeggio to the dazzlingly comprehensive cadenza, seemed all the more virtuosic thanks to the full complement of BlueWater's string sections accompanying.

The orchestra's wind players had the stage to themselves at the beginning of Saturday's concert, and their reading of Charles Gounod's *Petite Symphonie*, though uneven in places, let individual voices shine. Clarinetist Amitai Vardi and flutist Sean Gabriel made the most of every solo here and in the evening's concluding work, selections from Gabriel Fauré's incidental music to *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

The unique suite Meyer had assembled for the occasion balanced Fauré at his most famous — the flute-and-harp *Sicilienne* — with intriguing excerpts you wouldn't hear anywhere else. Over these interludes and scene changes, soprano Amanda Powell narrated the events of the play, and after she sang the mournful "Chanson de Mélisande," the music, for a moment, felt complete.

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