

Harpist Bridget Kibbey makes ChamberFest debut

by Mike Telin



ChamberFest Cleveland launches its 2024 season — three weeks’ worth of concerts inspired by the theme of “Sacred and Profane” — on Wednesday, June 12 at 7:30 pm at the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Mixon Hall.

Opening night marks the ChamberFest debut of harpist Bridget Kibbey, who will be featured in Claude Debussy’s *Danse sacrée et danse profane* — and throughout the first week of the festival. Tickets for all performances are available [online](#).

I caught up with the Findlay, Ohio native on Zoom and began our delightful conversation by asking her if it was true that she first heard the harp in a church.

Bridget Kibbey: That’s true. It was a small country Mennonite church. I was taking piano lessons at the time and one of my Suzuki piano kid mates’ mother was a harpist. I saw her play and was just floored, so I started lessons with her right away at age nine. That’s what makes Ohio so special, there’s so many local music studios. I think that’s why Ohio produces great musicians, great music teachers, and music lovers.

Mike Telin: I’m curious, where did you continue your studies after high school?

BK: I went to Juilliard when I was 17 and did my undergraduate and master’s with Nancy Allen, and have been based here in New York ever since.

MT: Congratulations on all of your successes. I was just getting inspired for this conversation by listening to your NPR [Tiny Desk Concert](#).

BK: That was a hoot. And I'm excited to come to Cleveland. The artistic directors — Diana [Cohen], Roman [Rabinovich], and Frank [Cohen] — have put together quite a fun roster of musicians and I think it's going to be an awesome week.

MT: And it's going to be a busy week.

BK: When festivals bring in the harp, I'm always thankful when they really use it. And I'm so glad that they're featuring the instrument in some of its best repertoire.

MT: You'll be making your ChamberFest debut with the Debussy Dances. I'm sure you're probably tired of talking about the piece but I never get tired of hearing what people have to say about it.

BK: I love that you know the rep, and I never get tired of talking about it because Debussy was a true craftsman and one of the first to write for the modern harp. That's a whole story — Ravel and Debussy were commissioned by two piano makers to create a modern version of the harp that could play the chromatic harmony that composers were writing at the turn of the century.

Debussy is one of my favorite composers in terms of how he lays out harmonic shifts, and he's really showing off this new instrument. And the piece is so fun to play because the audience is taken on this journey. Throughout he uses these simple modes that are very austere and mysterious. Then we land in this amazing waltz that's so fun. And there's a beautiful cadenza that showcases all of these unique colors. It's a color palette that composers are still looking to as inspiration for how to write for the harp.

MT: I'm curious, how is playing the piece with a full string section different from the quartet version that you'll be doing here?

BK: What's great about the quartet version — or quartet and bass, as is often done — is that it's really malleable. You can shift colors in such a finessed way from chord to chord and respond to each other. So there's a collaborative element that to me is even more exciting than it is with a full string section.

MT: On Friday [June 14 at 7:30 pm at Harkness Chapel] you're playing Biber's Mystery (Rosary) Sonata No. 1 in d ("The Annunciation") and C.P.E. Bach's Sonata in g with violinist Alexi Kenney.

BK: He's a good friend of mine and we share a love of the Baroque. These are direct transcriptions — I'm playing from the keyboard scores and adapting it all to the harp. I

love the Mystery Sonatas, and the “Annunciation” is one of my favorites — Alexi and I get to trade off these high-flying lines.

And the C.P.E. Bach is fantastic. I think it’s one of the best pieces to adapt to the harp because it has this great obligato line in the left hand that’s really driving it, and the right hand basically acts as a duo voice with the violin.

It’s incredible writing and so much fun to play, with the harmonic journey that C.P.E. takes you on. And the conversation between the violin and the right hand of the harp is really exciting. It’s definitely a high-wire act between the two voices, so I think it’ll be a great opener for the second concert.

MT: And on Saturday [June 15 at 7:30 pm at Mixon Hall] it’s the André Caplet. I love this piece.

BK: Yes, *The Mask of the Red Death*, that famous, very long short story by Edgar Allan Poe.

André Caplet was the orchestrator that the great French masters turned to. He orchestrated works for Debussy and Ravel. But he was also an amazing composer in his own right, and was friends with the harpist who taught at the Paris Conservatory. He wrote a lot for her, including this fantastic piece.

The harp is a crucial figure in this story. It not only plays the role of everyone who throws their heads back and laughs while drinking champagne and having strawberries, it’s also the harbinger of death. You can hear the harpist tapping on the board when the clock strikes midnight — someone’s knocking at the door. Who could that be? It’s death itself. The plague has arrived!

I think Caplet does a great job of taking the audience through the story with all these beautiful musical tapestries.

MT: Changing gears, you’ve got a lot of very interesting projects going on right now — and congratulations on the new CD, Crossing the Ocean. I love this idea of asking composers to write pieces based on music that they grew up hearing. Were there any surprises once you received the scores?

BK: I’ll just preface it by saying that I really love folk narratives. I love going back in time, just like Debussy — his writing was based on these ancient modes that inspired him as a “modern composer.” So I think that many of the composers I asked to write

something, although some of their language is new and innovative, they're also inspired by their own native folk music.

So the questions I asked them were, where are you from, what did you grow up hearing, and how did that influence your life and writing as a composer? And as a result, I basically received six cultural snapshots from six composers, six countries, and four continents, and it's a wonderful display of high art meets folk art.

It was surprising because I ended up with some straight ahead joropo, which is a Venezuelan tradition. I was expecting some Syrian music from Kinan Azmeh, but instead he wrote something based on what a nightclub sounds like, so it's more techno meets minimalism. And Paquito d'Rivera, who is from Cuba, wrote this incredible milonga, which was the predecessor to tango. So even though they're living composers, they're mining these folk voices that were around them.

MT: What do you look for when commissioning a composer?

BK: Once again, my favorite place to play, pun intended, is where high art meets folk art. So the composers I tend to commission and work with understand the rich classical music canon. They know the structure of counterpoint. They know the great colorists, and the great 20th-century composers. But they also have a folk art sentiment that informs them. Maybe it's because I'm from the country in Ohio but I find something very satisfying about that duality.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 6, 2024

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)