

THE UNION

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World-class harpist captivates TCCA audience

By Charles Atthill
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Under normal circumstances, a solo harp recital would not have been on my bucket list. Until, that is, TCCA's Third-Sunday breathtaking presentation of the world-leading harpist Bridget Kibbey.

I had never been to a harp recital. I could not name a classical work for solo harp. I knew of only two harpists. I could not say how a harp produces the notes of the chromatic scale (seven pedals are the secret,) and I had no idea how the harpist creates such a range of sounds just by plucking a string (it's the physics of vibration.)

Sunday changed all that. In her short life Kibbey, born in 1979, has scaled the heights. She solos; plays chamber music and duos with leading singers; founded the International Contemporary Ensemble; plays in major symphony orchestras; is on the faculty of three conservatories; performs with the prestigious Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and is sought after by young composers. If her resume is impressive, just wait until she sits at the harp with focused intentness to begin a program requiring not only astonishing technique but sensitive musicianship as well.

Sunday's program was a primer of the harp's expressiveness, and a World Music celebration of its own. France opened: a transcription, clean and classical, of the Baroque Rameau's "L'Egyptienne." Germany followed with a romantic Fantasia by Spohr, lush and tuneful. Back to France for Faure's "Une Chatelaine en sa tour," a favorite in the repertoire. This is goose-bump music, rich in color and harmonic shifts and a show-piece of glissandi, arpeggios, trills, plucking techniques, and prodigious pedal work for Faure's constant key changes. Alas, Kibbey's feet were hidden beneath her skirt so her dexterous pedal work had to be inferred.

To Spain, as seen by Frenchman Caplet, the harp emulating the guitar, and so to England for Britten's Suite, five short movements displaying a full range of color and imagery, harmony and technique.

The second half surveyed contemporary works and arrangements, but still with a World view: English composer David Bruce's effective "Caja de Musica" featured Venezuelan choros; Kibbey's atmospheric arrangements of Irish reels were inspired by hearing Celtic harpists in Brittany; Hungarian Kati Agocs' "Every Lover is a Warrior," written for Kibbey, incorporated Celtic,

Provençal and Hungarian elements which would influence Appalachian music.

Kibbey's transcriptions of a chorale from Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" and the hymn "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus" closed the program ("My offering to you," said Kibbey), with what seemed a distillation of the essence of harp.

The concert, as usual preceded by an insightful discussion lead by Aileen James, was amazingly enhanced by the large-screen projection of Kibbey's hands and face. With no other instrument can the effect of the player in producing sound be seen so immediately.

Kibbey is an extraordinary talent, and a sensitive teacher as well, as the five students who attended her Master Class the previous evening will attest.

Charles Atthill lives in Alta Sierra. The traditional call for an Irish coin-toss, "Head or Harp," is, alas, dying out. But for him, since Sunday's concert, "Harp" it is, every time.