

Masumi Nagasawa gave a lecture, Master class and a concert on the Netherlands Harp Day on March 2019. The interview below tells how she encountered her new harp world and her path receiving her PhD in the University of Leeds in England. (Interview by Inge Frimout)

1. Can you tell something about the path you have completed and how you came to play these harps?

Whenever I had the opportunity to play the Harp & Flute Concerto by W.A.Mozart on the modern concert harp in the past, a question always arose inside me. Musically I felt that something was not right. But I did not know what it was. This questioning persisted for many years, and this became the starting point of my research.

When I encountered the fine replica of Louise XVI harp built by the harp builder, Beat Wolf from Schaffhausen, I became much aware of my sound and approach to music. I was instantly stunned by the difference in the sound.

After several years, I had been privileged to own beautiful original 18th and 19th-century instruments. These harps have put me under their spell and made me more conscious to discover their musical language. Gradually my enthusiasm grew to know more about the practices of the period.

2. Can you tell something about the study you have recently completed in this field?

PhD studies are usually for academics to prove their research in their writing. I chose my study at the University of Leeds in England, first of all for my supervisor Clive Brown, who is an expert on 18th and 19th-century performance practice and on Louis Spohr. But another reason was that the university offered a PhD program for musicians. This program was perfect for me since I had to prove my research not only in writing but by investigation, recording and performing.

My first step was to get to know the earliest pedal harp method written by J. Ph. Meyer (1737-1819). Furthermore, I investigated J.H.G. Backofen's methods, which was necessary for playing the most challenging repertoire for the single action pedal harp written by Spohr. Backofen (1768-1859) was the harp instructor of Spohr's wife Dorette, which made it inevitable to go through his methods. I also explored around 40 method books including keyboard treatises from the period to get an overview of what practices were used at the time as well.

I recorded Meyer, Backofen and Spohr's pieces, and wrote how I played them by investigating their practices.

I took films of specific techniques shown in Meyer and Backofen's methods, which could be useful to enhance the harp music of the 18th and 19th century.

However, above all the significant performance practices, such as fingering, pedalling, prelude, phrasing, articulations, arpeggios, rubato playing etc., the core of my research was more on approach to music.

This was not possible to replace only by technical practices which I learned. Freedom of expression may be accomplished when all the technical difficulties may be well digested at the level of applying them without thought. It was important to seek the expectations of the composer by reading behind the notation and to improve my flexibility to execute them tastefully by perceiving beautiful qualities in music.

The necessity of combining intelligence and flexibility to approach music is what I became most aware of through my research.

3. What is striking is that the pedallings are very different from the double-action pedal harp. Can you tell something about it?

The single-action pedal system has a distinct way of pedalling. This is due to the possibilities one can produce on the single-action pedal harp by combining the use of the pedals differently from the double-action pedal harp. The double, triple pedalling and balancing the foot to release and depress the pedals were applied. Some of these techniques may be integrated on a double-action pedal harp.

4. During your lecture you suggested that it is important to study with the early sources of music. Can you explain that and do you have any advices for us? A manuscript, of course, is the best source to study. However, it is not always possible to find them.

Therefore, it is very important to choose the earliest source or edition to study since you have a chance that the composers were still alive when their music was published. The later editions may often have additional suggestions by the editor, which may change the expectations of the composer.

I search in different libraries, IMSLP or archive.org. to find the earliest publications. The search can be done a lot online, but sometimes you have to get in touch with the library to get more information. Please take time in finding the right edition since it is the first step to give respect to the music you will be playing. One can also exchange early publications by getting in touch with other colleagues and harpists.

5. Is such an antique harp very sensitive?

Original instruments are very sensitive and we must handle with care. It is an important responsibility for me since they are my family. The historical harps can be aged more than 200 years. It is a wonder that they survived through their history. They naturally have their distinct noises and difficulties. We should respect the instrument by carefully mastering their language and learning to listen to their delicate nuances.

6. Are you busy with the maintenance?

Yes, I do take care of them. But sometimes you need a good reliable harp doctor for some complicated maintenances. In my case, it was Beat Wolf.

7. What kind of strings do you use on the harp?

I use thin gut strings and for the lower, thin wire strings.

I occasionally have carbon strings for the high octaves, just to keep them from breaking. But I definitely prefer the sound of the gut strings, which are not thickly varnished.

8. You are teaching at the conservatory in Maastricht. Are you teaching mainly the single-action pedal harp?

I have had a rich experience in playing contemporary music as well as the standard harp repertoire. Therefore, I teach both double and single-action pedal harp in the conservatory by providing a very wide range of the harp repertoire. I feel privileged to be able to teach harps from the different period since, without doubt, I can convince you all, that by learning both, it will increase the vocabulary of our musical language.

9. With these beautiful harps you have given much concerts and have numerous Cd recordings. Do you have a dream for the future?

'Dream'....what a wonderful word.

I have lots of dreams. I think I will never be without them.

I would like to try to publish my research in the future for harpists, but this demands a long time of sitting behind the computer again, which I am still hesitating.

Although I am privileged to have already around 29 CD recordings (see attachment; three are missing here), I would still love to make a solo recording on my authentic Naderman harps from 1771 and 1815.

I also would love to create a group of harpists and musicians who are willing to approach and hear music with awareness. This will be a challenging task for me since it will be questioning our music making today. However, I believe that it will be a meaningful assignment for the harp world by carefully going through our music repertoire once again with a fresh perspective. (If any of you are interested in this, you are most welcome to the Summer Masterclass in France, La Roche sur Foron; see www.manjasmits.com/summer-masterclass).

Another dream is to publish my compositions, which I made for harp ensemble, "Animal Dance" "Mozart in Hawaii" "Harper" and my stories with them. I know that many are waiting for this to happen, but this also demands a work behind the computer.... (sigh)

I have too many dreams to accomplish, but at this very moment, my dream is to perform as much as possible and to share my world of music around!!

Finally we would like to thank you for your time and sharing your knowledge in this area!