

Yolanda Kondonassis, harp & Jason Vieaux, guitar

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Harpist, guitarist share the stage for a night of perfectly mixed melodies

Review: Kondonassis, Vieaux blend beauty of harp, guitar

By Daniel J. Kushner

Friday evening’s duo recital of Yolanda Kondonassis on harp and Jason Vieaux on guitar at the University at Buffalo’s Lippes Concert Hall felt like an auspicious beginning of sorts – even for such polished and top-tier professionals.

Both musicians have carved out their respective niches by showcasing their instruments’ standard repertoire while forging the blueprints for prospective concert programming for guitar and harp. That kind of dedicated investment was more than evident as an eager and attentive audience witnessed what was only Kondonassis and Vieaux’s second tandem concert – a fact that is startling, given the pair’s chemistry.

Though each musician performed a solo showpiece – Vieaux interpreted “Sevilla” by Isaac Albeniz, and Kondonassis played “Chanson dans la nuit” – the program was designed to demonstrate just how compatible are the sounds of the two stringed instruments.

Their diverse expressive capabilities and intimate sonorities suggest that they are interchangeable parts of one whole, perhaps best exemplified by the instantly engaging “Suite Magica” by Maximo Diego Pujol. As the “Preludio” began with a sleepy waltz rhythm, Vieaux clearly was linked in spirit to his guitar, as each phrase breathed with a natural musicality. Later on during the “Tango,” Kondonassis laid the groundwork with mobile bass ostinati and lush, floating chords that lent added color to the guitar



melodies. The fourth and final movement, “Candombe,” projected a more folklike aesthetic, with intense rhythmic interplay between the duo that was reminiscent of bluegrass music.

The magic of the musical partnership continued with Alan Hovhaness’ Sonata for Harp and Guitar (subtitled “Spirit of Trees”). The first movement’s rubato section – literally meaning “robbed time” – felt like the very suspension of time altogether. It was the mystical effect of one great intangible apparent throughout the program: the intuitive synchronicity of Kondonassis and Vieaux.

Later in the piece, the performers expertly delivered a circular phrase as dizzying as it was entrancing. In it, Hovhaness enhanced

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the unity of guitar and harp by blurring the distinctions between them altogether. It was difficult to hear where one instrument ended and the other began. With the obvious technical prowess of both artists, it was easy to get caught watching earnestly. But in truth, the music was best experienced with eyes closed.

The evening's biggest curiosity – a world premiere called “Knock on Wood” by composer Keith Fitch – was where the concert hit a snag. A more expansive exploration of the sounds capable on both instruments, “Knock On Wood” featured muted notes, harmonics and the use of other extended techniques. Abbreviated melodies quickly gave way to disjointed harmonies and bold rhythmic gestures. And while abstracting a phrase in this way and transferring the bulk of the musical meaning more prominently to the rhythm can be rewarding, the work somehow felt more like academic demonstration than organic musical expression.

All in all, however, the recital served as prelude to what will undoubtedly be a profound and fruitful collaboration by harpist and guitarist.

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