

- [Oregon ArtsWatch](#)
- [ABOUT](#)
- [DONATE](#)
- [CONTACT](#)
- [ADVERTISE](#)

- [NEWS](#)
- [THEATER](#)
- [MUSIC](#)
- [DANCE](#)
- [VISUAL ART](#)
- [LANGUAGE ARTS](#)
- [FILM](#)
- [FAMILY](#)
- [TBA:17](#)



OREGON ARTSWATCH

OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

Oregon ArtsWatch



[FEATURED](#)

Sound of Late review: Harp attack

Northwest ensemble's concert shows composers and performers remaking harp music for the 21st century

April 10, 2017 // [FEATURED](#), [MUSIC](#) // [Oregon ArtsWatch](#)

by MATTHEW ANDREWS

Harpes have been around for at least 5,000 years, and can be heard in one form or another all over the world. Yet as a concert in Portland last month showed, the modern harp has never been so modern, and we're finally seeing it come into its own as a contemporary classical instrument. Guest harpist [Jennifer Ellis](#) joined contemporary music collective [Sound of Late](#) at [Studio 2 at New Expressive Works](#) in southeast Portland for a performance of quite different compositions by Ellis, [Kaija Saariaho](#), [Angélica Negrón](#), and [Tina Davidson](#). Each explored new ways of using a quite old instrument.



Sound of Late and Jennifer Ellis performed contemporary chamber music featuring harp.

The modern chromatic pedal harp—the kind Jennifer Ellis and every other Western-style orchestral harpist plays—was developed in Europe from around 1700-1800, when inventors introduced and refined the system of pedals Ellis demonstrated and manipulated so effectively. Used sparingly in Baroque and Classical music, it came to prominence in the later Romantic and early Modern periods, especially in works by Russian and French composers (and Harpo Marx).

When I think of truly modernist harp music, I don't think first of Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez, and Lou Harrison, all of whom wrote extensively for harp, but of Björk, who has worked with experimental harpist Zeena Parkins on several albums and even commissioned a [special gravity harp](#) for her album *Biophilia*. Meanwhile, in 2015 [Yolanda Kondonassis](#) (who has [recorded](#) some of Carter's work) performed [Alberto Ginastera's Harp Concerto](#) with the Oregon Symphony; local harpist Sage Fisher started making waves last year as [Dolphin Midwives](#), running her harp and vocals through loop and delay pedals at the Kenton Masonic Temple in North Portland.

Texture & Timbre

Sound of Late's flutist and MC Sarah Pyle opened the [March 18 show](#) by apologizing for her bronchitis and discussing her friendship with Ellis, "the first friend I ever made in college," whom she met at the orientation BBQ at [Oberlin College](#). Violist Andrew Stiefel joined them for Kaija Saariaho's *New Gates*, commissioned in 1991 by the [Sabeth Trio](#) and based on her "ballet with no storyline," *Maa*. Saariaho's much-mentioned [spectralism](#) was immediately evident: this is music where [timbre](#) comes first and the acoustic properties of combined tones and textures outweigh any considerations of traditional harmonic or formal functions. This ain't Handel. Hell, it ain't even Debussy.

So many [drones](#)! The viola played long sustained notes, mostly [sans vibrato](#) (but punctuated by judicious use of heavy vibrato), using [varying bow techniques](#) and [mutating harmonics](#). The flute combined [overblown harmonics](#) and sung/spoken syllabic phrases (necessitating a second line in [the score](#), as we saw afterwards). Over and through these drones floated the harp's colorful [synthetic scales](#), strangely buzzing strings (more on those later), and fragmented, interrupted dance-like figures.



SoL members accompanied Ellis in music by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho.

The music played a lot with the definition of “pitch” itself: breathy, bendy, noisy flute lines full of Pyle’s tongue-clicking and eldritch whispering, making pitches appear and disappear from between shifting fields of [white noise](#), showing just how fuzzy the delineation between “sound” and “noise” really is. It was the same with the buzzing harp strings: where does the noise end and the pitch begin?

Complexity Concealed

While Saariaho’s trio demonstrated the harp’s ability to transcend its usual melodic role to effectively use texture and timbre, the concert next showed how the instrument can make use of more than its strings, revealing its hidden mechanical complexity. Ellis performed three pieces solo: two of her own and one by Puerto Rican composer Angélica Negrón.



Jennifer Ellis.

The first of Ellis’ pieces, *Disk*, explores the modern concert harp’s 2000 moving parts, all of which are supposed to be invisible and inaudible. Ellis demonstrated the harp’s seven foot-operated pedals, each of which can be in one of three notched positions. (For some visual explanation, look [here](#).) Harp strings are tuned [diatonically](#), seven to the octave like the white keys on a piano, and each pedal changes one whole set of strings: e.g., the C pedal tunes all of the C strings to C-flat, C-natural, or C-sharp. The harp’s beautiful and ornate column hides all the pedal rods and linkages to execute these changes. At the top, disks swivel and change the tuning of the strings. Ellis demonstrated the relative quietness of these changes, remarking that “strange rumbles would be odd in the middle of Debussy.”

Disk focuses specifically on these disks and the sounds produced by slightly varying their positions, achieving a harmonic-rich “buzz” (also used in the Saariaho piece) which sounded quite similar to the buzz produced by the [javari bridge](#) on sitars and other Indian string instruments. Compositionally—in terms of notes and rhythms, that is—I found *Disk* almost New Agey in its lush simplicity. I always listen for music that is enhanced by a gimmick but not dependent on it. This lovely [modal-minor](#) composition would have been cool enough as a simple harp piece, but the rich, sizzling tone which Ellis put on certain notes gave the music an uncannily [steelpan](#)-like extra sonic layer.

Mikes and Screwdrivers

Ellis described Negrón’s piece, *Technicolor*, as an exploration of the “hyper-real sense that memories take on.” It also explored uncommon enhancements to the harp, both mechanical and electronic. Negrón’s [fixed media](#) accompaniment used samples from playgrounds and all the usual electroacoustic tricks—complex delay, filter, and stereo effects; pitch-shifted loops of bells and high cymbals—to create a “window into a past world.” Negrón, known for her use of extended techniques, gave the harpist plenty to do; the most striking technique involved a screwdriver, which Ellis delicately removed from a little vinyl microphone pouch. Ellis used the screwdriver sparingly but effectively: every so often she wiggled it between strings, jittering up and down to produce semi-random glissandi in a sort of harmonic tremolo. I’ve heard plenty of weird shit on the harp before, but this one was new to me.

Ellis composed *Weav-weav-weaving* as the middle movement of a [three-part composition](#) using IRCAM’s [motion sensor technology](#); Ellis said that because the equipment was only on loan, she wanted at least part of her music to be performable independent of the tech. The piece takes its title and inspiration from a poem by [Edna St. Vincent Millay](#), “[The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver](#),” in which an impoverished mother uses a

magical harp to weave clothing for her young son. Ellis explained that the music itself explores “the sounds I get to hear that never make it to the audience.” To this end, she attached contact microphones to the instrument and ran them through a simple amplifier into her laptop, which she used to create loops and apply slapback delay effects. Ellis also made extensive use of “pedal gliss,” the normally inaudible shift between notes that occurs when the harpist uses the pedals to change notes. The resulting chromatic melodies, relatively uncommon in harp music, reminded me of the post-post-tonal tonality of [John Adams](#) and [Lou Harrison](#).

Another nice side effect of the amplification was the beefiness of the harp’s lowest strings, which are quite low indeed—its lowest note, Cb1, is three octaves below middle C and a perfect fourth below the [bass](#)’ open low E. Every time Ellis plucked those low strings, I experienced a brief bit of blissful frisson and was once again quite pleased with the reverberant little studio space that makes an excellent venue for contemporary chamber music, including [Third Angle’s Studio Series](#).

Wild Thing

The rest of the entire Sound of Late ensemble (minus bassist Milo Fultz) joined Ellis for the last piece, Tina Davidson’s *Never Love a Wild Thing*, composed in 1986 for “non-specific instrumentation and open orchestration”—which, in this performance, meant flute, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello, and harp. Pyle introduced the composition: “this next piece is...a bit of a wild thing. We’re using a [graphic score](#) and play in unison exactly three times. It’s all about tumbling out of control.”

The composition struck me as being almost like Terry Riley’s [In C](#) in reverse. In Riley’s minimalist composition, musicians play from a score containing nothing but melodic fragments (all in C major, naturally) which tend to coalesce around [canon](#)-like expressions of a very tonal (well, modal actually) harmonic ecosystem. In Robinson’s similarly [aleatoric](#) piece, the layers of [ostinati](#) fragmented and diverged instead of coalescing and converging; the layers ended up pulsing and throbbing and tumbling over each other like something out of Michael Torke’s [Color Music](#), generating dissonantish and modernist Frankish harmonies reminiscent of [Franck](#), [Poulenc](#), [Varese](#), [Milhaud](#), even [Stravinsky](#) and Zappa (whom we could justifiably consider Francophilic composers). After all this tense, dynamic-static textural opulence, the players finally came together in the third and final unison ostinato, racing toward one last, nasty, [Le Sacre-esque chord](#).

[Matthew Neil Andrews](#) is a member of Cascadia Composers and a composition student at Portland State University. He and his music can be reached at [monogeyte.bandcamp.com](#).

Want to read more about Oregon music? [Support Oregon ArtsWatch!](#)

Want to learn more about contemporary Oregon classical music? [Check out Oregon ComposersWatch.](#)

Share this:



Recommend

10 people recommend this. Be the first of your friends.

Send

Related

[Chamber Music Northwest reviews: independent women](#)

August 14, 2017

In "FEATURED"

[Improvisation Summit of Portland review: spontaneous community](#)

July 31, 2017

In "DANCE"

[Weekend MusicWatch](#)

September 9, 2015

In "MUSIC"

[Next](#)[Previous](#)

Comments are closed.

FARNDALE AVENUE...
MURDER
 AT
CHECKMATE MANOR
 by David McGillivray and Walter Zerlin Jr.
OCTOBER 12 - 31

Big & Bigger
 baghbaggage.org

CoHo
YEAR OF THE ROOSTER
 BY OLIVIA DUFAULT

OCT 27 - NOV 18, 2017
 TICKETS \$20-\$32

COHOPRODUCTIONS.ORG
 (503)-220-2646

POWERFUL DANCE FROM ISRAEL

L-E-V
OCD Love

WHITE BIRD
 UNCHAINED

NOV 16-18
 THU-SAT | 8 PM
 Lincoln Hall, PSU

WU

THE ENCHANTED TOYSHOP

Get Tickets >

THANKSGIVING WEEKEND
 Nov 24th - 26th

TP B



**Oregon
Visual Arts
Ecology Project**
a new magazine and archive
www.oregonvisualarts.org

THE Ford Family FOUNDATION OREGON ARTS COMMISSION



ArtsWatch
4,496 likes

Like Page Sign Up

10 friends like this

• **Search**

• **Archives**

Archives ▾

- [Arts Resources](#)
- [Oregon ComposersWatch](#)

• **Archives**

- [October 2017](#)
- [September 2017](#)
- [August 2017](#)
- [July 2017](#)
- [June 2017](#)

• **Follow ArtsWatch**

- [ArtsWatch](#)
- [OrArtsWatch](#)
- [RSS Feed](#)

Oregon ArtsWatch © 2017

☺