



**Breaking down harp stereotypes,**  
 alumna **Dr. Jennifer Ellis** paves her own way through the  
 new music world.

Jennifer Ellis has a history of being “the first.” She was the first harpist to be accepted to the Bang on a Can Summer Festival, the first harpist to attend the Splice Institute for Electroacoustic Music, the first harpist to be accepted to the Fresh Inc. Festival and recently, she wrapped up a tour with the organization One Beat, where she was, again, the first harpist to be a part of the program. Ellis has paved her way through the contemporary and new music sphere, in an industry where harp stereotypes are abundant. She’s a contemporary performer who, in addition to performing her own harp compositions, has worked with composers to perform over forty premieres. She’s part of a duo with a saxophonist, a trio with a mezzo soprano and flute and a jazz trio with a tabla and a trumpet played without the mouthpiece. She runs workshops on composing for the harp, takes

questions from composers via Skype and even reviews composers’ works for harp. And it all started with a movie, a deal made with her mom and a determined five-year-old.

**The Deal**

Ellis remembers reading the book *The Secret Garden* as a child and subsequently going to see the movie with her mom. She loved the music in the background and asked, “What instrument makes that sound?” Her mom told her she thought it was the harp. “OK, I want to play the instrument that makes that sound,” she said.

Ellis and her mom made a deal. Ellis would start on the piano, and if her mom never had to bug her about practicing, she could eventually play the harp. “The idea was either I wouldn’t practice at all, and that

would be the end of that, or that I would fall in love with piano and we'd never hear another word about the harp," says Ellis. "Unfortunately, you can tell how well that worked."

After two years of dedicated piano practice, Ellis finally won her mom over. Her mom looked in the yellow pages for the word "harp" and called the first name she saw. That happened to be CIM alumna Jessica Siegel who would become Ellis's teacher for the next 10 years.

### Tasting Musical Freedom

The harp is typically seen as an angelic instrument, soft spoken and unimposing. Ellis rallies against those preconceptions. Her first memorable exposure to contemporary music was at a summer seminar with another CIM alumna, Alice Giles. "Jessica sent me there with a piece by Sergiu Natra, a contemporary harp piece," explains Ellis. "I just loved the musical freedom I got with a piece like that—that it wasn't just about learning the performance history of how a phrase had been played for the past 200 years. There's just so much room to make contemporary music your own, so much musical freedom, so much musical flexibility."

From then on she was hooked. She explains that contemporary music not only gives her more musical freedom but also lets her unlock all the characteristics of the harp. "I feel like I'm only getting to use about 10 percent of what the harp can do," she explains. "I get to use, maybe, two colors of the paint palette. It's awesome; those colors are beautiful; I can do all these different shadings of both colors and it's great. But there are all these other colors that I don't even get to touch in that repertoire. There are all these different timbres and sounds and techniques and skills that I miss. It's that emotional range that I want to utilize in my playing, and contemporary music gives me the freedom to do that."

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### Faculty Who Shaped a Future

After pursuing an undergraduate degree at Oberlin, Ellis was able to continue to hone her contemporary music passions at CIM as a master's student, noting that CIM is unique for having both well-respected harp and composition departments. "Composers at other schools aren't getting those in-the-hallway interactions with harpists, or friendships with harpists; that informal education that you get when you're able to go to a friend and say, 'Hey look at this part, does this work?'"

Ellis was also impressed by the CIM harp legacy. "Its reputation in the harp world just precedes itself," she says. "Alice Chalifoux is such a legacy, and the program that she built at CIM is really amazing. There's just wonderful harp history at CIM."

Yolanda Kondonassis, head of the CIM harp department, was another draw. Having studied with her at Oberlin, Ellis wanted to continue working with the same teacher, whom she calls "incredible." However, Kondonassis isn't just a great teacher; she also invests in her students' futures. Ellis recalls the mission statement assignment Kondonassis had her students complete at the beginning of every year: "You map out where you think you want to be in five years, ten years, fifteen years, so on and so forth," says Ellis.

"Then you write down everything you need to do while at school to get you there." This type of student investment is what Ellis was so grateful for in a mentor like Kondonassis. "There's really no adjective you

can use to summarize well enough what an incredible teacher and mentor she is and the impact she's had on my life," she says. "It really does leave you at a loss for words. She is phenomenal!"

In addition to Kondonassis, Ellis also praises the head of the Eurhythmics Department, Brian Sweigart, whom she credits for making her a better musician and helping her tackle the "level of rhythmic craziness that goes on in contemporary music." She also worked with Diane Urista, theory faculty member, and Chris Haff-Paluck, director of community programs at CIM, both of whom helped her get to where she is today. "CIM gave me first and foremost incredible teachers," she says. "I was incredibly fortunate."

### To Today's Young Musicians

Ellis is an advocate for creating one's own career path. She likes to remind today's young musicians to be resilient, learn from every experience and "think broadly about the things that make you happy and the ways that those can intersect with music." She considers herself and her fellow musicians to be lucky to be in such a creative field, and encourages young musicians to take advantage of every path. She reminds them that "Orchestra is a wonderful, wonderful place to be but it's not the only place to be. So if orchestra isn't the right fit, it doesn't mean that music isn't the right fit. It just means you have to broaden your idea of what a career in music looks like. And, fortunately, it's a really broad place out here."

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