

Why the harp?

Composers who take to the harp are few and far between, while composers who attempt to write for the harp are legion. The harp is a strange and compelling instrument that in its technological ancientness beckons composers and listeners alike to bask in its heavenly aura.

Unfortunately, that aura is quite deceiving.

However, the harp possesses one thing that justifies every misconception heaped upon it: the immediacy of its relationship to touch. Every note played on the harp displays aural artifacts of human hands and fingers. When played conventionally, the harp's sound isn't mediated by reeds, mouthpieces, bows, electronics, sticks or anything else, it simply is the sound of strings plucked by human fingers.

Compared to the piano, a violin or a guitar, the harp is unwieldy. It's big, expensive and difficult to play—a diatonic instrument living in a post-chromatic, multi-temperamental musical world. Our modern harps aren't much different from their historical cousins, virtually unchanged in both technology and performance technique since they were invented thousands of years ago. Like hand drums and acoustic guitars, the immediacy of a harp's sound production demands an intimate, one-on-one relationship between listener and instrument/performer.

This intimacy is why composers of all stripes write music for harp—it strips away habit and affectation. Its limits are challenges that distill the essence of a composer's style and technique and reflect them back as if from a mirror.

The harp reveals.

Cage: *In a Landscape* (1948)

“For living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract or symbolical.”

—John Cage, 1952

Famous for liberating sound from music and music from meaning, John Cage (1912–1992) composed *In a Landscape* in 1948 for dancer/choreographer Louise Lippold. The work's title is revealing: Cage places both sound and its hearing *in* an environment. This is not *Music In a Landscape*, or *Sound In a Landscape*, it is simply *In a Landscape*. Typical of Cage, his insight and his humor, the environment itself is left up to the choice of performer and/or listener, whether they realize it or not. There is no perspective imposed upon the music by composer or title, there is simply the fact of being in a landscape. No need for interpretation or emotion, simply just being.

Cage creates this state of being through limitation—limitation of pitch, rhythm, register, dynamic and time. Cage indicates a continued sustain throughout the piece, so that the notes and their harmonic series blur. The dynamics remain in the soft range, peaking at mezzo forte. The work is based upon a rhythmic structure (indicated in the score) of 15 x 15, or 15 iterations of a rhythmic set of 5 plus 7 plus 3 (15) measures. The sets create a blank time space, *“the division of actual time by conventional metrical means, meter taken as simply the measurement of quantity,”* much as the title creates space in which time unfolds. (Cage, quoted in Nyman, p. 28) This unvaried form is reflected in the eighth-note pulse permeating almost every beat of the piece, giving it a sense of stasis through motion. The majority of the pitches played occur in the three-octave space

between D3 and D6, while the pitches themselves are limited to the notes A, B-flat, D, F, C, G, B and E, creating a field of frequency in which pitch simply occurs, oblivious of tonality and function.

Tenney: *Harmonium No. 3* (1980)

“I have to keep reminding my students, asking them, ‘What is your experience of listening to this? Don’t tell me about the notes you see on the page, tell me about what you hear.’”

—James Tenney

Much has been made of James Tenney’s (1934–2006) relentless experimentation, use of non-standard tunings, electronics and other seemingly varied techniques and resources. His compositional output roams far and wide, and on the surface seems preoccupied with multiple questions of how to make music. However, there seems to be really only one question Tenney set out to answer with his music: how to make music that not only sounds interesting but that leaves a deep and lasting impression. This music, although it explores new realms with almost every piece, constantly harkens back to the challenge Tenney laid down to his students: “. . . tell me about what you hear.” What you hear in his work is an uncompromising quest to get to the fundamentals of what music is about, its materials and its substance.

Composed for Susan Allen, *Harmonium No. 3* brings three harps together in an ensemble that deceives the ear, sounding like a single instrument. Tenney achieves this effect by writing a single line that crosses all three parts. The need for three harps is created by the piece’s unique tuning scheme. To quote from the directions in the score: *“Harp II is tuned normally. Harp I is tuned approximately 14 cents (about 1/7 of a semitone) flatter—and Harp III 14 cents sharper—than Harp II, so that the pitch of any higher string on Harp I matches the 5th harmonic of a string two octaves and a major third below it on Harp II, and the 5th harmonic of any lower string on Harp II matches the pitch of a string two octaves and a major third above it on Harp II.”*

None of that would be worth knowing about it if wasn’t a key into how the music works. The reciprocal tuning relationship of Harps I and III gives the music a static feeling and a sense that though the intonation may be unfamiliar, it nonetheless feels right. Similarly, Tenney takes the listener through a series of arpeggiated chords that grow from groups of two notes to groups of six, chords that due to the tuning scheme often sound like demented versions of harmonies familiar from centuries of Western harmonic practice.

Using a mathematical formula that divides its major sections into building blocks composed of eight-measure phrases, Tenney creates another kind of stasis, that of time, yet one that still has a teleological thrust to an inevitable conclusion. This is where the work calls for virtuosity—the counting and coordination between the three harp parts is fiendish, especially in the five-note arpeggios, as the differing arpeggiations require notes from different harps in differing sequences.

The final two measures give us chords of six notes and end the piece in an upward arpeggio that recalls the pulling back of a curtain in order to let in light. An apt metaphor for Tenney’s work.

Tcherepnin: *Quatre Caprices Diatoniques* (1973)

A less-known figure in American music, Alexander Tcherepnin (1899–1977) became a naturalized citizen of the U.S., but lived a musical life that spanned the globe. Tcherepnin called many countries home, including his native Russia, Georgia, France, the United States, Japan and China. His music reflects his diverse experiences and the many cultures which he came in contact with during his life.

Tcherepnin's *Quatre Caprices Diatoniques* are brief musical bonbons originally intended for the non-pedal Breton harp. They work equally well on modern pedal harps, as played here by Ms. Allen.

The first caprice opens with a series of descending parallel chords. It revels in major-mode harmonies that are often a feature of purely diatonic composition. A deeply touching middle section is rounded off by a return to the descending chords of the beginning. The second makes extensive use of downbeat/offbeat between the hands, creating an elegant melody and accompaniment feel while simultaneously feeling as if they are one. The movement relies on an ascending/descending major-second motive at key points. The elegant third caprice shows the influence of Tcherepnin's Asian experience. It is delicate as a cherry blossom floating to the ground in spring, yet based upon sturdy counterpoint. In contrast to the third movement's stationary ending, a constant sixteenth-note rhythm flows throughout the final caprice. Tcherepnin's condensed phrases pass by quickly without being rushed. The constant forward motion is broken by a gorgeous compound glissando that takes place across two measures, interrupting the piece's unvaried pulse and leading to the work's final, joyous cadence.

Coates: *Perchance to Dream* (2014)

Gloria Coates's (b. 1938) score for *Perchance to Dream* is deceptively simple. Her use of triadic harmonies and diatonic melody is modified by altering the tuning of the harp and the bowing of the vibraphone. These key characteristics create the piece's hallmark otherworldly quality. Coates developed much of the music's ethos with performance directions given directly to Ms. Allen during the process of bringing the piece to life, which are codified in this recording.

Composed for Ms. Allen and inspired by poetry from Goethe's novelette *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the three movements of *Perchance to Dream* (respectively titled *Wer nie sein Brot mit Traenen Ass*, *Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt*, and *An die Tueren Will Ich Schleichen*) evoke the sounds of a harp and voice heard in the distance by the main character, Wilhelm Meister, who is fighting depression. Thinking the harp will soothe his troubled mind, Meister moves closer to the source of the sound. To his chagrin, the music that from afar sounded so promising turns out to be strange and mysterious. Adding insult to injury, the old man performing this eerie tune evokes even more dark thoughts in the character of Wilhelm Meister.

Perchance to Dream was originally written for glass harmonica (or vibraphone as an alternative to that extremely rare instrument) and harp. Coates composed the modal melody of the second movement during a 1982 stay at the MacDowell Colony. The vibraphone, played here by Colton Lytle, represents the strange song the old man sings, with the harp playing a splintered, yet eponymous role. The tuning scheme augments the roles the two instruments play. By bowing the vibraphone, pitches become microtonal, giving the melodies their aforementioned otherworldliness, throwing the standard tuning of the harp into sharp relief. Interestingly, as the ear follows the melody, the brain assumes the harp's accompaniment is the instrument using a

non-standard temperament. In the third movement, Coates accentuates this aural illusion by calling for the harp to detune by a quarter step its notes from middle C up two octaves. Thus, the harp plays the retuned microtones against the standard intonation of its lower octaves, compounding the uneasy relationship between melody and harmony, heightening the gloomy aura of the poems and the songs they describe, and together with the icy tones of the vibraphone, bringing the piece to its climax.

Perchance to Dream was commissioned by, and is dedicated to, Susan Allen.

Cage: *Postcard From Heaven* (1982)

“Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos or to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord.”

—John Cage, *Silence* (1961)

A lot had happened to both Cage and music since the composition of *In a Landscape*. Cage’s compositions, and more importantly his ideas about music, had revolutionized the way music was written, performed and perceived. He shook up the musical world with his work *4’33”*, which demonstrated that our collective concept of silence is an arbitrary construct and that ambient sound is just as beautiful and revealing as any “composed” piece. What’s more, it put the listener in the position of composer, holding an aural mirror up to its listeners to illuminate just how much their own perceptions bring to the music-making process.

1982 was the year of Cage’s 70th birthday. By this time, Cage had become possibly the most well known avant-garde composer in the world. What’s more, his music had become canonical, widely performed and recorded and his new compositions eagerly awaited in the new-music world. Fittingly, there were Cage premieres, performances, happenings, circuses, lectures and more all around the globe.

Postcard From Heaven, for 1 to 20 harps, was one such piece. The work consists of a collection of “ragas” (predetermined scale patterns featuring set pedal configurations for the harp), that the performers are free to choose how many and in which order they wish to play. Cage’s directions for the piece include “3 double ragas, double because either part may be used for ascending or descending.” The ragas restrict the pitch material, but other aspects of performance are given up to performer choice. Performers are instructed to begin and end the piece using *e-bows*, a magnetic device that causes steel strings to vibrate without being plucked. The e-bow creates a soft, sustained tone one would rather expect for a postcard from a destination such as heaven. On the harp, this means the lower range of the instrument, mirroring the construction of *Postcard From Heaven*’s ragas, which begin and end in the bass register. Ms. Allen, who enjoyed a collaborative friendship with Cage, including improvising together in concert from 1981 till his death, is joined by harpists Marilu Donovan, Jillian Risigari-Gai and Jaclyn Urlik in this recording.

Susan Allen has pioneered new music for the harp over the past forty years. In her career, she has commissioned and/or premiered hundreds of works for the instrument, ranging from solo pieces to concerti. She has worked in genres ranging from world music to avant-jazz and all stripes of contemporary classical music. She has toured the globe concertizing and created new frontiers of music through improvisation both solo and collective.

Her performances on this disc represent but a fragment of her musical abilities and endeavors, but they outline a very crucial vein in her work: the return to the physical, the spiritual and the sensual—not in a 1980s Neo-Romantic Schwantner/Corigliano/Albert/Druckman mold, but in the mold of ancient wisdom in a post-modern context. They partake more of a performance style akin to the polystylistic music of George Rochberg that honors the values and styles of the past and incorporates them into those of today and tomorrow.

Much of the music on this album sounds like what one would imagine ancient Egyptian or Minoan music sounds, yet at the same time, it's very modern, with the performance partaking of a world viewpoint, not a single-culture viewpoint. These are pieces that despite their different tunings, different processes—and even the Tcherenpín's through-composed diatonicism—all have a richness informed by the past, by what really are more of the sorts of uses that music was put to before recorded sound came along. They fight the disposability of music, while charming and seducing both the ear and the soul.

—rogerallenward

*Los Angeles-based composer **rogerallenward** is Composer in Residence with the California Philharmonic.*

Composer, philosopher, writer, mycologist, performer and artist **John Cage** was born in Los Angeles in 1912 and died in New York City in 1992. Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg, adapting his ideas about pitch to rhythm and form, creating new musical structures in the process. His work with dancers led him away from pitch and toward rhythm/time as the building block of his music. Along the way, he invented the prepared piano. His studies in Indian music, Zen Buddhism, Emerson and Thoreau opened up new vistas into which he poured his ideas about music, sound and the relationship between artists, artworks, performance and audience. Cage was a master at artistic collaboration, working with luminary figures in many fields including composers Lou Harrison, Lejaren Hiller, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown, pianist/composer David Tudor and his lifelong partner/collaborator dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham. Always searching for new ways to allow sound to be perceived, Cage used any and every type of material at his disposal, from chance operations (often derived by using the *I Ching*) to star charts, imperfections in paper, computers, improvisation and more—touching, influencing and/or creating every significant development in music since 1945. His music, writings, lectures and etchings are one of the most influential bodies of work created by any composer.

Born in 1938 in Wausau, Wisconsin, **Gloria Coates** began composing, experimenting and improvising at an early age, winning a National Federation of Music Clubs composition contest at age fourteen. Her musical education has been primarily in the United States, in Louisiana and at Columbia University (M.M.). She also earned a B.A. in theater (Goodman Theatre in Chicago and Herbert Berghoff in New York) and art (Cooper Union Art School). Since 1969 she has resided primarily in Europe (England and Germany). From 1971 to 1984 she produced a

German-American concert series in Munich and Cologne subsidized by the Munich Ministry of Culture, The Alice M. Ditson Fund at Columbia University, and the Munich America House. She has written and produced radio programs on American music for the Cologne Radio (WDR) and has written articles for *Die Musik Forschung* and *Musica*. She has been the recipient of numerous prizes and awards. Her music has been performed at such festivals as Warsaw Autumn, New Music America NYC, Dresden Festival, Berlin Festival–MaerzMusik, Other Minds in San Francisco, Musica Viva in Munich, and Henze’s Festival Montepulciano, with orchestral performances by the Milwaukee Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, New Century Chamber Orchestra, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Munich Radio Symphony Orchestra, Stuttgart Philharmonic, and the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Vienna. Her oeuvre comprises sixteen symphonies, ten string quartets, chamber music, solo, instrumental music, vocal music, electronic, multimedia and opera. Coates’s music is recorded on New World Records, Naxos, Tzadik, CPO, BIS, Cavalli, and Musicaphon.

Russian-born composer **Alexander Tcherepnin** (b. St. Petersburg, 1899; d. Paris, 1977) was the second generation of a musical dynasty. Tcherepnin’s father, composer Nikolai Tcherepnin, was a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov and a teacher of Prokofiev. Alexander’s sons Ivan and Serge both have made significant marks as composers. Mr. Tcherepnin’s life led him to live in many countries, beginning in his native Russia, escaping the Russian Revolution by moving to Georgia, then Paris, the United States (becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1958) and China. He also spent significant time in Japan. Each of these locales exposed him to new and diverse musics, which he absorbed into his own compositional technique. His work includes an emphasis on synthetic scales, with one even being called the “Tcherepnin Scale.” His manuscript *Basic Elements of My Musical Language* outlines the many scale forms and other components of his oeuvre. Tcherepnin’s work includes symphonies, operas, chamber music, ballet scores, concerti and more. His body of solo piano music reflects his abilities as a virtuoso. Tcherepnin was a well-respected teacher, whose notable students include Gloria Coates, Philip Ramey and Robert Muczynski.

A performer as well as a composer and theorist, **James Tenney** (1934–2006) was co-founder and conductor of the Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble in New York City (1963–70). He was a pioneer in the field of electronic and computer music, working with Max Mathews and others at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the early 1960s to develop programs for computer sound-generation and composition. His teachers and mentors included Eduard Steuermann, Chou Wen-Chung, Lionel Nowak, Carl Ruggles, Lejaren Hiller, Kenneth Gaburo, Edgard Varèse, Harry Partch, and John Cage. He wrote works for a variety of media, both instrumental and electronic, many of them using alternative tuning systems. He is the author of several articles on musical acoustics, computer music, and musical form and perception, as well as two books: *Meta + Hodos: A Phenomenology of 20th-Century Musical Materials and an Approach to the Study of Form* (1961; Frog Peak, 1988) and *A History of “Consonance” and “Dissonance”* (Excelsior, 1988).

Susan Allen is internationally known for her premiere performances and recordings of new and improvised music for harp. She is a performer and master teacher in classical, contemporary, world, and jazz genres. Ms. Allen holds a BFA from the California Institute of the Arts, where she is a member of the faculty, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Schools on Borders. She also plays the Korean *kayageum*. She has lectured and taught throughout the world on the harp, improvisation, music composition and pedagogy. She has authored monographs on distance learning, and

designed an innovative K-6 curriculum based in Ghanaian *Ewe* music traditions for Southern California public schools. She founded and administers the music programs for CalArts' award-winning Community Arts Partnership in Los Angeles County. Ms. Allen has recently completed a book, *Passage of Desire: Improvisation and the Human Journey*.

Ellie Choate has a B.A. from CSU Fresno and an M.A. in Harp Performance from CSU Long Beach. She is a versatile musician and has performed in opera, with symphony orchestras, and on stage with show orchestras backing headline artists. She is active as a soloist, chamber musician and teacher.

Marilu Donovan has premiered new music for chamber orchestra and for solo harp in New York City, Los Angeles, and Canada. Her mentors include renowned harpists Susan Allen, Mariko Anraku, and Judy Loman. She holds a Bachelor of Music from The Glenn Gould School of The Royal Conservatory of Music, and a MFA in Harp Performance from the California Institute of the Arts.

Colton Lytle is a percussionist who specializes in 20th-century and new music. Mr. Lytle holds an MFA from the prestigious percussion program at the California Institute of the Arts. Mr. Lytle's primary teachers include David Johnson, Amy Knoles, John Kasica, Chad Wackerman, Houman Pourmehdi, Henry Claude, and Dr. Allen Larson.

Jillian Risigari-Gai has an MFA in Harp Performance from CalArts and a B.M. in Harp Performance from CSU Long Beach. She is principal harpist of WildUP, Industry Opera Company, Long Beach Ballet, and VEDA Quartet. She was recently involved in The Industry's production, *Invisible Cities*, a wireless headphone opera.

Jaclyn Urlik began studying harp at age five and holds a BFA from California Institute of the Arts. While at CalArts, she was a member of the New Millennium Chamber Orchestra, and worked alongside many prominent composers and musicians. Throughout her career, she has performed in the U.S., England, and France.

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POSTCARD FROM HEAVEN

MUSIC FOR HARP BY JOHN CAGE, GLORIA COATES, ALEXANDER TCHEREPNIN, & JAMES TENNEY

80763-2

1. John Cage (1912–1992)

In a Landscape (1948) 8:43

Susan Allen, harp

2. James Tenney (1934–2006)

Harmonium No. 3 (1980) 4:31

Susan Allen, Ellie Choate, Marilu Donovan, harps

Alexander Tcherepnin (1899–1977)

Four Diatonic Caprices (1977) 6:43

3. *Animato* 1:56

4. *Allegretto* 1:28

5. *Lento* 2:07

6. *Allegro* 1:05

Susan Allen, harp

Gloria Coates (b. 1938)

Perchance to Dream (2014) 18:23

7. “Wer nie sein Brot mit Traenen Ass” 5:44

(He Who Never Ate His Bread in Tears)

8. “Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt” 6:09

(He Who Drowns Himself in Solitude)

9. “An die Tueren Will Ich Schleichen” 6:25

(I Shall Quietly Steal From Door to Door)

Susan Allen, harp; Colton Lytle, bowed vibraphone

10. John Cage

Postcard From Heaven (1982) 15:30

Susan Allen, Marilu Donovan, Jillian Risigari-Gai, Jaclyn Urlik, harps

TT: 54:15