

## Live Performance – it’s all good!

– Anna Dunwoodie (Auckland)

So when was the last time you heard another harpist performing live?

One of my adult students (and a diligent, responsive, pro-active harp player at that) came to a recent gig and commented how nice it was to “really hear you play”.

It got me thinking about all those students (not just mine) and other harpists, whose experience of the harp is limited to a weekly lesson, and daily practice between lessons, and how different this is to my musical upbringing.

With a quick mental glance across my 45+ students, I’m guessing that not more than 50% of them have ever heard me play a live performance (don’t count the casual one-off tune that I threw in at a fundraiser or workshop – I’m talking about 45 minutes+ of prepared musical performance), and not more than 20% of the total of my students have ever heard another professional harpist perform a concert. It’s not that we don’t ever have them in Auckland!!! And those 20% of students who have seen another harpist perform are repeat harp concert attendees – they have seen most of the visiting harp concerts – well done to a small number of you!!!

I realise now I was a very, very lucky young musician. Regardless of the distance to the nearest ‘big smoke’ (90 minutes to Auckland) my parents knew it was important to expose me to all kinds of musical performances that I wasn’t going to get the chance to see, growing up in Thames. We attended musicals, operas, orchestras, traditional music concerts, singer/songwriters and pretty much any genre of music that either my musically inclined mother or I spotted in the entertainment section of the weekend *Herald*. We didn’t do it often, maybe 3 or 4 times a year, maybe more when I started harp and singing lessons in Auckland (yes – the 90-minute drive each way to lessons) and I was taken to see any harpist who performed in Auckland. I wasn’t always impressed with every performer or performance, but I did learn something from every single performance. These performers had rehearsed and rehearsed and were playing to the best of their ability (I say this as it’s not an even playing field across many different genre of music), and I quickly learnt what I did and didn’t like in a performance – which opera singers had voices I liked or didn’t like, and the kinds of music I most preferred or just tolerated.

My mother knew that if I was to have a good musical background, I needed to experience real live music, not just learn about it through my music teachers or books and videos (there was no You-Tube in those days!). It probably

helped that my mum was a lover-of-all-things-music as well, and indulged my wishes for harp music for birthday and Christmas presents. But she didn't rely on my teacher to provide names or resources, she would often quietly jot down the name of a harpist or piece of music which my teacher mentioned during lessons, and then it would appear in my next birthday present. She gave me the background knowledge of the great harpists and composers – I didn't pick up the relevance of this gift from my mother until many years later, when I realised as a teacher I haven't the time in a student's lesson to delve into the background history of the harp, that I only have time to help them improve lesson by lesson and week by week, and that many aspects of their musical education has to be up for them to find out about outside of our lessons. I was lucky that the mention of a composer would lead my mother to find out more which she then passed on to me. I'm sure as a teenager, I didn't appreciate how much mum's support would make my musical education so much stronger, and broader and we had so much more in common as mother and daughter than a parent who believed that their child's musical education was solely the responsibility of the teacher.

I remember being kind of shocked to see my secondary school music teacher playing keyboard in a pop band, and my wiry old guitar teacher belting out a jazzy bluesy number at a tennis club function. Oh, and a little embarrassed that my primary school guitar teacher (who was a bit of a heart throb for many of us) was taking a lead in the local operatic society productions each year. While I was quietly thinking he must not have enjoyed seeing me taking part at rehearsals several nights a week for months, I realise now he was probably pretty happy to see one of his students so involved in music outside of lesson time. Every now and then, I still bump into my piano teacher's husband, playing keyboard for a local jazz and Dixie band. He must be in his early 80s and still loving it, while she plays the piano for church. I also remember being really proud to hear my harp teacher play in the APO, and even more so to hear her play at St Matthews in the City .... the "Handel Harp Concerto", with a small chamber ensemble I had never seen that side of her music in our lessons, and it was inspirational to really hear the harp part played by the fingers that demonstrated small fragments of music to me at my lessons.

As my previously mentioned adult harp student pointed out "I can think in one of two ways .... Argh ... she's so good I should just give up now.... Or... uhuh.... Maybe I can aspire to playing like that one day."

So it leads me back to the original thread of thought: If you haven't made the effort to get out and hear a live polished performance (sorry, taking part in your local harp ensemble and workshops doesn't count – that's a different set of skills – I'm talking about being part of an audience and sitting back and appreciating a



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live performance) ...what are you missing out on in your own musical education?

You're missing the part of your learning that comes from forming likes and dislikes about sound, techniques, choice of repertoire, genre, posture, the instruments, the performers and the venues, and then reflecting on these things and how you can use them in your own personal harping. You never know, you may fall in love with a tune that you want to learn, or a different genre of music you want to study, you may be inspired to form a music group with other musical friends and start performing together. You never know what it will lead to!

There is another side to it too! Being in an audience makes you part of a very special relationship with the performer. You get to judge them and then judge your own subsequent performances all inside your own thinking. And you learn to be a considerate, tolerant audience member – a skill which applies to many different situations. My own children are far from perfect, but are regularly commended for their audience skills – they have been subjected to it (in all genres of music) since birth, and it seems they have always known when not to talk, when to clap and when it's ok to get up to go to the bathroom – skills some adult audience members could do with sharpening up on!

So, students – get out there and attend some live professional performances!

Parents – get value for the thousands of dollars you have already put into your child's musical education – spend just a little more and take them to real, live professional musical performances. Get them to any harp performances you can and give them the chance to see what musical opportunities are out there for them. Otherwise you have to ask yourself what you are giving them a musical education for? Do you really want it to suddenly end when they leave school, or do you hope that the love of music will be with them for life?

