

**FROM FUNKY TO SUBLIME**

# Symphony shares elegant invention with a harp hero

By **CLIFTON J. NOBLE JR.**

*Music writer*

SPRINGFIELD - Striking flamenco sparks from the strings and body of her amplified concert harp, wrenching distorted bends worthy of Eddie Van Halen from the levers of her portable electric Celtic harp, belting gutbucket blues and crooning lullabies, Deborah Henson-Conant made more than 1,700 new friends Saturday at Symphony Hall.

Henson-Conant joined Springfield Symphony Orchestra and conductor Steven Lipsitt in a memorable evening at the pops.

While Henson-Conant has been making music by ear and interlacing it with stories since she was a toddler, she waited until her late teens to invest her magical imagination with the technical musical know-how that has turned her into a performing and recording force to be reckoned with.

Saturday she gave 1,766 concertgoers a taste of the variety of styles essayed by her nimble fingers in the years since she made the harp her partner in creativity. Echoed "Dueling Banjos"-style by the SSO and energized by the trumpet section's joyful mariachi thirds, Henson-Conant opened with "My Mother's Mexican Hat."

She followed with a solo blues, "Make the Best of What You've Got," snapping and slapping the strings with an infectious, gritty swing that incited the fingers of SSO principal bassist Salvatore Macchia to silently spider around the fingerboard of his instrument.

It was impossible not to be mesmerized. Henson-Conant brought utter sincerity, prodigious technique and courageous, elegant invention to the intense focus commanded by a master storyteller. Prefaced by a tale of childhood friendship, "Siana's Dream: The Music Box" launched the orchestra into a swirling Latin dance, conjuring the allure of sultry Southern California summer evenings.

Next she put the familiar chantey "The Drunken Sailor" through rapid paces and introduced a wildly appreciative audience to "Baby Blue," the first commercially produced solid-body electric harp. With a wireless transmitter attached to the soundboard and an array of straps and buckles to keep it in position, "Baby Blue" allowed Henson-Conant to strut and wail like the closet guitar hero she always knew lurked within her.

"This is the harp Jimi Hendrix is playing now," she quipped.

From the funky to the sublime, Henson-Conant answered a further frisky Celtic excursion with a medley of "Songs My Mother Sang" and "The Nightingale;" the latter a most touching tribute to one's mother ever sung, with the sort of simple melody you never forget and the kind of tender sentiment that doesn't leave a dry eye in the house.

The concert's second half was largely devoted to the premiere of Henson-Conant's symphonic suite, "Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown." Conceived in the 1990s as a jazz improvisation in response to a brief 1956 scientific paper of the same title, "Stress Analysis ..." grew to a fully

scored dance suite, embracing wit and philosophy, vigor and virtuosity, in Victor Borge proportions.

Conductor Lipsitt, entering for the premiere in lab coat and goggles, shared with his SSO colleagues a superb job of bringing "Stress Analysis" to life with only a single rehearsal of parts on whose pages the printer ink was barely dry.

Henson-Conant, also lab-coated and with her waist-length braids wound into a severe bun, injected harp arabesques into orchestrations that revealed a perceptive ear for doublings and especially fine woodwind writing. Her composition proved thorough and refreshing in its harmonic thinking and the work's five dance movements, a quirky quintuple "waltz," sinewy tango, cool samba, bold blues (titled "The Danger Zone") and billowing finale, complete with harp cadenza, exhibited a perfect balance of grace and rhythmic vitality.

She concluded the concert proper with a wonderful solo encapsulation of music from "The Wizard of Oz," and sang with the SSO and audience the gospel-flavored birthday song "Congratulations" from her "Altered Ego" CD, then rewarded a standing ovation with an encore of "Baroque Flamenco."



**Harpist Deborah Henson-Conant performed Saturday night in a pops concert with Springfield Symphony Orchestra.**