

Maria Christina Cleary, Harp

The extraordinary harpist Maria Christina Cleary from Ireland, has been described as “a true virtuoso”, a “brilliant player” and “a pioneer of period harp practice”. She is noted for her improvisatory skills and ingenious *basso continuo* playing, combined with a particular care to create a beautiful sound on a perilous instrument.

Specialising in historical harps, Maria is part of a rare breed of harpist who performs on medieval harps, the Italian *arpa doppia*, the Spanish *arpa de dos ordenes* and the 18th century *harpe organisée*. She promotes a pedal technique that was exclusively used on harps with a single-action pedal mechanism. She has developed several innovative tunings for performing medieval and renaissance music, some which can heard on recordings with Ensemble Tetraktys on the Olive Music label.

She has performed as soloist with, among others, Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, American Bach Soloists, Bayerische Staatsoper, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Arion Ensemble Montreal and the RTE Concert Orchestra. In the 1990's, Maria performed at the Playboy Mansion in LA and while living near Milan for the last 15 years, she has never played at La Scala. In 2014, Maria was invited to perform a Concerto by J. B. Krumpholtz with the Orchestra of the Antipodes at The World Harp Congress in Sydney. This was the first time the *harpe organisée* was featured at the Congress. As a *basso continuo* player, she has performed in most festivals in the world including the Boston, Utrecht, Montreal, Salzburg festivals, with historically-informed orchestras and ensembles. Maria performs regularly with Davide Monti under the name **Arparla**, a violin and harp duo specialising in repertoire from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

Her recordings include *So mach' die Augen zu* (2010), the first ever CD of Louis Spohr's music using original instruments and historical performing practices. Subsequently, Davide and Maria recorded a second CD of Spohr's music, *Geliebte Dorette*, in 2016. Other solo recordings of works by Frescobaldi, Merula, Uccellini and Michelangelo Rossi can be found in Arparla's CDs: *Le Grazie del Violino*, Uccellini Op. 5 and Uccellini Op. 4. *Le Grazie del Violino* (2010), is the first ever CD using the harp exclusively as an accompanying and solo instrument. She has recorded over 40 CDs with orchestras and Early Music ensembles.

She has been prizewinner at the following competitions as soloist: Utrecht Early Music Competition (First Prize ex-aequo, 1997), Nippon International Harp Competition (sixth prize, 1996), Dutch National Harp Competition (second prize, 1997). She has received awards from The Arts Council Ireland and Culture Ireland throughout her studies and professional career. As an orchestral player, she has worked as Principal Harpist in the Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest Amsterdam and further held the position of harpist of the RTE Concert Orchestra Dublin. Maria has worked for years in the area of contemporary music, with MusikFabrik Köln and Remix Ensemble Porto. She has premièred over fifty pieces for solo harp and harp in ensemble, including *Arc Song* by T. Hosakawa at the Darmstadt Festival in 2002 with Peter Veale (oboe). More recently, she has recorded *Evanescente* (2013) by Beatrice Campodonico for the CMC Milano label.

Maria holds Bachelor and Master's degrees from Dublin, London, Den Haag and Bruxelles, where she studied with Susanna Mildonian. She was awarded a Ph.D. from Leiden University, The Netherlands in 2016 on historical pedal techniques. She has

published academic articles and book chapters.

Maria teaches historical styles, improvisation and chamber music to all instrumentalists. She has taught at the Guildhall School of Music London, Conservatories of Singapore, Brisbane, Sydney, RMIT Melbourne, Venice, Padua (2005-2008), Krakow Academy, Sibelius Academy Helsinki, Oslo Academy, Oberlin College Ohio, Case Western Cleveland and at the Juilliard School of Music New York. She holds teaching positions at Verona and Vicenza Conservatories in Italy and at the Haute École de Musique de Genève.



Reviews

Soloist with Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra

“brilliant solist”

Luigi Bellingardi, Corriere della sera, 16 October, 2012

Soloist with Bayerische Staatsoper, July 2012

“The demands made by the solo instrumental parts Mayr composed may also go some way towards explaining why Medea in Corinto has disappeared from the standard repertory. Musicians with the requisite musical razzle and the technical dazzle for what essentially are cameos tend to be rare in any age. ...She was accompanied brilliantly on stage by Maria Cleary on a period-style harp.”

www.operacastblog.com/2012/07/woman-scorned.html

Recording of the CD *Le Grazie del Violino* with Arparla

“...the harp is probably the most resonant of any accompanying instrument heard in this selection of discs. [...] and in this recording Davide Monti produces a luxuriant and luminous sound to match Maria Christina Cleary’s harp, which in turn has a very extensive range of dynamics.”

David R. M. Irving, *Early Music*, May 2012

"I tanti microcosmi del disco riescono assai bene nell'intento e l'interpretazione è all'altezza, specie nella grazia ... e nell'estro improvvisativo, conditio sine qua non di un'interpretazione degna." Giudizio Artistico *****, Giudizio Tecnico *****

Amadeus, Nicoletta Sguben, feb 2011

"A dimostrazione dell'estrema duttilità stilistica nonché perfetta consapevolezza storica di Arparla, giunge ora sugli scaffali questo bellissimo disco dedicato integralmente a quel lungo secolo di trasformazioni e sperimentazioni in campo musicale che è stato il seicento.

... Davide Monti e Maria Christina Cleary ci conducono per mano in questo repertorio fascinioso, fatto di suoni sublimi, di modulazioni inaspettate, di geniali improvvisazioni e di felici trovate esecutive."

www.cdclassico.com, Gabriele Formenti, dicembre 2010

Recording of the CD of Vivaldi's Four Seasons with Il Tempio Armonico

"Zu solistischen Streichern wartet der Basso continuo nicht nur mit Cembalo/Orgel und Violone auf, sondern auch mit einer Doppelharfe von zauberisch-verschleiertem Klang, der namentlich in manchem Tutti Erstaunliches bewirkt."

Gero Schreier. Klassik.com, 15 Jun 2011

Concert for the festival "Primavera in Musica" in Verona

"The harp, as basso continuo, was more than a simple accompaniment: it sparkled with a soloist's personality, perfect in articulation and phrasing for a concert that was really well balanced with infinite lyrical possibilities. And the "Toccatà" by Georg Muffat contributed to put Cleary on the same level as the violin at every moment, not missing any possibility to interpret this indisputable emotive piece".

L'Arena, 14 April 2010

Recording of the CD "So mach' die Augen zu, Allora chiudi gli occhi" by L. Spohr

"The harp playing is flexible throughout and ... closely approximates the spirit of 19th-century style."

Clive Brown, Early Music 2010

"...both the Fantasie and The Variations come over as really beautiful in these sensitive performances."

Newsletter 145 (09/4) The Spohr Society of Great Britain, Dec.'09

"It comes then, as a real joy to hear this recording. Not only is the instrumentation well balanced and completely appropriate, but both players have developed a unified 'accent', that rare musical unity bordering on telepathy, that one feels must have existed between the original performers.

"The power and control of Monti's violin is more than equalled by Cleary's elegant, precise and poised command of the harp. Her virtuosic performance couples navigation of some fiendishly difficult pedalling with finger work of enviable tone and power, never sacrificing musical line to technical demand or velocity.

"The Fantasie (Op. 35)... due to the combination of the right instrument and Cleary's insightful performance, the improvisatory nature of the piece revealed, with changes of mood rendered in tones of light and shade of great subtlety and nuance.

"Here, both instruments show lightness, crispness, sweetness and power in equal measure. Lines are separate, yet intertwined, subtle and flexible as living vines twisting around each other without losing their own identity, but making much more than the sum of the parts."

Musicalpointers, 16 April 2009

Recording of Concerti Op. VI by Dall'Abaco: Il Tempio Armonico

"Also the continuo realisation is highly convincing, where the harp is a featured instrument in six Concertos... (and also is soloist in a short, but emotive Largo of Concerto No. 1 in C major)."

Musica, April 2009

Soloist with Portland Baroque Orchestra, Duo Monica Huggett

"...PBO's special guest for the series was extraordinary Irish harpist Maria Cleary, who plays on modern instruments -- she has served as principal harpist of the renowned Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra -- and is also a pioneer of period harp practice.

"As such, she's a rare breed: The powerful tension of all those strings has a tendency to turn wood-framed harps into lumber after a century or so.

"For these performances, ... the 1808 instrument... rang like a bell, hummed and sang with Cleary's deft, varied touch. Cleary and Huggett made an impressive duet in the Spohr."

The Oregonian, USA 10 May 2006

Il Tempio Armonico

"...The pages of Giovanni Paolo Cima, Salomone Rossi, Marco Uccellini, Biagio Marini and Tarquinio Merula were also used as a pretext to appreciate the extraordinary interpretative and instrumental skills of the performers: the extremely difficult Toccata Cromatica by Merula came easily to Cleary, a true virtuoso on a perilous instrument. "

L'Arena Verona, Italy 22.09.2004

Ensemble Tetraktys Polifona Festival Antwerp, with Jill Feldman (soprano), Maria Christina Cleary (harp), Jane Achtman (viol), and Kees Boeke (recorders & viol)

"...This group's hour of experimental 14 C music, given in the Elzenveld chapel, was for us the high spot of the whole Polifonia Italiana Festival."

www.musicalpointers.co.uk/index.htm, August 2004

Academy of Ancient Music, Cecilia Bartoli: Haydn's Orfeo

"...(Did) the harp, accompanying Orfeo's recitativo at the end of the First Act, ever sound so sparkling, clear like water and yet warm?"

NCR Handelsblad The Netherlands 23 January 2001