

Maria Christina Cleary – Harpist, Researcher – (774 words)

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.

A native of Ireland, Maria grew up surrounded with Irish music as well as receiving a Classical musical training in piano, recorder, harp and singing. She was part of an inter-disciplinary group based on the Renaissance epoch (*Capriol Consort*, Dublin, directed by Doris Keogh at the Royal Irish Academy of Music). She studied harp at the College of Music Dublin with Mercedes Garvey, and later began a Degree in Psychology at Trinity College Dublin. She studied harp at the Koninklijk Conservatoriums in The Hague and Brussels (Susanna Mildonian). During her studies, her mind was opened to many types of music: contemporary, electronic, jazz and Informed Practices, experimental music with non-tonal and micro-tonal tuning systems.

In 2016, she was awarded a PhD, carried out in-and-through artistic practice from The Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA), Leiden University. The title of her thesis, “*Harpe Organisée, 1720-1840: Rediscovering the lost pedal techniques on harps with a single-action pedal mechanism*”, is the first ever monograph on pedalling techniques in the world.

Specialising in historical harps, she performs on one-rowed medieval harps, Italian (*arpa doppia*), Spanish (*arpa de dos ordenes*), German (*Davidsharffe*) and Welsh Baroque chromatic harps, 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 of which can heard on recordings with Ensemble Tetraktys on the Olive Music label.

She performs as soloist with orchestras including the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, American Bach Soloists, Bayerische Staatsoper, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Arion Ensemble Montreal and the RTE Concert Orchestra. She was a featured soloist at The World Harp Congress in Cardiff in 2020 and in Sydney in 2014, performing premiere performances of concertos by Krumpholtz, Handel, Hasse and Alberti. 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. In the 1990’s, Maria performed at the Playboy Mansion in LA and, even though she lives near Milan for the last 15 years, she has never played at La Scala.

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 later 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 *Evanescence* (2013) by Beatrice Campodonico for the CMC Milano label in 2017.

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www.arparla.it
www.heliconait.com

Partners for over fifteen years, 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. Their recordings include two CDs *So mach' die Augen zu* (2010), the first ever CD of Louis Spohr's music using original instruments and historical performing practices, and *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 (2015) and Uccellini Op. 4 (2020). *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.

Maria teaches harp, improvisation and chamber music to all instrumentalists in seminars, masterclasses and artist residencies all over the world, including 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.

She has published for *Early Music*, *Basler Jahrbuch*, and the *American Harp Journal* and has forthcoming publications coming in the near future.

Here are links to her views on teaching:

https://arparla.it/media/docs/Teaching_Manifesto_2018.pdf

<https://arparla.it/en/activities/teaching/8/>

Other links

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-maria-christina-cleary/>

<https://cmusge.academia.edu/MariaCleary>

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maria_Christina_Cleary

Reviews

Soloist with Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra

"brilliant soloist"

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 Violine 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

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"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

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