



Harp

Jazz Harpist: Monika Stadler

by Andrea Stern

Monika Stadler lives in Vienna, where, in addition to touring internationally, she composes and gives workshops. She was a member of the Vienna Symphonic Orchestra and played with the Vienna National Opera Orchestra, and then in 1991 received a scholarship to study jazz harp with Deborah Henson-Conant and David Clark and free improvisational music with David Darling. Last January, the Minnesota chapter of American Harp Society invited her to perform and give a workshop in Minneapolis. Andrea Stern interviewed her then.

Andrea: How did you get into playing jazz?

Monika: When I was a teenager, I really liked jazz music — Miles Davis, Pat Metheny, Jan Garbarek, Egberto Gismonte — and I thought it was so strange because I played classical music but liked so much other kinds of music. In classical music, you play the notes written in front of you, but in jazz you have much more freedom. It took me a long time before I could find a way to learn jazz. As a student, I tried a little to improvise, but couldn't find the way and I gave up. So I stuck to classical music, but the urge to play jazz was still with me. I kept playing classical music until I finished the University and after that I was really ready to find my own way.

A: Are there any other jazz harpists in Europe?

M: Uschi Laar from Munich plays folk harp and some jazz, but I've never heard her. Magali Zsigmond was a student of Deborah Henson-Conant, so she also plays and teaches jazz in France.

A: So it's pretty unusual to play jazz harp in Europe.

M: Yes. I would say that just a few are doing it ... much less than in America.

A: You perform mostly your own original music. How did you make the transition from playing standards and other people's compositions to playing your own material?

M: After I finished the University, it took me a long while to find my way. I felt

I had to finish just the classical music, you know, all the technique, and afterwards I was falling into a hole — I just knew I wanted to go a different way. It was so hard to find a teacher. I found a jazz piano teacher who taught me a little bit, but it was hard, because I had never played jazz before and he didn't understand the harp. When I came to the United States and studied with Deborah she left me alone because she was gone a lot on tour. She showed me a little bit, but I had to discover a lot by myself. So I learned jazz standards and at the same time began composing. "Composing" sounds like you are doing it with your head, but I don't. I sit down and play something and think, "Oh, I just like this so much." It's like magic! Sometimes I play just three or four notes and then I start dreaming or something, and a piece develops.

A: So you don't write anything down?

M: I remember. It's just improvising and thinking, "I like this so much." I play it many times, and then another idea comes and adds to it. It's like a little piece that grows. I do nothing with my head. Something inside me wants to express — I think my soul — I don't know what. Something wants to come out. I'm very intuitive and never learned formally to compose. I'd like to go to school and learn to compose.

A: Do you have any advice for harpists who want to arrange and compose their own music and improvise?

M: When I played classical, I couldn't recognize what was fun for me. First find out what you really like to play and don't like to play. What is touching you or affecting you is what you should concentrate on, and if you have the feeling, for example, that you want to change the melody a little, then do it, and don't stick too closely to the notes. Give yourself the freedom to allow yourself to play with the melody. You can fool around with just two or three chords. Just take a chord and play around with it. Don't have so much respect for the whole tune. Open up and dream about the music. Everyone

should listen carefully to what they play. If there is a phrase you especially like, play around with it. For me, I find two chords that I like a lot, and I play with them for 15 minutes, and things develop. You have to be patient, and start from the beginning.

A: It sounds like you break things down to small bits.

M: Yes, breaking it down. Don't expect in the beginning a big concerto, because when you improvise, you create your own melodies. You're not used to this. Be happy when you play just a few notes and create your own melody. The most important thing is that you create the music yourself, and that you don't always read. So be patient, just listen to what you are playing, even if they are little melodies. I spoke a lot about the melody, but with chords, I learn in this way: A lot of folk tunes have really nice harmonies, simple harmonies. Get a folk tune, and have a teacher help you with the progressions, like II – V. Play the progressions over and over again, or just two chords which are connected, and this helps.

A: Like a minor to e minor?

M: Or e minor to b minor. Going back and forth between these two chords and improvising over them helps your ear get used to this progression. Later, when you don't have sheet music, you can hear this progression which helps very much with improvising.

A: Tell us your goals.

M: There are two things. I would like to heal people with my music, but not like music therapy. The music should be interesting and healing. I would also like to develop my improvisation. I would like to be able to go on stage and play what I feel from the audience. Right now, I go on stage and I have my tunes, which are prepared, and there are some parts where I always improvise. One of my goals — and I have done this a few times with an amazing piano player — is to be able to sit down and allow myself to improvise. He just sat down and played nonsense and some very beautiful things came out of that chaos. I need to have

the courage, being alone on stage, to just play nonsense for a while and let the music come out.

A: Just solo?

M: No. I would like to work more with other musicians. On my third CD (*On the Water*) I started working with other musicians. I want to develop this more — composing for other instruments. Of course I know the harp very well, but I don't know much about other instruments, and I want to learn the nature of other instruments.

A: So you would like to focus on going on stage, improvising, but also have

written compositions?

M: With the other musicians, it can be both — we can do written pieces, but it's also easier to improvise with other musicians.

A: Isn't it more free when you are playing solo?

M: It's easier in one way, but harder in another. When I'm with other musicians, I can respond to them. Ideas are coming; it's like speaking with them.

A: You must have good ears.

M: But I don't have perfect pitch.

A: Anything else?

M: I want to do a lot of performing,

travel around, play for many different people, and heal people with music.

A: Music has that effect — especially the harp.

M: And I also heal myself.

Andrea Stern is a free-lance harpist in the Twin Cities area. She has a private studio in her home and specializes in adult students of all levels. She composes and arranges for harp and has published Mosaic through Lyra Music Company. Her CD's feature a wide range of styles. †