

Way Out: String Theory

by Inara Verzemnieks, The Oregonian
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I learned to play the harp this week. OK, maybe that is an exaggeration. I should probably say I played the harp this week, since really, what I did amounted to some very tentative string plucking, nothing resembling real song. But still, it was an amazing feeling.

And I will get back to this, I promise, but first I should probably explain the circumstances.

The Northwest is home to a thriving community of music-thanatologists, men and women who play the harp for people at the end of their lives. Doctors and hospitals have embraced the concept as a way to ease the physical suffering and fears of those who are dying. And while music thanatologists also sing to patients sometimes, the harp is at the center of what they do.



The Oregonian

On a recent rainy Thursday, I met up with a music-thanatologist named Sharilyn Cohn, executive director of the nonprofit SacredFlight, who had kindly offered to give me a little informal harp lesson. I hoped by actually putting my hands on a harp it might give me a better sense of why the instrument carries such powerful associations.

I had never touched a harp before. And I imagine you probably haven't, either; harps just aren't an instrument that we interact with very often.

"It tickles me to no end when I am walking through a hospital, lugging my harp around, people always say, 'Do you play that?'" says Cohn. "No, I just carry this big, awkward thing around!"

I asked her how long it was before she felt comfortable playing the harp.

"A few years," she says. "But it's interesting, because I have a background in cello. With a harp, all you have to do is pluck a string, and everyone will say, 'Oh, that's so beautiful. I love it.' They'll be so moved. No one did that with the cello!"

She had set up two large harps in the living room, side by side. "Are you ready to put your fingers on a harp?" Cohn said.

I nodded like a madwoman; for some reason I was really excited.

Cohn had me sit down in a chair and then gently eased the harp forward to rest on my left shoulder. "Let it come to you," she said. She let it rest there for a few breaths.

"How did that feel?"

Even now, it's hard for me to describe: The harp was surprisingly light for something so large, just a gentle weight on my shoulder, as if someone were resting a hand there.

We returned the harp to my shoulder; it was time to try to actually play. It was challenging at first to find just the right amount of force as I plucked the strings -- too little and there was no real sound at all; too much force and the violence of the reverberation actually jolted me.

Gradually, though, as I played the simple series of notes Cohn showed me over and over again, I began to find something resembling a rhythm. I loved the way I could feel the vibrations travel back to me, through the harp. I became so focused on perfecting my funny little sequence of notes, evoking the perfect tone, that I didn't even notice when Cohn quietly drew her own harp to her shoulder and began to accompany my jagged little half-song.



The Oregonian Sharilyn Cohn, Jane Franz and Claudia Walker take their place in the warmup circle.

We played together for what felt like forever, though I'm sure it was only a few moments. I could still feel the hum of the notes in my chest.

"OK," said Cohn, "Let's do a glissando!"

Glissando is that beautiful sweep of the notes that we so often associate with harps. And I did it a few times, feeling the drama of the motion. Then Cohn began to play, beautifully, assuredly. Every so often, she would nod at me, cueing me to perform a glissando.

I wish I could tell you I was perfect. I wish I could tell you that I was a natural. I wasn't. I fumbled about a lot. And still, it sounded beautiful somehow. That was the amazing thing. The harp was so forgiving, comforting even. For a long time afterward my shoulder felt warm, right where the harp had rested against it.

Come hear the harps when SacredFlight holds its annual holiday concert, featuring performances by music-thematologists from around the Northwest; at 7 p.m. Dec. 13; First Baptist Church, 1220 S.W. Taylor