



**"On my recording is something for everyone!"**

audite 97.807

After a 16-year hiatus, award-winning harpist Sarah O'Brien has released her second solo album on audite, on which she has recorded all the impromptus for solo harp written between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A conversation with the Swiss musician about impromptu music, composing sailors and the question for whom one actually records such an album.

**Sarah O'Brien, you have called your new CD "Impromptu". Now impromptus are, after all, pieces that are supposedly played off the cuffs. Do you play off the cuff on your new CD?**

So to play the harp off the cuff, that's relatively complicated because we have all the pedals. That is the technique of our instrument. Harpists can of course improvise, but the pedals make spontaneous playing a little more difficult. So no, my CD is not an impromptu improvisation in that sense. The pieces that I have chosen should reflect the spontaneity of an impromptu, the instantaneousness, this impression should come across..

**Which impromptus have you chosen?**

No spontaneous improvisations (laughs). So the idea of recording all the original impromptus for harp and putting them together on one recording is something I've had for a long time. As far as I know, there is no such recording yet. And in general, most of these impromptus for harp are hardly known. So the works by Pierné or Fauré, of course they are often played. But the other impromptus are rarely or not at all played. The Impromptu by Ropartz, for example, is, as far as I know, completely unknown! Nobody knows this piece! I got the sheet music from my teacher when I was a student, but she never played it either. And then one day I thought to myself: All right, it's time to record all these impromptus for harp. But of course it was also important for me to play pieces that I could relate to. I have to like the pieces, otherwise I can't record them. But yes, there are real rarities on my album. I wanted to combine those with the other pieces and show what musical references are there.

**Among these rarities are two works by Virgilio Mortari and Albert Roussel, two composers from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who are almost unknown today. I read about Roussel that he was originally a sailor before he started composing for harp. How did you come across these composers?**

I knew these composers. For example, I played Albert Roussel's Impromptu several years ago at an international harp congress, which must have been in 1987, when I was still at school. Even then, I was incredibly moved by this Impromptu. Surprisingly, many harpists don't like it, because it is very far away from this romantic harp sound. That is, the sound that many usually expect from the harp: This expectation is not served here. Jean Cras, by whom I play two impromptus on the album, was also a sailor, by the way.

He and Roussel were both in the navy, and they both started composing there, but they were always on those ships. And I think you can totally hear that in their works. It's simply music that is no longer on the ground! It has something floating about it. Yes, I think that's the perfect association for the harp anyway – the water ...

**... because the harp has this floating, rather indirect sound that builds up slowly. It's interesting that, in addition to these "floating" rarities, you've chosen some Baroque pieces that were actually written for the piano and arranged them for harp. A completely different sound! How do you arrange piano pieces for the harp? Can you transfer these works 1:1?**

Both as well. So there are pieces that you can implement directly. But most of them you have to work on. We only play with 8 fingers and not with 10, and then we add the pedals, which are our "black keys", all the semitones are played with the feet. That's why you usually have to arrange piano pieces for harp. But yes, how did these baroque pieces come about? So actually for love and for reference (laughs). I like these pieces very much, I would have loved to choose more of them. For me, these pieces echo the desire for freedom that an impromptu also has – only 200 years earlier! And especially the French, Couperin and Lully, but especially Rameau: They were wild! They were cheeky! Already these titles: *La Poule!* About a chicken, who would write a piece about a chicken? And writes in the first bar "Co Co Co Dai"?! And I found that beautiful: this not caring about these rules. But simply to say: I feel like writing this, and that's why I'm writing this now! That is also spontaneity. And then I wanted to put Italian pieces next to Italian pieces, Scarlatti next to Rota. And the French like Rameau and Couperin next to the many French impromptus – to show the references to each other.

**These subtle references and differences are, if I may say so, often only recognized by the experts, especially with the harp. Have you actually thought about the audience you want to reach when compiling your CD? Who is your CD aimed at?**

So actually to all of them! But since you are very much at home in your profession, you are naturally shaped and very much in your subject. And therefore you think of the harpists first – and you also think of yourself! But then I also had the idea of recording, in addition to the rarely heard pieces and the baroque pieces, pieces that are played very often, for example the Sonata by Hindemith or the Impromptu by Gabriel Fauré. And it was precisely there that I wanted to venture a bit onto the ice. Because with such pieces you are vulnerable, because everyone has an opinion about it and comments on your interpretation: Well, you'd better play it this way and that way. Hindemith even wrote down himself how he wanted the Sonata to be interpreted and why it should be played this way and not another way. But then you have to find your own way and come out with your own interpretation. I think, in the end, this recording is meant for an interested audience, which ideally does not know the harp at all. That would be the very best! I think there is something for everyone on my recording! Not only this harp romantic, but also the baroque and the modern. However, you have to listen carefully to harp, otherwise it just rushes past you.

**Thank you very much for the interview!**

Interview: Sarah O'Brien / Beate Stender