

Heaven with theatrical flair

Symphony Tacoma welcomes the Hip Harpist

By [Christian Carvajal](#) on April 19, 2018



Hip Harpist Deborah Henson-Conant. Photo credit: J. Brian Buckley

The last time most of us thought about the harp -- and chances are that opportunity wasn't recent -- our most likely associations were uptight chamber music or supplies from Saint Peter to the newly inorganic. Maybe not, though. Maybe you're one of those lucky connoisseurs who are hip to the Hip Harpist, aka Deborah Henson-Conant. Since before her first album in 1985, Henson-Conant has been broadening her repertoire to include a variety of styles from Irish traditional to highbrow heavy metal. She plays the instrument she commissioned and helped design, an 11-pound sound machine named for her: the CAMAC DHC Light Blue electric harp. The origin of that custom-built instrument is the subject of her recent TED Talk. She earned a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Crossover Album for the soundtrack to her 2006 DVD, *Invention & Alchemy*.

Henson-Conant became her college band's harpist after just six lessons but soon realized she wanted to expand the range of her then-80-pound concert instrument. "It's like a piece of furniture that you can't sit on," she admitted in her

TED Talk, which she sang. "So I asked my boyfriend -- who was a jazz aficionado -- I said, 'Do you think I could play jazz on the harp?' And he said, 'No, I don't think so.' So I got another boyfriend."

Her new, carbon-fiber electric harp has the ability to mimic a number of instruments including slap bass, mandolin and electric guitar. "It is an impressionist," she agreed in a recent *Volcano* interview. "I would go to a percussionist or I would go to a guitarist, and I would say, 'How do you do that?' And then I would make what I call a poetic translation on my instrument." The flexibility of the CAMAC DHC derives in part from her close-up access to its strings. "The instrument is so naked," she said. Not only can she dance while wearing it, she can use differing strikers and surfaces to make contact with it.

"Who I am is someone who needs to tell stories," she explained, "who needs to move around; who really wants to be a physical partner with my instrument." She was aided in this pursuit by expert training by mime artist Tony Montanaro plus adoration of musical theater. Her performances are a whirlwind of dance, comedy and jazz singing, often via songs of her own composition.

Her upcoming appearance with Symphony Tacoma falls on Earth Day, so Henson-Conant seized on that opportunity to feature songs about the earth and our place in it. She sees her own role -- in this case, in front of an orchestra -- as a symbolic bridge between the individual human and her planetary community. She notes the organic construction of many classical instruments, which ties their resonant personalities to the natural world and reminds us yet again of our interdependence within it.

SYMPHONY TACOMA - EARTH SONGS FROM THE HARP, 2:30 p.m., Sunday, April 22, Pantages Theater, 901 Broadway, Tacoma, \$19.50-\$81.50, 253.591.5890, broadwaycenter.org