

How did this commission come about?

Bright Sheng: The project was initiated by the terrific harpist Yolanda Kondonassis, who approached me a few years back for a harp concerto.

Yolanda Kondonassis: I think it was around 2003 that I called Bright and asked if he would be interested in writing for the harp. All the puzzle pieces of the commissioning consortium were not yet in place, but I figured that I had better start with the composer. I thought Bright's musical language would be a wonderful match for the harp with its innovative colors and Asian folk-inspired threads.

So Bright said 'yes' and you were off and running?

YK: Bright did express interest in the project during that first phone call, which was what I needed to start putting the rest of the pieces in place. I suppose my general operational mode has always been to get that one critical piece of a puzzle in place and then worry about the rest in due time. The way I approached this project was no different.

And what were the rest of the puzzle pieces?

YK: I knew that this commission would require a consortium with a lead orchestra and at least two other orchestras to round out the expenses and give the piece the kind of exposure I felt it would deserve. I have known Jahja Ling (conductor of the San Diego Symphony) for over twenty years and consider him a dear friend, so he was the very first conductor I approached and he loved the idea. The Dallas Symphony, The Grand Rapids Symphony, and Oberlin Conservatory committed their support to the project as things progressed. I am so grateful to everyone who extended themselves to make this concerto a reality.

Yolanda, what were your artistic hopes for this commission?

YK: I wanted a harp concerto that would stretch both the expectations of the instrument and the audience's imagination. Bright gave me both. One of my primary goals over the next couple of decades is to not only expand the repertoire for the harp but to also expand the range and reputation of the instrument. I truly believe that the harp is one of the music world's most untapped resources.

Bright, what was your inspiration when you began the concerto?

BS: My inspiration had two folds. The first was the beautiful and angelic harp sound plus Yolanda's demonstration of what she can do with the harp. The second inspiration was a Chinese folk song called "The Stream Flows" which happened to be a favorite of both Yolanda's and mine - Yolanda had already done a short harp arrangement of the tune and I have used the melody many times in my various compositions.

Yolanda, we heard that you created and recorded a new arrangement of this folksong that's available as a bonus download at telarc.com/yolanda/. Can you tell us about it?

YK: I find it rather remarkable that both Bright and I zeroed in on the very same Chinese folksong years before we ever met each other. I think it must have been fate that we would eventually work together.

I did an arrangement of it years ago for inclusion on a Telarc album called *Pictures of the Floating World*. The translation of the tune I found back then was "Small River Flowing." In this new version of just a few months ago, I wrote it as a possible cadenza or a freestanding piece - perhaps an encore. Whereas Bright's treatment of the melody is very creative and inner-woven, I think it's nice to hear this beautiful Chinese melody in a rather simple context. I also took a bit of inspiration from Bright's musical language in this arrangement, which makes it a bit different than my first version.

Yolanda, the premiere season of performances seems to have been extremely successful. The Dallas Morning News praised you as "a brilliant and expressive player" and described *Never Far Away* as a work that encompasses everything from "wide-screen luxury" to "Asian-flavored boogie-woogie." Did you have any trepidation about committing to so many performances of a work that you had never even seen?

YK: Well, that's the excitement in the commissioning process. It's a bit like skiing down a steep hill. If you stop and ponder the risks, you will certainly fall. With each performance, the piece became more my own and I understood the subtleties better. And I discovered all sorts of little tricks for making the piece fit comfortably in my hand. [Laughs] It's thrilling, really - in a reality-show kind of way.

Bright, what was the most challenging aspect of writing for the harp?

BS: Making sure the harp part would be playable but still trying to cooperate with all my musical ideas.

Further to that, is your idea of the harp different now than it was before you wrote the concerto?

BS: I certainly learned quite a great deal about the instrument after the premiere and the recording, and I am even more in love with the instrument.

What did you both enjoy most about this project?

BS: I very much enjoyed the collaboration with Yolanda and her input on the music.

YK: The whole process of working with Bright was hugely educational and inspiring. One learns so much about the creative process with every single new collaboration. And I think that there are few things more rewarding than watching a brand new piece of art emerge in a space where before there was nothing. It's almost like watching the beginning of life in time-lapse photography - it's truly genesis and metamorphosis. I am also deeply indebted to all those who held to their support of this project through some very tough and changing economic times. In the five years from concept to premiere, every single element in our financial system came under hardship. The devotion and integrity of the sponsoring organizations and of Telarc in bringing this project to fruition - despite every challenge - is an unbelievable inspiration.