

HarpColumn

practical news for practical harpists

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Scottish harper

Rachel Hair

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Caroline
Léonardelli's
Serenata is
"warm and
rich like a
sinful
dessert"

interview

Home is



photo by Neil Hanna

where the harp is

A scrappy entrepreneurial spirit and deeply rooted sense of community have helped Scottish harper **Rachel Hair** thrive while the world waits out a pandemic at home.

by Alison Reese

Nearly 3,500 miles separated Rachel Hair and I when we got together on a Zoom call one cold January day. It was the first time I had “met” Rachel, and despite the physical distance between us, I felt like I was sitting across the table from an old friend, sharing a cup of tea and catching up. The Scottish harper caught our attention nearly a year ago when she launched a set of online tutorials called Harp at Home. Now a year into a global pandemic, many organizations have moved their programming online, but Rachel was one of the first, and she wasn’t a big organization. She was just herself—one scrappy, independent musician figuring out how to continue creating while the world was stuck at home. Her series caught on like wildfire, as harpists who were hungry to learn and connect during COVID found Rachel’s warmth and deep connection with the music and stories she shared to be just what they needed (her great Scottish accent doesn’t hurt either).

When we talked in January, Rachel had just kicked off her third Harp at Home series. Though she’s hopeful that she’ll be able to return to her pre-pandemic touring and travel soon, she continues to make the best of her life at home in Glasgow.

HARP COLUMN: It’s been almost a year since the start of this pandemic. Tell us a little bit about how your daily life looks different today than it did a year ago.

RACHEL HAIR: I’m not a slave to my diary today, I would say. Until a year ago my life was usually very busy and was kind of split into three parts: teaching or playing or touring. Whereas now I’ve never spent so much time at home. I miss going to people’s houses for lessons. I quite like that. I like getting out of the city to people’s houses and meeting their dogs and having cups of tea with students. I was also teaching on the Isle of Man, which I would visit once a month for a few days. And before [the pandemic] I would go to The Netherlands seven times a year to teach. So I had that teaching life, and then I had a lot of corporate work in Scotland, so I’ll get called to play at the likes of Stirling Castle or Edinburgh Castle. And I had a touring life. So it has just been crazy waking up at home every morning.

HC: Well, you took this situation where everyone was at home and created something pretty neat out of it. Tell us about your *Harp at Home* series—how did the idea originate and how has it evolved almost a year later?

RH: At the start of the pandemic, I was involved in a harp festival that got canceled at the last minute, so we decided to put it online. I was the one who ended up doing that and compiling the videos, and as a result, I got to learn how to use this video editing software called DaVinci. I got quite good at it, and people said I should start to do online workshops. It was something that I had always wanted to do, but I didn’t want to do it half-heartedly; I wanted it to be good and proper. So after the festival, I took some time to think about how I could do it and make it different. For me, Scottish music isn’t just about the dots and the tunes, it’s about the culture and the stories behind it, and that’s something I really wanted to get across. Maybe I’m interviewing somebody and they’re telling me about their tradition and about the history of their music and their regional style, or maybe I’m doing a tune I composed and showing photos of something to do with it just to have a connection with the music—that’s really important to me

in traditional music. It was just going to be a one-off series for a certain number of weeks because I was aware folks might get a little bit tired after a while, and I knew I would. So I put a stop date on it. But then I was ready to do another one.

HC: So now you just kicked off your third *Harp at Home* series. What has the response been from people?

RH: It's been really good. I timed it so that I was doing sessions in between other harp events because I didn't want to annoy people by doing stuff at the same time. I had an old YouTube channel that was roughly based in teaching, so I renamed it and had some subscribers from that channel already. People have been really receptive—I've had about 1,700 downloads of the music. People pay to download the music, and usually they get the tune that we've done—the arrangement—with some information, an easier version, because I appreciate that not everyone will want to play the full version, sometimes a bonus tune or a second part to the tune, and a page with links to discover more about the tune or listen to other instruments playing it. And then one of the things I do at the end is the blather section where I blather on. "Blather" is a Scottish word for just talking—I'm really good at talking. [Laughs] So I literally have tea and talk to the camera about what's going on, and people love that because of my accent. [Laughs]

HC: Now, the video series is free, correct? Folks just

pay for the music if they choose?

RH: Yes. I know a lot of musicians use Patreon or things like that, but for me, having it on YouTube and having it available for free means that more folk might discover it. The generosity of folk has been amazing. Quite a few folk give extra money when checking out, which is just amazing. It means that things are not financially scary right now, which is really comforting because at the start of the pandemic, it was a little bit freaky. It's been good to know there is income in it.

HC: Right, especially for someone like you whose career base involves traveling. You still cannot travel.

RH: I don't think I'll get to the Isle of Man or The Netherlands to teach anytime soon.

HC: Do you teach at a specific school in The Netherlands?

RH: It's an amazing place in Rhenen. It's an hour and a half by train from Schiphol train station. Then I teach at probably the biggest harp shop in Europe. They have pedal harps and loads of lever harps, so students get to choose when they come there for lessons with me. It's lovely.

HC: That's really neat. Before the pandemic, you were also traveling to the Isle of Man once a month to teach. It's such a unique place. Tell us more about that.

RH: My fiancé is from the Isle of Man, and I met him years ago at a festival and started going over there.

BLATHERING ON WITH RACHEL



Rachel Hair includes a "blather section" at the end of her *Harp at Home* videos where she chats about whatever is on her mind. "I'm really good at talking," she says with a laugh.

City or Highlands: I've been living in the speed of the city, so I really want to get into the country just now.

Heels or flats? Flats. I wish I was a heels person. I like my high-top trainers. If I can wear trainers on stage, I'm there.

Which mythical Scottish creature has a better chance of being real: the Loch Ness Monster or unicorns? I'm going to say unicorns for sure, but that might be my 5-year-old niece's influence.

What's the first place you want to visit after the pandemic? I would say the Isle of Man. We're pining to get back there. We haven't been there since March 2020, so as soon as we're allowed to go, we're there.

If you weren't playing the harp, what would you do for a living? I would probably be a primary school teacher or do something in social work because that's what my mom does.

What's your favorite tune to play?

Right now I really like the Irish jig "Willie Colman's." I like playing that in sessions.

What's the last album you listened to?

Probably Calum Stewart's new album *Tales from the North*. He's a good friend of mine who playing Irish pipes and flute. He's just a phenomenal musician, and I listen to his new album when I'm out running.

What three musicians, living or dead would you invite to a dinner party, and what would you serve?

You do a hard one, don't you? Let's go for Derek Bell from the Chieftains because I would like to have met him, Tristan Le Govic because he's just good crack, and Anna Dunwoodie—a wonderful harp player from New Zealand who is always just good chat! It's just past Burns Night here, so I would serve some haggis because we had it the other night, and it was good.

It's an island with around 83,000 people on it, but it's not very big. It would take maybe an hour and a half to drive around it or 20 minutes coast to coast because it's a long island. It's really quite small. There are harp students on the island. On the north end of the island there is a primary school, but there is a man called Mr. Bolton who is probably 83 now. He's a retired primary school teacher, and he goes in every lunchtime to work with the kids teaching the Manx music. He doesn't really play the instruments himself, but he helps them to get started and facilitates them learning the tunes. They have eight harps at this school that he's bought with his pension—it's insane. So there were all these kids getting lessons with him, but only being able to get to a certain level and then they'd go to high school and wouldn't be able to get lessons anymore. So they started a more traditional kind of organization, and knowing that I was coming over, offered me a job teaching one day a month, which grew to two and a half days. There's been a real revival, and now it's getting to the stage where my student is starting to teach because there is such a big waiting list that I can't teach everyone. It's an amazing place. Especially with the youngsters, the music really flowing there. Since COVID, they are very strict about the border, so it's been Zoom lessons, but the kids have been great, to be honest.

HC: That's great. So are there elements of the Manx musical tradition that make it unique from others?

RH: They're the smallest of the Celtic regions, and it's located in the middle of the Irish Sea, so naturally people criss-crossed it traveling, and a lot of their music is really closely related to Scottish music and Irish music. But I find that the big difference between there and here in Scotland is that their music is still very closely related to the dance tradition. There are still Manx dance groups—Manx dance is the island's folk dance style. A lot of the kids will learn to play music for the dance groups, so it is really closely entwined. For example, my harp players that are from the north of the island all play in a dance group called Ny Fennee. They play harp in the band and then they'll dance and they'll practice harp together. So this dance tradition is really ingrained in their music. Also, my fiancé's parents are part of a dance group from the south, so when we visit them, I'll join in and play with the band because I know the tunes.



HARP AND HOME From her home in Glasgow, Scotland, Rachel Hair has been recording her instructional *Harp at Home* series since the early days of the pandemic.

HC: When you started teaching over there, did you have to learn all those tunes or were they somewhat familiar to you?

RH: I knew a few from playing in session with my fiancé and in the pubs, but I had to make a conscious decision to arrange them and put names to them and make sure that I understood which key to play them in with which dance group. I had to learn to be sensitive to all of these issues so that my students could play these tunes with others.

“ I was really influenced by the musicians around me. I got to learn by listening to different instruments. ”

HC: It sounds like a fascinating tradition.

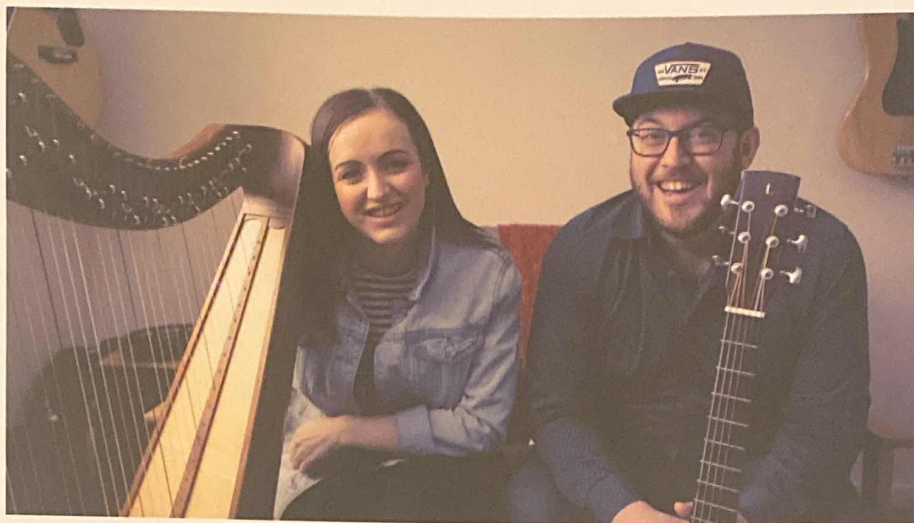
RH: I love it. I live in Glasgow now, but I was brought up in the Highlands, and I had that same sense of community when I was young. But I've been living in the city for 18 years, and no matter how hard you try, there just isn't that true sense of community in the city. Whereas over there [on the Isle of Man], I know the grannies, I know the brothers and sisters, I know the nieces and nephews that go to these events. Because it's such a small island, everyone in the folk scene knows ev-

erybody. I really like that. I feel like I'm part of a real community over there.

HC: Being raised in the Scottish Highlands, tell us about what your musical influences have been.

RH: I started playing when I was young. A lot of the music around us was Scottish Gaelic music and there was a lot of pipe music—bagpipes. I grew up going to these Gaelic summer schools. I was really influenced by the musicians around me. I got to learn by listening to different instruments. I was into the harp, but I just wanted to play fast tunes like fiddlers and play in the loud sessions and with the big bands, really. When I moved to Glasgow, I had the option to go to the conservatory to study Scottish music, but instead I went to University of Strathclyde (it doesn't exist anymore) and did an applied music degree, which was all the genres of musician skills, business skills, recording, touring. At the time, that was more interesting to me than learning Scots songs; I just wanted to do different things. Meeting different types of musicians there was a huge influence, because I had been somewhat stuck in a traditional music bubble. There I was kind of learning with jazz musicians and funk musicians and some classical musicians—just getting to mix with different types of musicians was a big thing for me.

HC: Interesting. I want to dig into those



Rachel Hair says she loves playing with other traditional musicians—especially guitarist Ron Jappy (pictured above). “I love the energy you get from somebody who provides that kind of driving feel in the music, which I can’t do so much with the harp. I just love that energy on stage.”

diverging paths a little. Do you have any regrets now that you’re further into your career? Do you feel like you were well-served by the direction you chose?

RH: It was a funny thing—there were a few traditional musicians there, all who went on to have amazing careers, actually, but we always felt we were looked down on because we didn’t go to the conservatory. Because of that, I felt like we tried harder to push ourselves further. For instance, I never wanted to have to work in a bar, so first year I was burning CDs to deliver to hotels to see if I could get gigs there, playing at weddings. It was very entrepreneurial, in just wanting to do music. It’s different now. It’s so much better. The degree offered at the conservatory has elements of business and recording and so much more. Before the Scottish music degree was very much about performance. Now it’s actually called a traditional music degree. And it’s a bachelor of music degree that is a lot more practical and serves what the music scene is today because it’s changed so much in 15 years.

HC: Absolutely. Especially during this pandemic, the musicians who have been successful in continuing to create have had the technical and entrepreneurial skills to do it, or at least enough experience to figure it out on the fly. So looking forward to post-pandemic life. What do you think you’ve learned from the last year that you will take with you?

RH: Giving myself time to chill out. I go

out for a walk or a run every day. I realized I don’t really know my area of Glasgow at all because I always had to drive everywhere. Getting outside of the apartment is good—it’s good to have time to breathe. It’s also been good to have time to do things I never would have. I think it’s made us appreciate what is important in life. For example, we were made to get married last October, and we’re on our third day of rescheduling our wedding now, which is kind of stressful, but not really because we’ve realized it will happen when it happens. Our idea of what we wanted for our wedding has changed because now we just want people to be together. Being with people is what’s special, not the big fancy wedding venue or deciding what aisle runner you want. Expectations have changed for the better thing.

HC: That’s a great outlook. Do you have any musical discoveries or epiphanies or observations that you’ve made in all of this time?

RH: I’m enjoying playing the music that I like to play. It’s been quite nice to not have to practice specifically for things because I’ve not had the usual schedule. I really enjoyed the time to explore and research new tunes really for the *Harp at Home* series. I go down these rabbit holes looking at new tunes, and I really enjoy having time to do that and play exactly what I want. It’s been good. I’m about to start working a new album with a girl from the Isle of Man who’s a Manx Gaelic singer

in the traditional languages over there. I’m really looking forward to having proper time to concentrate on doing the arrangements for that, not just squeezing in practice time here and there where I can find it.

HC: In the classical tradition, you know, the harp is such a solo instrument, but in the Celtic tradition it’s much more of a collaborative instrument. What do you like about playing solo? What do you like about playing with others?

RH: One of the reasons I love playing harp in traditional music is that it’s the arrangement you do that makes you a respected harp player, and that’s how you get your credentials—how you arrange tunes, especially in Scotland. I simply love that I can decide how to color a tune; I can adjust the mood of the tune; and I can decide how I want the listener to feel by what I do with my left hand and what chords I use. I love the freedom that I have, that I can change the feeling of a tune by deciding what accompaniment to do with it. So I love playing as a soloist, but I also love playing with others, especially guitar. I love the energy you get from somebody who provides that kind of driving feel in the music, which I can’t do so much with the harp. I just love that energy on stage.

HC: That’s a good point. Tell us about the harp you play.

RH: I play Starfish harps that are made in a place called Ballachulish. They are a small company, and there’s a few professionals who play them—I play them, Catriona McKay plays them—but I’ve played them pretty much from day one. I remember as a child being told that Starfish harps are really good. On my first day of summer school, before I’d even touched a harp, I remember someone telling me, those are the really good harps. Starfish are the ones you want to play. I remember switching my levers of the harp I was playing and raising my hand, saying my harp was out of tune so that I could move to the Starfish harp next to me. [Laughs]

HC: That’s hilarious.

RH: They made a new model which is great for flying. In its flight case it’s under 20 kilos. At the Glasgow airport, they’re used to us because myself and Catriona McKay fly quite often. You end up getting on a first name basis with the oversized baggage man. But anyway, Starfish are made in the most amazing place in Scotland. They’re at the southern tip of the Highlands. It’s only

two hours away from here, if I have people staying with me from around the world who are harp players, we'll take a drive up there because it goes past Loch Lomond and Glen Coe—some of the most stunning scenery in Scotland.

HC: I noticed you stand up when you play. Is that common?

RH: Catriona [McKay] and I do it, and there are quite a few harpists in Ireland starting to do it because they've seen us doing it. It gives you more freedom. I can easily move the harp out of the way so I can talk in the microphone. I've got a Dusty Strings pickup in it, and standing gives me more freedom to move. The stand I use folds down flat and I can put it in my hand luggage.

HC: That's brilliant. So I'm curious, in all the traveling and touring you do, what is the perception of Scottish music around the world and what is the reality?

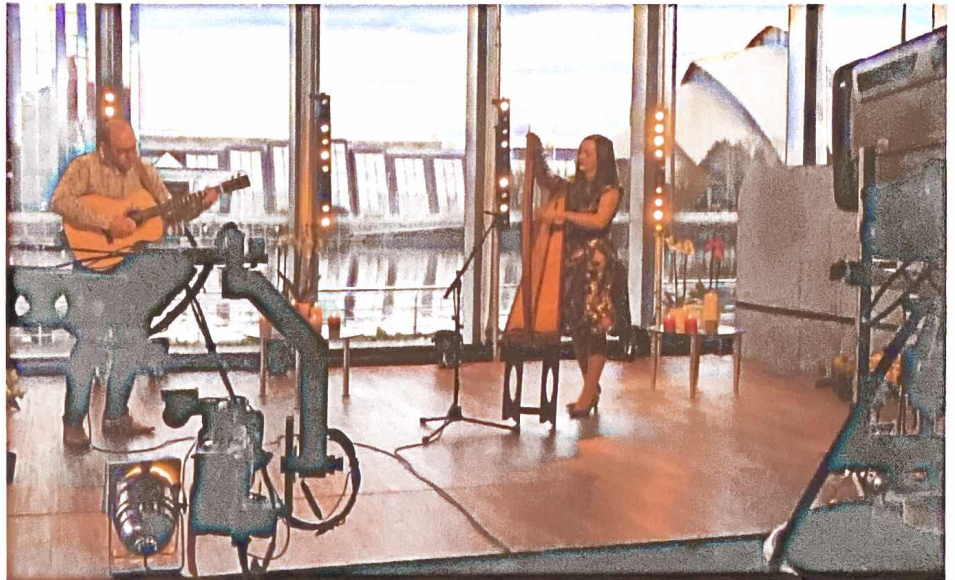
RH: I'm not sure if they are misconceptions of the harp or misconceptions about me, but when people see me, they think I'm going to be playing gentle stuff, and when they hear me, they're like, "Whoa! Okay, so you play like fast Celtic stuff. That makes us want to tap our feet and dance!" They might have a misconception of what Scottish harp could be. Traditionally, maybe it was more lullabies and gentle stuff. Whereas now, things have been shaken up a wee bit. But it's amazing the folk we'll meet who have a connection to Scotland, whether they've emigrated or their neighbors have emigrated. It's crazy the people you meet around the world who know people you know.

HC: Celtic music is probably as popular today as it has ever been. I'm curious how you and your fellow traditional musicians make Celtic music relevant today.

RH: It's amazing, especially recently, to see these Scottish bands reach almost pop star status. They are playing big arenas and stuff, and they're just lads singing the same kind of Scottish songs about home. It's a lot of folk connecting songs with home because so many people come down to the city. It's a lot of younger folk who are good with social media and streaming, and it's been really interesting to see.

HC: So there's obviously something granular in the music that appeals to everyone.

RH: Yeah, totally. The popularity is not quite there with the harp; I'm not sure if it can get to that these days, but it all feeds



Rachel Hair performs with guitarist Ron Jappy on BBC television in December 2020.

into each other. A lot of these people that are in bands that are the party bands, the club bands, the midnight bands at festivals, they also have a good grounding in the music. They started off in the same place as I did at the same summer schools and things, and

we went to the same pub sessions. A lot of them will have other projects, a second band that just plays tunes and stuff. Everybody's working with different people and wanting to explore what other people are doing. It's really good. ●

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