

Ceren Necipoglu Istanbul International Harp Festival 2020

The first Ceren Necipoglu International Harp Festival was held in Istanbul, Turkey, 16-19 January 2020. It marked ten years since the passing of Ceren, who was in the Air France plane that tragically came down in a storm over the Atlantic whilst on its way to Paris from Rio, where Ceren had been performing in the Rio Harp Festival.

I was invited to be on the jury by the festival's Artistic Director, Florence Sitruk, when she briefly stayed with me (at my home in Stamford) last year. Florence and I have a deep bond, over our personal lives as much as our musical ones, and I stayed with her in Berlin a few years back when I performed some trios in the Philharmonie's lovely Kammermusiksaal. Why am I telling you this? Because this whole festival was created with friendship, closeness and humanity at its heart. Florence knew that Ceren and I had met a couple of times during her life and, as with Florence and I, these meetings had taken place at World Harp Congresses. We are part of something unique and powerful, us women (yes, in this case, women) of the harp world. We stick together and raise each other up. It's hard to put these things into words and that is where the music takes over, so I'll speak from the heart but try to stick to music where possible. This was, however, so much more than a harp festival and it has fed me in ways I could never have imagined, from an artistic and human perspective. Here are just a few memories.

As Ceren would have wanted, this festival was centred on three competitions: Young Hope, Young Artist and an open category for Chamber Music, not exclusively for harp groups (in fact, a Piano Trio won the top prize here). The solo harp categories of the competition took place in the beautiful Pera Museum in the heart of the Old City. We all enjoyed being steeped in history as much as the lovely café downstairs. Speaking of which, the hospitality for the juries was magnificent and we were catered for generously throughout the festival. Two special mentions for the organisation go to Ceren's best friend, Dr Lilian Tonella Tuzun, who felt like family from her first whatsapp message to me. Also, Ece Yavas, one of Ceren's students, who went on to study with Florence and is now an established soloist and teacher, gave herself generously to the running of the festival for many months. The inspirational women that are ensuring Ceren's legacy blooms and grows took my breath away with their energy and endless love for Ceren.

I was privileged to be on the jury (for the solo harp competitions Young Hope and Young Artist) alongside chair Marielle Nordmann, pianist Paola del Negro Plano and harpists Irena Czubeck-Davidson and Gozde Ece Yavas. A point of interest is that I took part in a competition when I was 18, adjudicated by Marielle Nordmann, and I remember every word she said in her comments to me personally as she encouraged me with both my playing and my composing. To be sat next to her on a jury was an honour as she has the most beautiful warmth, depth of knowledge and humanity and only wants success and happiness for every competitor.

The children's category was particularly impressive with the most gifted and dedicated 13 and 14 year olds showing artistry and understanding beyond their years. Huge congratulations to all of them - I had the treat of coaching a masterclass with them two days after the competition and we had a lot of fun, learning how to mimic the cuckoo in Handel and to give a light touch to the watery textures in French harp music. The Young Hope winner was Gedra Julia Tutkute from Lithuania, who achieved flawless rounded tone at all

times, beautifully varied colours and finely crafted phrasing. Second prize went to Bahar Asçi and Ada Canata from Turkey who both had integrity and depth to match their technical mastery. It was pure joy to experience such dedication to the harp from these young musicians.

The Opening Recital at the German Embassy was performed by Florence Sitruk, who shone in opera fantasies by Parish-Alvars (who visited Istanbul and spent four years travelling in this part of the world) and staples of the harp repertoire such as Hindemith's Sonata and Salzedo's Variations. When she performed her solo transcription of Schubert's 'Du bist die Ruh' (you are rest and peace) our hearts stopped beating as Florence's immaculate control of the harp allowed a perfect and soulful delivery. Ceren would have loved it. There were moving spoken tributes by Michael Reiffenstuel, the Consul General, and Ceren's sister Imre Tuylu. From this moment, no one could forget for a moment that we were there for Ceren and her memory was both alive and giving musical life throughout the festival. After the concert, we were treated to a reception with wine and hot food, all provided by the German Consulate in association with the festival, as Ceren had attended the German high school whilst she was growing up in Istanbul.

Some people you meet in life have such depth of humanity and strength of heart that you can't help but be drawn to them. They attract people to them like bees to flowers, spreading warmth and love wherever they go. It is not an exaggeration to say that Florence Sitruk's artistic direction of the festival took this approach and she gathered around her a musical team of big hearts, open minds and courageous travellers, to celebrate a life lived for music and humanity. Ceren Necipoglu's life. It was also fitting that Marielle Nordmann was the head of the jury as she is such a unique human. It was a gift to hear her impart words of wisdom to the young musicians. "We need you. Music needs you. Life needs you. As you are." "In the silence, a lot of things appear." "When I play in a concert I think there must be only children. And I must be very clear in what I say, because I have something very fresh and important to tell." These are just some quotes from her masterclass, where she was keen to share something of herself, something deeply personal. She encouraged the students to invest more in humanity than music and to consider how closely we are all bonded. "I am nothing without the other." (meaning, we need one another) "Because there are no others, we are only one." "If you have no one to build you a harp, you are nothing. You have no harp. If you have no one to build you a house, you have no where to live, nowhere to practice your harp."

There were wonderful workshops with composers and a beautiful gala concert in the famous Cemal Resit Rey Concert Hall, where I performed my own music including a newly written Turkish 'Kolbasti' and the other jury members and competition prize winners performed too. The concert and the festival closed with the arresting and mournful sound of the solo Scottish bagpipes as Lindsay Davidson played a heartfelt lament for Ceren. The sound of the muezzin calling people to prayer across the Old City was still in my ears, mingled with Ceren's lament, as I boarded the flight home. A final note of thanks has to go to EE for cutting me off (admittedly as a result of two months unpaid bills). That week spent without the distraction of my phone was the greatest gift money could (fail to) buy!

Eleanor Turner