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Héloïse Carlean-Jones holds the L. Daniel Dannenbaum Fellowship at Curtis. PHOTO: JANICE CARISSA

Exploration and Expression

French-born harpist Héloïse Carlean-Jones digs deep into the score, and then lets go.

BY DAVE ALLEN

Landing a spot on the Philadelphia Orchestra’s substitute list is not uncommon for Curtis students. Still, it’s a major leap—one that confers valuable experience and considerable prestige.

Héloïse Carlean-Jones took a somewhat risky path to this achievement in 2016, during her third year at Curtis. She had prepared a concerto by Handel for her audition, though she and her teacher, Philadelphia Orchestra principal harp Elizabeth Hainen, differed in their interpretations. “I don’t have to prove anything,” Héloïse recalls thinking as the audition approached. “I’m just going to be *me*”—even if that meant taking a tempo faster than her teacher had advised.

During the audition—played from behind a screen, as with all major symphony orchestra auditions—Ms. Hainen recalls, “I wasn’t sure it was her after all. There were differences in interpretation that I definitely respected.”

This experience hints at a bold, almost impulsive streak in the fourth-year harp student, one informed by a deep musicality that is fed, in turn, by a desire to get to the bottom of every



Héloïse in a lesson with her teacher, Philadelphia Orchestra principal harp Elizabeth Hainen PHOTO: PETE CHECCIA

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score she plays. Raised in Paris by émigrés from South Africa, Héloïse was introduced to the harp through music classes in elementary schools after playing the piano from an early age. “That was when I realized the harp was something real, something you could actually play,” she says. “It wasn’t just something you’d see in *The Aristocats*.”

This reference to an American cartoon set in France seemed oddly humorous amid a young French woman’s impressions of the United States. Interestingly, Héloïse says the French view of Curtis is that it has “a European philosophy,” though she notes a marked contrast between the French *conservatoires* where she previously studied and her years at Curtis. “There’s a lot more energy and positivity here, balanced with healthy criticism,” she says. Despite her success in harp competitions—she played her first at age 13, after traveling alone to Russia—she recalls lacking confidence; her acceptance at Curtis in 2014 seemed, at the time, a stunning validation.

“I feel being at Curtis has opened me up,” she says. “Before coming here, everything was clearly laid out: do your homework, practice, go to school, eat lunch. Now I think more about, ‘What am I doing? What is life?’”

SINCERITY AND SELF-SCRUTINY

If young adulthood is typically a time to wonder what it all means, then Héloïse regularly applies those big questions to her musical self as well. Last year, following a master class with noted harpist Isabelle Moretti in Washington, D.C., Moretti called Héloïse’s playing “sincere and emotionally pure.” Rather than basking in praise, Héloïse was motivated to scrutinize her playing even more closely. “No one can teach you how to be sincere in your playing,” she says. “My goal is always to understand the music intellectually first, and from there, I can make it my own.” By contrast, in performance she aims to “give up everything” and to hold nothing back.

Ms. Hainen sees what she calls an “exploratory, almost precocious attitude” as fundamental to the expressivity in Héloïse’s playing. “She has this drive to explore the score at all costs,” she says. Since Héloïse entered Curtis, she notes, “I’ve seen tremendous growth in her ensemble skills, especially in the way she listens and makes adjustments.”

That adaptability was evident during a lesson last fall, as Héloïse contended with a transcription of Bach’s famed violin sonata, BWV 1001. Over the course of several run-throughs, she shaped up some slightly ragged phrases and incorporated her teacher’s advice to play longer, more violin-like lines. A performance later in the semester was even more burnished: organic, free-flowing, and all of one piece.

Héloïse has approached new repertoire with similar rigor through 20/21, Curtis’ contemporary music ensemble, performing works by Kaija Saariaho, Unsuk Chin, and others. She has also premiered pieces by student composers while advising them on how to write capably and



Héloïse warms up before a Curtis Symphony Orchestra performance in Verizon Hall. PHOTO: DAVID DeBALKO

idiomatically for harp. “A lot of composers forget the physical component” of the instrument, she observes. “They come to the harp room and then see what my hands can do and what my feet can do.”

Emma Resmini, a fourth-year flutist also drawn to contemporary repertoire, has performed with Héloïse on numerous occasions. Together with soprano Alize Rozsnyai, a 2015 opera graduate, they took on a work for flute, harp and voice, Joseph Schwantner’s *Wild Angels of the Open Hills*. “There was no recording online, and when we first looked at the score, I think we were all extremely intimidated,” Emma says. All three musicians had to double on percussion instruments such as tuned water glasses and crotales, with spoken and sung elements written into the flute and harp parts.

Héloïse encountered further technical challenges as well. “I was constantly moving pedals and changing positions on the strings,” she recalls. “It kind of drove me crazy!” The final performance, with strange timbres and spellbinding extended techniques in place, rewarded the challenge: “It was so satisfying ... the effect and character that emerged from each movement was immediately clear.”

Even when providing accompaniment in classical works—like the Saint-Saëns and Massenet pieces she has performed with fourth-year violinist Maria Ioudenitch over their years at Curtis—her commitment shines through. “It was quite magical to play traditional violin staples with the harp,” Maria says. “Héloïse is always on top of things, never neglecting rehearsal time and organization, all in favor of making the music the best it can be.”

Ultimately, for her, every performance—whether in a starring role or a supporting one—is a chance to get closer to the absolute expression of musical integrity, as well as a chance for the audience to “discover who you are beyond the music. Just thinking about that opens a lot of doors.” ♦

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—HÉLOÏSE CARLEAN-JONES

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“It’s the people that you meet, especially the students. You don’t meet musicians of this caliber anywhere else. I’ve learned so much from playing with them and even from just watching them practice. I had almost no chamber music experience before coming to Curtis, and in my first rehearsal, I could tell that the other students were thinking way beyond the notes on the page: about colors, about energy, and about how to transfer it from one player to the next. I thought, ‘I should be doing this, too!’ At Curtis, you find this common ground in order to play together, and you have tons of opportunities to perform and to learn.”

PHOTO: JANICE CARISSA

