Israel Harp Contest –1959-2019

by Julia Rovinsky

Do miracles happen at all? Sometimes they do.

Try to imagine Israel in 1959: the Old City of Jerusalem is under Jordanian control and the existence of the State itself is still in great danger; hundreds of people are living in tents as the housebuilding industry can't manage the numbers of newcomers. Already, in the beginning of the year, the food rationing card system is cancelled (which measured 500 gr of meat and 10 eggs per person per month) and it will still be a year before the first supermarket in Tel-Aviv will open…

And here appears a man who decides that the time has come for Israel to become a more fully mature and for him this meant – The Arts.



Igor Stravinsky (left) and Aharon Zvi Propes (middle) in 1962.

His name was Aharon Zvi Propes. Not being a musician himself but being a true music lover: he had a rare combination of patriotism -in the naive, idealistic, and non-political sense of the word, and also mundane practicality. And he offered to hold an International Harp Contest in Israel – the first one in the history of music.

The harp is one of the first known musical instruments mentioned in the Bible. The Great Jewish King David was known as a harp player. Actually, his rise to power started from playing his magic instrument to delight king Saul. The harp therefore brings with it not only sounds, but also a story, the story of the Jewish people and the story of music.

Music is unique as it touches the heart before the words which come from the brain. It is unique in its capability to bewitch and enthrall, and in its possibility to bring down walls and open hearts, just as David, who is known played well, showed us, and as all music lovers know. It has been thousands of years for the harp's enchanted sounds to resonate in the air. The harp is the magical poet of any ensemble or orchestra. The harp's soft sound carries its listeners to other dimensions and the playing of harp strings creates an beautiful atmosphere that blend the present and the past.

The harp's shape, beauty and its delicate sound served as inspiration to many artists including Rembrandt. Marc Chagall even designed a gold coin for the contest with the figure of King David playing harp.



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF FIRST THREE PRIZE WINNERS

SUSANNA MILDONIAN

Susanna Mildonian was born in Venice, Italy, in 1940. Her father is a Russian Armenian from the Caucasus and her mother is Turkish. She began her musical training with piano at the age of five, and when ten years old she began the study of the harp at the Venice Conservatory. She has given solo concerts and has appeared as soloist with the Conservatory Orchestra. She is a pupil of Mme. Marguerita Cicognari, and graduated this year from the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory. Miss Mildonian is scheduled to appear as soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, with the Paris Radio and with the Santa Cecilia Orchestra in Rome.

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SUSANN McDONALD

Susan McDonald was born in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1935, and has played the harp since six years of age. She studied with Mlle. Henriette Renié in Paris and also with Mme. Lily Laskine at the Paris Conservatoire where, at the age of 19, she was the winner of the Grand Premier Prix for harp. She made her New York debut in 1957 and has toured this country extensively. Outstanding among her achievements was the series of three recitals comprised of works originally written for the harp, presented in Carnegie Recital Hall last year.

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EDWARD WITSENBURG

Edward Witsenburg was born in Holland in 1934. He is a student of Mme. Phia Berghout and a graduate of the Amsterdam Conservatory of Music. He is a professional harpist, holding the position of first chair with the Hague Philharmonic Orchestra this season.

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First three prize winners in 1959: Susanna Mildonian, Susann McDonald, and Edward Witsenburg.

Last year we celebrated the 60th anniversary of this wonderful Contest, and all the First Prize Winners of all previous International Harp Contests had been invited to perform the varied repertoire of musical pieces composed for the harp accompanied by the musicians of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Israeli Harp Contest has become the highlight of musical activity in the field, and contest has set the harp in its appropriate position in the world of music. Every three years, the world's most outstanding harpists gather in Israel, bringing with them the magical sounds of the ancient instrument. The upcoming contest will be the 21st, and will take place in October 2021.



Members of the contest jury and prominent visitors during the contest in 1962. Among them: Tsutomu Mimura, Pierre Jamet, Jacqueline Borot, Lucile Johnson Rosenbloom, Maria Korchinska, Lucile Lawrence, Phia Berghout, Clelia Giatti Aldrovandi, Inga Graae, Klaria Szarvas, Joseph Tal, and Aristid von Würtzler.



Winner of the 1962 contest: Lynne Turner.

Sixty years ago, the contest was a ground-breaking event, it was the harbinger of all competitions, the world's first ever competition for the harp. Over the years, even though other international and national competitions followed, the International Harp Contest in Israel still remains the most prestigious in this field. Above all, the Israeli Contest provides the best stage for talented young musicians, the world over, who chose to play this unique instrument.

Last year's celebration continued for a whole month that included many celebratory concerts which featured our Festive Gala Concert, where seven winners of prior competitions gathered on one stage: Lynne Turner and Emily Mitchell from the United States; Chantal Mathieu and Anaïs Gaudemard from France; Gwyneth Wentik from The Netherlands; Lenka Petrovic from Serbia; and our own Sivan Magen from Israel.


L to R: Gwyneth Wentik (1998), Lynne Turner (1962), Emily Mitchell (1979), Julia Rovinsky (Artistic Director), Anaïs Gaudemard (2012), Lenka Petrovic (2018), Sivan Magen (2006).


Winner of the 19th Contest: Yuying Chen.

The preceding month we also organized a concerts with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra featuring Yuying Chen from China, the winner of the 19th Contest and many other concerts.

Sixty years later, we proudly take stock of our achievements. Most of the greatest and best-known harpists in the world are the prize winners of our competitions. Since our inception, more than six hundred contestants have participated in our twenty contests; they have performed musical pieces especially created by Israeli composers, thus enriching the harp repertoire and the world of music.

We look forward seeing you in October 2021 at the 21st International Harp Contest in Israel.

Born in St. Petersburg, **Julia Rovinsky** graduated from the Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg State Conservatory. In 1988 she was a prize winner of the All-Union Harp Competition in Moscow.

Since immigrating to Israel in 1991 Julia Rovinsky has become a central figure on Israel's concert scene. She appears regularly as a soloist with different orchestras, mainly with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Maestro Zubin Mehta. She also appeared in many chamber music ensembles and took part in a number of leading festivals in Israel and around the world. In 2002 she won the Prime Minister Prize for best performance of Israeli music.

In recent years, Julia Rovinsky has recorded several CD's, both for solo harp and chamber music and her arrangements for harp are very popular in concert scenes all over the world. She is successfully given Master classes in Europe, South and North America and Asia.

Julia Rovinsky is Principal Harpist of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and Professor at the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music, Tel-Aviv University. Since 2016 she is the Music Director of the International Harp Contest in Israel.

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