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# PACIFIC HARP PROJECT

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## Media Reviews

### [Deep Roots Magazine, September 23, 2016, by Dan McGee](#)

Harp (Megan Bledsoe Ward), vibraphone (Noel Okimoto), bass (Jon Hawes), drums (Alan Ward)—that’s the Pacific Harp Project, a culturally diverse, well-schooled quartet committed, at least on this self-released, Kickstarter-funded debut album, to invigorating traditional harp repertoire with splashes of improvisational jazz and pop (even crossing, on a couple of occasions, into Mancini-like meditations suitable for a noir-ish film escapade or something on the order of *Peter Gunn*—check out the captivating, moody twists and turns of “Rhapsodie,” built on a classic 1923 solo harp piece by Marcel Grandjany but enticingly expanded texturally [and in subtext] by thoughtful, economical solos courtesy Okimoto on vibes and Hawes on bass).

A template is established in the captivating opening number, “Sonatine.” Composed by Marcel Tournier in 1924, *Sonatine pour harpe, Op. 30* was itself inspired by Ravel’s Sonatine for piano. The arrangement by Megan Bledsoe Ward opens up into a brisk, jazzy shuffle keyed by her fleet harp soloing and a tenderly stated theme-and-development by Okimoto’s vibes.

Fortunately for listeners, Ms. Ward’s liner notes serve as an informed guide to what is taking place within each track in terms of style, structure and reimagined approaches. The dozen compositions here are evenly divided between originals by Ms. Ward and Mr. Ward and otherwise by Ms. Ward’s inspired arrangements of works by Ravel, Debussy, Liszt, in addition to the aforementioned tunes by Tournier and Grandjany.

You always anticipate beauty from Ravel and Debussy, and so beauty ensues everywhere the PHP takes these composers’ works. For instance, in *Danse Sacrée*, the first of a two-movement Debussy composition, the harpist’s intoxicating, swirling glissandos and evocative arpeggios remain but Ms. Ward rewrote the bass accompaniment. So now we hear Mr. Hawes discreetly following the harp with a *sotto voce* monologue of steady, supportive contrasts to the harp’s harmonic shifts; in the second movement, *Danse Profane*, the main theme has been transformed into a jazz waltz, springy and ebullient, with the vibes and drums enhancing the uplifting mood with energetic retorts tastefully deployed. Ravel’s *Intro & Allegro* (composed in 1905) is presented as a kind of companion piece to

Debussy's *Dances*, with, again, the harp part hewing close to Ravel's intentions whereas the other instruments take matters into a different dimension. For a bit the harp falls away as the vibes, bass and drums swing into a cool, understated groove with Modern Jazz Quartet overtones. The harp returns, rather sneakily, about midway through the six-minute track with a series of arpeggiated musings of a more contemplative nature than what the other instruments were laying down; then, near the four-minute mark, a dramatic arpeggio signals a dark turn to the proceedings, a curious, enveloping sadness both sweet and mystifying that seems to be heading towards a dirge-like finish until...at about the five-minute mark the clouds lift and the bright, sunny melody returns, along with the emotional lift the vibes provide, and everyone lives happily ever after, so to speak.

The original tunes follow this template as well. One of the album's most memorable moments is Ms. Ward's "Willow Waltz." An engaging simplicity marks this work, from the unembroidered harp part establishing a lovely melody line and returning to it following a lively vibraphone discourse as the drums provide an unobtrusive underpinning. Her "Serafina," with its exotic sounding arpeggios and wash of percussion underneath, along with some atmospheric clicking Mr. Ward contributes on bass, is a delicate, tranquil gem with a bit of an Asian feel about it. With a melody "inspired by spy movies," as Ms. Ward writes, "Incognito" closes things out rather unexpectedly in being so haunting and ominous. There's a lot of space in the arrangement, many dark corners where the bass is found whispering conspiratorially and the vibes hint at something untoward in the offing, as the harp offers only scattered notes here and there, like a nervous onlooker to subterfuge, until the whole exercise fades to silence.

In the end, the individual virtuosity of the PHP players is most admirable; that the album sings, if you will, owes everything to the passion and commitment the musicians bring to the music. And in Megan Bledsoe Ward the harp has found an advocate to whom attention must be paid. Presumably the group takes the Pacific part of its name from the musicians' home base of Hawaii but the dictionary definition of "pacific" gives us meanings such as "calm; tranquil" and "at peace; peaceful" and "peaceable; mild." Here's where the delicate balance is struck most impressively: calm, tranquil, peaceful, mild, PHP's is soothing music in a troubled time but not so soothing as to be unchallenging. It's all good.

***[DownBeat Magazine, June 2016, by Frank-John Hadley](#)***

Hawaii-based Pacific Harp Project's eponymous album (Self Release; 57:16; 3.5 stars) has in its central role Megan Bledsoe Ward's plucked or strummed harp. Using her sharp musical intelligence, she encourages vibraphonist Noel Okimoto and the rhythm section into helping her transform pieces by Debussy, Liszt, and Ravel into engaging jazz. Ward's original material is largely mesmeric with scintillating plays of light and subtle colors.

[Harp Column Magazine, March 1, 2017, by Alison Young](#)

Isn't that just the way it goes? You have an idea that morphs into a school project and the next thing you know you've created an act!

Well, something like that.

Harpist Megan Bledsoe Ward studied classical harp at Eastman—she's got the Mozart Flute and Harp Concerto down pat. She's a composer and honored with one of her pieces getting a performance at an international harp convention, but all the while she was fascinated with the less traditional. It was this hankering for something different that led her to propose an atypical subject for her doctoral thesis while at the University of Washington, *The Harp in Jazz and American Pop Music*. And it's good stuff because even my colleague Christian McBride, host of National Public Radio's "Jazz Night In America" considers it the authority when it comes to the subject.

So the logical next step? Make some of that jazz. And what holds my interest most in the Pacific Harp Project's self-titled debut album is Ms. Ward's loyalty to her roots as a legit classical performer, while at the same time jamming with Hawaii's finest jazzers. The project features the talents of some of vibraphonist, Noel Okimoto, bassist Jon Hawes, and Ms. Ward's husband, drummer Alan Ward.

Each piece is based on some of the most important works from the harp canon—with a few tasty originals by Ms. Ward. One highlight is the funky duet of walking electric bass to an evanescent and mostly untouched Debussy *Danse Sacre*. Ms. Ward floats over the hyperactive bass and finally coaxes him to her wavelength. The reimagining of the second dance, *Profane*, is silky in its insouciance. A jazzy waltz has harp and vibre cleverly interchanging solos like two mezzos in close timbre. The harp is not a visitor, but a card-carrying member of the jazz ethos.

They say the entire enterprise got its start with *First Take*, a kind of game played during their Rochester days of "Exquisite Corpse" where each artist adds a bit onto what's just been created. There is a strong groove to the piece, and the harp sets the tone for the quartet. This is the piece that changes our perceptions of what the harp can do.

The opening work, *Revenge of the Harpies*, is the loveliest of them all. Using the cadenza in Ravel's *Tzigane* as a starting point, Ms. Ward tricks the ear and leaves us wondering if we've tuned into the middle of a performance, just in time for some magic. Again, the use of vibres in such a similar color range allows for super subtle shifts in resonance. The music feels like a living, breathing organism in spite of the fact that no instruments are played using air. That is indeed magic.

This is a beautiful and unusual recording and will give you many hours of enjoyment listening again and again. I highly recommend it.

### [Jazz Weekly, April 21, 2016, by George W. Harris](#)

Jazz and the harp have been a tenuous couple since the beginning. Dorothy Ashby bopped it, Alice Coltrane put it into modal form, and Carol Robbins does some nice bluesy stuff. That's about it, but here are a couple albums that might push the idea forward.

Megan Bledsoe Ward seems intent on changing that. Here, she teams up with Noel Okimoto/vib, Jon Hawes/b and Allan Ward/dr for a lithely swinging mix of originals and takes on classical thoughts.

Ward's touch on the harp is similar to a high tuned guitar when she picks on the ballads "Portrait" and her conversation with the drums on "Serafina." The teaming of vibes and drums as a sonic foil works well on "Revenge of the Harpies" and "First Take" and there is no sense of novelty as the strings weave from strums to single note ideas on "Rhapsodie" and "Dance Sacree." Hawes' bass does some nice contrast and compare on "Incognito" and you don't even think "classical" when you hear this band's take of Liszt's "Un Sospiro." Nothing bad to harp about here!

### [CD Hotlist, March 7, 2016, by Rick Anderson](#)

I'm fairly open-minded about instrumental configurations when it comes to jazz, but having had a sonically traumatic experience with a jazz bassoonist some years ago, I'm still a bit wary when it comes to jazz for traditionally classical instruments (except violin). So I approached this album of harp-vibes-bass-drums compositions with some trepidation, but was immediately won over: first of all, harpist and bandleader Megan Bledsoe Ward has a solid grasp of jazz idiom—she's not a dabbler or a dilettante. Second of all, this quartet swings powerfully and Ward herself writes beautiful melodies. Third, when she ventures into the very dangerous territory of arranging classical pieces in a jazz style, she comes out the other side not just unscathed but triumphant. Highly recommended to all collections.

### [AllAboutJazz.com, March 9, 2016, by Dan Bilawsky](#)

Harp happenings are relatively rare in jazz, but they are there. And when two highly agreeable and strikingly different harp-centric affairs appear on your doorstep around the same time, it really makes you stop and take notice of the instrument, its potential, and the players who are moving it forward and outward in various directions. Both of the releases under discussion here take cues and inspiration from specific styles and/or role models, but neither one is easily categorized. Each of these records leads the listener to the same conclusion: The harp has been unchained and left to go wherever it's guided.

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While selections from composers Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Franz Liszt appear here, this is *not* a classical album. The work of each of those esteemed gentlemen simply serves as leaping-off points for Pacific Harp Project.

Megan Bledsoe Ward, like many a harpist before her, received classical training. But a desire to look beyond the harp's most common musical homeland emerged over time, leading her to explore the instrument's place in popular music and jazz in her doctoral dissertation. Now, Bledsoe brings those musings to musical life with some help from vibraphonist [Noel Okimoto](#), bassist Jon Hawes, and drummer Allan Ward.

This music is built on the idea of creating the present by stretching, refurbishing, and borrowing from the past. The opener—Bledsoe's arrangement of the first movement of Maurice Tournier's "Sonatine pour harp"—is the perfect example of how that m.o. is put into practice: Bledsoe begins with a mesmerizing, as-written presentation of the two main themes, immediately establishing her credibility; the band enters with a pseudo-samba that underscores Okimoto's work on the first melody; the groove evaporates, inviting the slow and sedate second theme to enter; and the music ramps up again, bringing the original groove and statement back. All of the DNA comes straight from Tournier, but the performance belongs to this band.

All of the music that follows works in similar fashion. "Revenge Of The Harpies," based on Ravel's "Tzigane," marries 2-2-2-3 rhythm cycles and swing to the music; the dignity and demeanor of American spirituals surfaces in "Rhapsodie," a number based on a Gregorian chant and tied to blues language; Debussy's "Danse Profane" becomes a pleasant carousel ride, inviting soloists to take a spin; and the absorbing "Serafina," an original reverie that first came to life as a solo harp piece, succeeds with a blend of traditional techniques and folk-ish overtones. Across a dozen numbers, Pacific Harp Project proves that the harp can travel far from home without ever forgetting where it actually came from.

[\*The Aquarian Weekly: Rant 'N' Roll, March 2, 2016, by Mike Greenblatt\*](#)

The self-titled CD from **Pacific Harp Project** is unlike anything I've heard in years. We're not talkin' blues-harp here. Megan Bledsoe Ward plays the kind of heavenly-sounding harp where angels tread. Now imagine that sound augmented by a vibraphone plus rhythm section on pieces by Ravel, Debussy and Liszt. This 12-track gem will entrance, enchant, mesmerize and hypnotize you into their web of jazz waltzes, folk originals and pop flourishes. It's different. It's stimulating. I love it. And it's good for you.

[\*TheJazzPage.com, February 9, 2016, from "Raves: Latest Music We Like"\*](#)

The Pacific Harp Project is something rare, unique and enjoyable. The effort features the harp as the centerpiece of a contemporary music ensemble. The addition of vibraphone to the mix is also a nice twist on the traditional band personnel setup. Megan Bledsoe Ward is the group's extraordinary harpist. She's joined by Noel Okimoto on vibes, Jon Hawes on bass and Allan Ward on drums. Performing a mix of originals and wonderfully arranged take on classical pieces by Claude Debussy,

Maurice Ravel, and Franz Liszt, the ambiance that the unit creates is captivating. Definitely check these guys out.

### [Midwest Record, February 2, 2016](#)

Classically trained and with a doctorate in jazz, harpist Megan Ward wanted to take her beloved harp to places it's never been before. Hooking up with a diverse crew of players in Hawaii with dandy resumes, she rolled tape and let the good times happen. Contemporary instrumental music that doesn't fit conveniently into easy pigeon holes, Ward and the gang set sail quite nicely with a set that delivers high quality chops without any self consciousness or ego. A delightful set that feels like summer evenings, they stepped to the line and we aren't required to take any chances. Well done throughout.

### [LA Jazz Scene, February, 2016, "Half Notes"](#)

For something different, *The Pacific Harp Project* fills the bill nicely. **Megan Bledsoe Ward** is the harpist, **Noel Okimoto** plays vibraphone, **Jon Hawes** plays the bass along with **drummer Allan Ward**. The CD is interesting because it features both classical and contemporary, which can often be a potent mix. The CD features classics from Ravel, Grandjany, Debussy and Liszt as performed by the group: The music also goes into more personal pieces. Musicians might enjoy this unusual mix of classic and modern. Bledsoe Ward began playing harp at age 10 but has consistently been interested in jazz and pop music. She teaches harp lessons in Hawaii and Alaska. So here is an example of adventurous explorations.

### [Honolulu Star Advertiser, February 7, 2016, by John Berger](#)

Harpist Megan Bledsoe Ward is joined by Noel Okimoto (vibraphone), Jon Hawes (bass) and Allan Ward (drums) in demonstrating the possibilities of using a harp as a jazz instrument in this self-titled debut album by the Pacific Harp Project. Think Hiroshima with Ward's harp in place of June Kuramoto's koto, but with fewer additional instruments. The advantage here is that with only three other musical instruments sharing the spotlight, the harp is more prominent.

The 'project' — the group and the album — is an outgrowth of Ward's 2012 doctoral dissertation, 'The Harp in Jazz and American Pop Music.' She explains in the liner notes that she has always been interested in performing jazz but that the harp is not well suited to playing many of the songs that have become standards of the genre. A solution here is to take compositions written for harp and rearrange them for performance by harp and rhythm section. She's not the first to bring the harp into a jazz milieu, but her choices of material and arrangements are good ones.

The decision to include Okimoto also was a good one. The vibes give the arrangements a second melodic instrument, and the passages in which Okimoto solos with Hawes and Ward take the listener into warmer 'lounge music' climes.

[ASX.COM, February 12, 2016, by Carol Banks Weber](#)

The best music, believe it or not, often needs to be listened to carefully. Here's the Pacific Harp Project doing weightless but active jazz on its self-released, self-titled Dec. 4, 2015 album.

The [Pacific Harp Project](#) gathers together three exciting musicians around harpist [Megan Bledsoe Ward](#)'s elongated, thoughtful, and in-depth movements. Vibist Noel Okimoto, drummer [Allan Ward](#), and bassist [Jon Hawes](#) dance upon her show, never distracting but complementary, and always informative, with an illusory effect in mind.

"Since I began playing the harp at age 10, I've wanted to play in a non-traditional setting," Bledsoe Ward said in a press release. "My training is in classical harp, but my doctoral dissertation explored the harp in jazz and American pop music. It inspired me to combine my experience with my passion and create Pacific Harp Project. PHP would be nothing without the phenomenal musicians with whom I am lucky enough to play."

The musicians of the Pacific Harp Project come from far and wide, with loads of experience to bear, starting with the leader.

Bledsoe Ward comes steeped in academia: a Bachelor of Music in Harp Performance, a Master of Music in Harp Performance and Literature, and a Master of Arts in Music Theory Pedagogy — all from the Eastman School of Music, as well as a Doctorate of Musical Arts in Harp Performance at the University of Washington. She wound up publishing that doctoral dissertation in 2012, the same dissertation that started this Pacific Harp Project and recording.

She also performs in Alaska and Honolulu. She's the principal harpist with the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra, and an instructor at Pacific Rim University.

Musically, she's such a standout: "Alaskan Young Artist" of 2007, "Performer's Certificate" from Eastman School of Music, performing her solo harp composition, "Fantasy On A Red Wheelbarrow" at the 2010 USA-International Harp Competition, numerous other honors and scholarships. She's on recordings by Melissa Fischer, Kurt Reimman, and the Canadian Brass and Eastman Wind Ensemble, along with two previous releases, *Against The Current* and *City Nights*, with her own classical-fusion band, NeoCollage.

Vibist [Noel Okimoto](#) is a well-known drummer in Hawaii who's made memorable grooves on his own with various notable performances and recordings, such as the award-winning, 2014 album, *'Ohana* with pianist [Makoto Ozone](#), jazz-fusion trumpeter Tiger Okoshi, and bassist Benny Rietveld of Santana, and the 2010 *Rhythm Summit*, featuring Taiko drummer [Kenny Endo](#) and bassist [Dean Taba](#).

Drummer Allan Ward comes from Colorado University, Syracuse, and the Eastman School of Music, the same as Bledsoe Ward. He's in the Royal Hawaiian Band along with Okimoto.

England-born, Massachusetts-raised bassist Jon Hawes plays both electric and upright on this record. Another Hawaii resident, Hawes has worked with the best in the islands, including [Makana](#) ("The Descendants") and the Grammy-nominated *The Wild Hawaiian* with [Henry Kaponu](#).

One album, 12 songs, classical covers and a few hand-picked originals characterize this experiment of Bledsoe Ward's. The project originated from her doctoral dissertation, "The Harp in Jazz and American Pop Music."

In her project's website bio, the harpist acknowledged the difficulty of generating jazz from such a classical instrument as the harp. She went back to the French impressionist and 20th century for a collection of music that she and her project's band could improvise in a jazz setting.

"I've always loved jazz, and I've always wanted to play jazz on the harp. But the way the harp is constructed makes it difficult to apply a lot of jazz repertoire to the instrument," she explained. "There are several jazz harpists who have found success, often by creating their own niche of jazz music which works well for harp. One genre of music that hasn't been explored in an improvisational context is traditional harp repertoire. The harp music canon contains a plethora of French impressionist and 20th-century music, which exhibit very similar musical aspects to works that great jazz improvisers have performed."

Megan Bledsoe Ward's academic history plays a huge role in the music, which initially sounds so cerebral and out there. The average listener senses that there is a lot more at play than the lilting, pretty music box scores of a little girl daydreaming about dancing in a ballet. Much of the liner notes contains references to fanciful classical composers, Maurice Ravel, Franz Liszt, Claude Debussy, and even more fanciful terms like "chromatic harp" and "cadences in A Major."

*Pacific Harp Project* definitely begs for further attention. Each time the listener replays the album, a new discovery is made. What may have sounded like nice background music for a nameless ballet on "Un Sospiro" the first time, starts to take better shape in subsequent visits. Bledsoe Ward tries to revisit Franz Liszt's "Un Sospiro" (A Sigh) in her new transition, leaving room for the other musicians to find their places. Not surprisingly, while 10th on the recording after the original composition, "Serafina," and Bledsoe/Ward's first co-written piece, "First Take," "Un Sospiro" became the impetus for this project. "This is the first piece I adapted for the band, and it was the inspiration for Pacific Harp Project. I was inspired by Liszt's beautiful textures and harmonies and their inherent possibilities for improvisation on the harp," Bledsoe Ward wrote in the liner notes.

Her harp technique and improvisation ignite a butterfly's path from one peaceful moment to another. Halfway through her meditative throes, she almost goes into a Japanese garden during the age of the Samurai and geisha, plucking, strumming, and seemingly searching for an elusive melody buried inside so much historical context.

"Sonatine" is about contrasts, how hard or soft the musicians play two main themes that replay with subtle precision. The song is more about the power of restraint in playing the nuances of a repeat melody rather than the power of one melody with constant changes. It's from French composer Ravel's "Sonatine for piano" and Marcel Tournier's "Sonatine pour harpe, Op. 30" adaptation in 1924. "Adapting the first movement of this piece for Pacific Harp Project, I begin with Tournier's opening presentation of the two main themes exactly as he wrote it. The rest of the band enters with an arrangement of the first melody and solos before transitioning into a statement of the slower, contrasting second theme."

The opening number features Okimoto on vibes, extending and excavating a haunting melody that branches out in waves. His strokes resound with the deafening authority of a keyboardist and percussionist, bearing down on the notes chromatically, rather than gently tapping them on a barely-there monotone.

"Revenge of The Harpies," another Ravel inspiration, allows for bassist Jon Hawes to lead in parts, too, which he does with masculine instinct. He really lifts the classical genre into the gloriously muddy arena of funk and jazz on "First Take" before Okimoto reaches enlightenment between the two on an even vibe.

The musicians on Megan Bledsoe Ward's new album contributed also to some of the songs, Allan on a number of originals, Okimoto and Hawes on an arrangement.

Classical music fans will dig the subtle depth of the jazz improvisations, however slight at first glance. Non-classical fans may need to make a cup of tea, sit back in the middle of the woods somewhere, and chill out with *Pacific Harp Project* — on a steady loop.

**[Honolulu Star Advertiser, February 8, 2019, by John Berger](#)**

Harpist Megan Bledsoe Ward brings her Hoku Award-winning ensemble (Instrumental Album, 2015) back with another imaginative project.

Pacific Harp Project is now officially a quintet, as Todd Yukumoto (soprano sax) has joined Ward, Jon Hawes (bass), Noel Okimoto (vibraphone/steel tongue drum/percussion) and Allan Ward (drums).

Kenny Endo (taiko and Japanese flute), Jamie Jordan (vocals) and Allen Won (soprano sax) sit in as guests.

The most ambitious creation in the collection is Ward's reworking of "Scintillation," a composition by French harpist Carlos Salzedo, into "Sketches of Scintillation," a suite of five movements that puts the spotlight on each of the five core instruments.

Vocalist Jordan gets the spotlight on "La Lettre," with Ward and Okimoto positioned as the most prominent musicians. Ward explains in the liner notes that the French lyrics are written as a letter from a lonely gardener to his absent lover.

Endo plays fue (Japanese flute) opposite Ward's harp on a composition titled "Sunflower (Himawari)" that he contributed to the project; Ward's arrangement of Endo's tune also utilizes his talents as a taiko master.

The group closes with "Broken Handel," Ward's take on a 1736-vintage composition by George Frideric Handel that she describes as "the alter ego of Handel's original." It is a delightful conclusion to a marvelous second album by Pacific Harp Project.

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