Game Changer

Harpist Charles Overton is throwing out the traditional playbook as he crafts his career in the 21st century music business

by Kimberly Rowe

A
d of harpists I know don’t like labels. In fact, I was once represented by a
to be honest, harpist who didn’t like the term “jazz harpist” for fear it
d paint her into a box. But that clearly hasn’t been a problem for

Charles Overton.

Equally comfortable on stage with a major symphony orchestra, playing chamber music at Marlboro, or jamming with his own jazz trio, the Charles Overton Group, he is in the process of defying the career path every musical genre. If you’ve known him for a while—however unaware I was of some things as my surprise, what is sur-

prising is how confident and self-assured Overton is with building a customized career in a rapidly changing musical world.

I caught up with him in Boston to find out more about how he’s doing it, and I think you’re going to find the answer to “listening to” is

CHARLES OVERTON: When did you know you wanted to be a professional harpist?

CHARLES OVERTON: Pretty early on into playing harp, I started playing harp at the end of the fourth grade because [harp teacher] Lynelle Ediger was the music teacher at my elementary school. She just pulled me aside after school one day and was like, “Go home and tell your mom that you need to play the harp.” I don’t know why it was the way I sang in choir or what it was. But I took to it. I had a trial lesson. I was playing the violin at the time and had been for six or seven years, but I sounded awful. Like every kid I just didn’t want to practice. I’d like to think I didn’t want to because it’s right in the ear and it’s so high and shrill. If you don’t sound good, it’s painful.

HC: They say everybody has to find their instrument.

CO: Exactly. I’m so lucky that a harpist taught at my elementary school. I tried it out with Lynelle’s [American Youth Harp Ensemble] program. Her harp ensemble program is amazing. With the violin, I pretty much played alone.

I went to lessons. I played in a recital. There was the occasional group class, once in a blue moon. With Lynelle’s program you’re immediately thrown into harp ensemble and it’s super fun. You get to play the instrument. You get to make friends. With our ensemble they tour. I think within the first two years of playing the instrument, or maybe it was the three, the ensemble took me to Paris, to Italy, we went to Portland, Ore., to Carnegie Hall. I couldn’t have been playing more than five or six years. Seeing that through playing the harp I can travel, I can make great friends, I can have all these experiences, it was a pretty easy decision that yeah, I definitely want to play this instrument professionally.

HC: How old would you say you were when that happened?

CO: The final push was when I went to Berklee. Boston University Tanglewood University, when I was 13. After that summer I sold.

HC: You were young.

CO: Yeah, super young. I don’t know what it was. It really clicked.

HC: Then you went on to Berklee. I know that school has a reputation for training musicians for the real world rather than a conservatory, traditional background. Here’s my question. What do you think it means to be a musician in the real world today?

CO: There’s a lot to that question.

HC: I know, it’s a loaded question.

CO: There are a few different things.

HC: What do you think the first thing that comes to mind is entrepreneurship, which is something that different schools teach in very different ways. I’d have to say that my creative personal spirit has come from my parents, first and foremost. Being at Berklee definitely taught you in certain real-world aspects. The main way that Berklee is a very large school for a music school. It was about 4,500 students when I was there, maybe 5,000 now. They don’t exactly provide each student with a mentor to specifically mold you and guide you into the person and musician that you can be. All the resources are there but you have to know where to seek out and find them for yourself. Kind of take note of what’s around you. How stuff makes you feel. What feels good to you. Want to be happy, which doors of music. You have to really know who and what you want to be with music and they seek out those opportunities. I feel like that’s very cool. There’s not anyone...
Success or failure is contingent on me and what I do. It’s a new kind of responsibility and accountability that you don’t really have with a large institution playing a large part in your success or failure.

HC: Is there a particular class you took at Berklee that resonated with you?

CO: It was more than just a class. Berklee has this thing called the Global Jazz Institute which is a small specialized program of maybe 30 students where you just get to work very one-on-one in an intimate environment with master jazz artists. The artistic director of the program is a jazz pianist named Danilo Pérez. He’s a genius. I got to work with him, Joe Lovano, Terry Lynne Carrington, John Patitucci, all the best jazz musicians singing and playing in the world—on a one-on-one basis, with students. I really enjoyed it and continue to do those classes today.

HC: There are a couple things. The first is that they led by example. HC: What’s their business?

CO: None of them own or own their businesses. My dad is the general manager of a Py, a Marine base exchange at Quantico. It’s basically a mall or shopping center for Marine families. That’s what he does. My mom’s in pharmaceutical sales. There are many things that go into entrepreneurship. The essential parts of my day are administrative work which is basically responding to emails, making sure my boss, my resume stuff is mostly updated, website maintenance. I’m not perfect so stuff can get out of date but those are areas that I make sure to touch upon at least once a day. Practicing both jazz and classical, whether it’s for something I have coming up for a competition, a gig, whatever. Seeking out future opportunities, competitions, different ways of furthering my career. Right now I’m preparing to record a new album on the jazz side of things, so I’m making arrangements, looking into recording spots. Then obviously there are gigs. Depending on how many gigs a week or what kind of gigs I have determines how much time I have to spend on those other things.

HC: You’ve talked about practicing both classical and jazz. I have some questions for you about that. Rumor has it that you applied and were accepted at Juilliard.

CO: Yes, that’s true.

HC: Why did you turn that opportunity down?

CO: Juilliard, it’s the thing that people think of when they think about going into music school. I didn’t take it lightly. It’s not like I turned my nose up at Juilliard in anyway, shape, or form. When I was applying and considering my college options I really had to consider both sides. I was months of figuring out what was the right future for me. I knew I wanted to play the harp professionally and I wanted to make my career more than just music. But I didn’t know what specifically looked like. During my senior year of high school the ideal situation that I was playing in an orchestra, top five, big orchestra, full time, being a principal harpist somewhere. That would be phenomenal. At the same time, I love orchestral music, as you know, our role is somewhat limited. The harp brings a real color and flavor to the orchestra that’s undeniable. At the same time I feel like we don’t contribute in the same way that a more active instrument like violin.

HC: You didn’t see yourself in that position forever.

CO: I felt that there had to be something more. Not that that’s not fulfilling, I don’t want to say that. Also, to get that job—to be lucky enough that the timing worked out that a job opened and I happened to be the best of basically a generation to win a job like that—the odds of that happening are slim already. How can I preserve my love of classical music as well as be successful as an orchestral musician. Juilliard and just that I needed a different experience in college.

HC: That’s really amazing that you were able to make such a clear decision. I think probably had people saying, ‘What are you doing?’

CO: I was lucky though. I had a lot of help. Again, my parents are the number one influences in my life. When I told them what I was thinking they were like, ‘Well you’ll make the best decision but we support you no matter what.’ So I talked to Felicia Pons-arnwe who taught at Berklee. I talked to [jazz harpist] Park Stickney basically just to see if I was crazy for wanting to explore classical, because I did have those people in my ear, ‘You must be crazy!’

HC: I’m going to ask the obvious follow up question here. It’s six years later. Are you happy with the choice you made?

CO: One thousand percent. I’m very grateful happy with the choice I made because not only did I get to go to Berklee, but while in Boston I still got to take classical harp lessons from Jessica Zhou, the principal harpist at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I don’t feel like I’m missing anything at all. I think a parents’ mindset is to get your kids into the best music program possible and I think that’s what we did. I looked on your website and I saw that you’ve been performing with the Boston Symphony, the Pope—those are some impressive credentials.

HC: Super exciting. I played for the last two years. I’m an extra, what is they call it for the orchestra. So if they need a second harp I’m one of the few people that they call.
HC: That's great. My question was going to be how do you keep your feet in both worlds but it seems like you haven't had any problem doing that.

CD: My mentality is to keep as many doors open as possible. You have to say to certain things, but I do everything I can to keep as many doors open as possible.

HC: I have a couple questions about your playing. Which comes easier for you—jazz or classical?

CD: That's tough. Depending on the day I probably answer differently. Just depending on how I feel. I feel working on something really informs how I feel about music. If I have a bad rehearsal with my quartet where we're not really in sync I start to think, "Oh, it's because I'm not committing to an idea." I feel like playing classical and jazz are so different. They demand such different things, but at the same time they are very similar. The thing that ties me to that is the concept of intention. Commitment. I feel that I'm doing well when I'm very confident in what I'm doing and very committed to pursuing an idea to its fullest in either one. Various things go into feeling that confidence. With classical, specifically my right thumb just sounds like garbage half the time. Depending on the day, if I shower right before I play, I feel better. Different things just makes your fingers feel different.

HC: This time of year is the worst I think.

CD: It's the worst. The harp is super right, and it's just hard to get anything but a thin sound in the top couple octaves.

HC: I have the same problem. I guess every instrument has its problems. I'm telling you I can make you some cliché questions because I want to know the answers. What is your favorite classical piece to play?

CD: Rhapsody by Marcel Grandjany, for sure. That's my go to.

HC: Why?

CD: I guess for a couple different reasons. That's one of the first pieces I learned when I was first learning the harp. I bought a bunch of Yolanda Kondonassis CD's. I don't know specifically why her. I just had a bunch of her CD's. I remember Rhapsody really stood out to me. A year into playing harp I was like, "I really have to play that piece." I finally learned it my senior year of high school. I just has a special place in my heart. I don't know why. I feel like it's one of those pieces that I don't struggle with at all. It seems to spill out of me when I play that. I don' have to think, "Oh, should I really pay attention to this crescendo here?" It's all very natural and I love that.

HC: That's awesome.

CD: What about jazz? What's your favorite piece to play for jazz?

CD: It really depends on the context. I play with a lot of different sub genres within jazz. I play in a setting with this Carnistic singer, an Indian classical singer that sings jazz. It's me, a bassist, a traditional Indian drummer, and her. I love what we do there. I play with my own quartet which is a little bit more modern classical jazz. I play with a trio where I kind of play banjo almost on the harp. Then there's a keyboardist/accordion player and a drummer. So lots of different things. A tune I keep coming back to is "Missy." It's kind of cliché. It's one of those songs that everyone knows and comes back to, but I really do love that piece.

HC: That's great. What inspired you to listen to it?

CD: On the classical side, Sivan Magen. He's an inspiration. I think his musicianship transcends the instrument while, at the same time, being so in touch with it. One of the things I love most about playing, no matter what, is we see the limitations of the instrument as a barrier to making music. I feel like he sounds like so much more than a harpist. Not that it's negative to sound like a harpist, but just takes in all levels. All of his playing is about it the music sounds different and embracing what makes the harp unique. I think that's really beautiful. I also think Emmanuel Ceysson is also amazing. He does things that I didn't think was possible and plays so clearly and brilliantly. I really love Monika Stafler. I love that she's unashamedly herself in all her musical pursuit. I don't know her but she came and visited Lynne's program in Berkeley a few times, and I got exposed to her music that way. She takes all of her musical influences and has such a clear identity and doesn't shy away from it even though it doesn't fit in any genre. At least not to my ear. Her music is just so much herself. I think that's really cool and really unique when someone manages to put it together. I'm just amazed and everything I aspire to do in jazz for sure. Edna Ascarate is another one. I listen to a lot of different musicians but in terms of harp, Edna, does things rhythmically that I never thought were possible and that is super cool.

HC: I agree. What about non-harpist music?

CD: I find myself listening, at least for inspiration, and just when I listen to music, I love listening to pianists. Flarists and guitarists but less so on the classical side for guitarists. Those are the instruments that I look to. In terms of classical music, Martha Argerich is really my favorite pianist to listen to. I can't say I've gleaned anything specifically from her way of playing that I actually incorporate into my own. I love watching her. She's so confident and so solid. I think that's super cool. On the jazz side of things I love listening to Brad Mehldau. He's one of my heroes. He's an American jazz pianist. He's in his 50s or 60s now. He played with everyone growing up. When he was super young he was a genius at bebop. Playing really fast eight-note lines, which is kind of the building blocks of what we do now in jazz. The jazz trio The Bad Plus is another group. I really like, Joshua Redman, a saxophonist player.

HC: Tell us about your CD, Convergence. What can people expect from it?

CD: Convergence is my first and only CD. I recorded it with my quartet, which we call the Charles Overton Group. It's made up of me on harp, Peter Barnick on drums, Max Ridley on the bass, and Greg Groove on Jr. on the tenor saxophone.

HC: I got to hear you guys last year at Sojourn. It was fantastic. I really loved it.

CD: It was actually. I love playing with those guys. Coming up in Berkeley...I have to go back a little bit. When I first got to Berklee I felt like I was learning a new language in and out in tune. People would swear that they didn't know what happened but it was in tune. It's the same thing. I guess beginning to adapt to being a harp player. Ideally in classical music that's what you should be doing too. It's less essential when you're in the early stages of classical, whereas in jazz that's what's going to take you forward.

HC: Yes, but going back to your CD.

CD: Yes. Finding people with that same mindset—finding your musical soul is something unique. I feel like I found that in all of [the quartet members]. It started with Peter because we went to high school together for a couple of years. Then later we had this jazz quartet. He has such a sensitive touch on the drums that is very rare. Stereotypically you think of a drummer as being this heavy, loud, forceful sort of instrument, but he plays with a touch that seems so conscience of every note he produces. It's rare to find. Then Max Ridley on bass is another person that I feel like we just click. It's the same way with everyone in the band. So I called this CD Convergence because I felt like convergence is this meeting of different things. It's rare that you find people that you feel this strongly about playing with or have such a connection with. All of us together I thought was a special thing.

HC: You talked about doing a new recording, is that with this same group?

CD: Same group. We're working on arranging and rehearsing the music right now. We have a tentative second week of April recording date. Hoping to get an album out by the fall.

HC: What song on Convergence are you most proud of?

CD: I'm most proud of a tune called "Osintan No. 7." It's actually not an original but it's by another harpist, Mavee Gilchrist. She had this project called "The Ostinato Project." I love one of the ostinatos on her project called "Ostinato No. 7." and I really did this re-imagining and reworking of the ostinato and took it to, I think, a different place
than her original recording. I love what we did with it.

HC: That's great. I want to circle back to your current place in time of coming out of school and kind of trying to find your career and what you're doing. If you could mold your dream career, what would that look like five years from now?

CO: There would be a couple things in that. On the classical side of things I would really like to see somehow myself doing more chamber music at a high level. I was lucky this past August to fill in for Sivan at [the Marlboro Festival] for a couple weeks for just a chamber project. In addition to the performance that I was there for, I got to work with some brilliant musicians, which really reinvigorated my love for chamber music, which I have always loved. I would really love to find and pursue chamber music at a high level. Unfortunately, in the direction that classical music is headed, I feel like to have a successful career in chamber music, you kind of have to have a thing. I don't want to say gimmick because that sounds cheap, but you really have to have an identifying thing. More and more it's on the edge of new music. I really love 20th century French music. We all do as harpsists. I would really love to play some of those masterworks with some really great musicians for an actual audience. Right now I play in a trio with two of my friends. We rehearse probably weekly but it's hard to find and build opportunities locally. If you do, it's great to play for friends and it's nice to support each other that way, but it would be nice to move into an arena that's just a little bit more public. On the orchestral side I'd just love to still be based in Boston and I hope BSO continues to call. I really love doing that. In five years at least, I don't see myself doing anything principal job or orchestra job anywhere else.

HC: Why is that? Is that just because you don't want to do that full time like we were talking about earlier?

CO: Pretty much. I have four groups, bands, that I'm passionate about. They're all so different and unique and I feel they're all really things that can go the distance in terms of have something special or unique to offer the jazz community. I'd really love to see those through, and I know it takes time. I'd really love to stay based in Boston, at least until I see that, for whatever reason, these things don't pan out. I'm really hopeful. That brings me to the jazz thing. With these projects, including my own quartet, I'd love to see them playing at different jazz festivals around the country and the world. At least visible, that's what I see as success. The jazz festivals circuit. Being either invited to or being booked through a booking agent at these different places. Continue doing that and earn a living doing that with these different groups. I'd be happy with that.

HC: I have another question. What skill would you say you learned in school, or elsewhere, that has served you and helping you establish your career path?

CO: Going back to what I said earlier, the element of self-accountability and self-reliance is the number one thing I learned from school and the number one thing that has helped me the most in beginning to shape a career. Not expecting someone to hold your hand through the process of building a career for you but knowing that you have to know what you want, and you have to figure out what to do to go after it. That's tough, and I don't really know all that entails, but having that as a home base, I feel, is essential.

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