

# Harpist takes center stage

■ Symphony will showcase instrument with rare work

By **TARA DOOLEY**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

After more than 24 years tucked behind the violin, viola, bass or cello sections of the Houston Symphony, Paula Page and her harp are moving into center stage in Jones Hall.

Page will be joined under the spotlight Thursday by soprano Twyla Robinson and

the symphony for the premiere of a new composition, *Absolute Ocean*.

The work — a rare combination of harp, voice and orchestra — will not just highlight a player who has made a career playing from the back of a symphony. It offers Page's beloved harp a rare chance to shine before an audience.

"It is a much more versatile instrument than people think," Page said. "Hopefully, they are going to hear enough of the harp itself that they will hear a different kind of sound than when it is in the orchestra."

Page's star turn is part of the symphony's plan to commission new concertos for the principal players in the orchestra. *Absolute Ocean* by Augusta Read Thomas is the eighth work in the series that has included concertos for instruments such as trombone, viola, double bass and horn.

"It is great for us to have musicians step out of the orchestra and be soloists," said Matthew VanBesien, executive director and CEO of the Houston Symphony. "That is artistically good for them."

Nudging players into the  
*Please see HARP, Page E8*



**JULIO CORTEZ:** CHRONICLE

**LIMELIGHT:** Harpist Paula Page, is the centerpiece of a new classical composition that was created especially for her and the Houston Symphony.

# HARP: 'Very few' such concertos

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limelight also gives the orchestra a chance to show off its own to the hometown audience, said Aurelie Desmarais, the symphony's senior director of artistic planning.

"When you have a jet-setting artist come in, we love them," she said. "We want to present them. They are the backbone of what we do. But ultimately people are really interested in the orchestra. They are interested in who is up on that stage."

Artistically, it may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for Page, she said. When the first rehearsals started Monday, Page said she felt she was helping to bring something new into the world.

"It is very exciting to have worked on something and know here you are at the last week," Page said. "It is like my granddaughter being born. It is a brand-new piece."

Page's first grandchild, Samantha Page Fossan, was born earlier this month.

*Absolute Ocean* came to life on a page in May, when Thomas delivered a copy of the new work to symphony music director Hans Graf, Page and Robinson. A cadenza, a musical interlude for the soloist, was added only a month ago.

The real work of playing the piece began Monday with a first rehearsal. It continues until Thursday night's premiere.

"This is where the music-making starts," said Thomas, who is based in Chicago. "They've learned the piece before, and now we get into the little details."

The commission for the work came from the symphony with the instruction to create a double concerto for soprano and harp.

"There are very few if any concertos for harp, soprano and orchestra," Thomas said.

It took Thomas at least a month to find the text that she would set to music. She settled on three poems by American poet E.E. Cummings, which make up the three movements of the concerto: *the moon is hiding in her*



JULIO CORTEZ: CHRONICLE

**TWO SOLOISTS:** The commission for *Absolute Ocean*, which will feature Paula Page on harp, came from the symphony with the instruction to create a double concerto for soprano and harp.

## MUSIC HISTORY

Houston Symphony principal harp player Paula Page joins soprano Twyla Robinson for the premiere of a new double concerto by Augusta Read Thomas.

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Sunday

■ **Where:** Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana

■ **What else:** Music Director Hans Graf also conducts the symphony in Mahler's Symphony No. 4.

*hair; who knows if the moon's a balloon; open your heart i'll give you a treasure of tiniest world.*

The first and third movements are slow, the second fast and whimsical, Thomas said.

The composition is tailor-made for Robinson, Page and the orchestra, Thomas said. Before she put a single note on the page, Thomas listened to all of Robinson's recordings. She also discussed the various sounds and timbres of the harp with Page.

Thomas said she envisioned the concerto as two helixes interacting, one made up of the two soloists, the other a combination of soloists and orchestra.

"The two soloists are constantly swirling around one another, and the orchestra is swirling around them," Thomas said.

In her mind, Thomas knows exactly how the piece will sound, even though it has yet to be played, she said. Her notations in the music are purposefully clear, so her musical instructions to the players cannot be misinterpreted, she said.

Page, on the other hand, is excited to hear the piece for the first time, she said. She has heard a recording that was made electronically but never on real instruments.

"I have a sense that it is really good," Page said. "That is part of what adds to the pressure. There is nothing to go on. There is no recording."

Page will be a small part of music history as the first harpist to perform *Absolute Ocean*. But as the night of the premiere looms, history is not her main concern.

"When it's over, I think I will look back and say, 'That was really neat,'" Page said. "But right now I'm just thinking that I want to do everything I can to make it a good performance and sell it to the audience."

"I'm in the moment, for sure."

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