



**Berlin, London, Tunbridge...** That's the wide world of harpist Christina Sonnemann, who calls the last of these destinations — a small bush settlement (population 90) in the Midlands of Tasmania — home.

Christina, 25, and her American-born parents, Jack and Margaret, moved to Tasmania via Queensland in 1990, having found a "decrepit old place" to start a B&B. They settled on the oldest building in the Midlands, built by a ticket-of-leave convict in 1825, and purchased it for \$20,000. The Tunbridge Wells Inn is still their home while Christina has set up house nearby in 'Nellie's', a cottage just down the road named after a former resident.

Tunbridge, formerly a busy stop on the main highway between Hobart and Launceston, is now effectively bypassed; the nearest shop or petrol station is 15 minutes by car. However, for Christina growing up in what some would call the middle of nowhere has helped shape her destiny as an internationally renowned harpist.

"You think it's the end of the world, but really it's the centre," she says with a smile. "I don't mean this in a bad way but one of the nicest things about living in a place like Tunbridge is that it's like a blank canvas."

"Musically I feel like I can do anything I want. As a performer or composer living in Europe, you have a strong sense of what's gone before, of what's around you; you must find a niche in the marketplace. Here I don't have to do that."

In fact, the freshness and originality of Christina's performances grew from giving concerts to remote communities in Tasmania. There she revealed a gift not only for playing the harp but also for showing audiences the exciting potential of this ancient instrument that's usually

associated solely with folk or classical music. Christina is not averse to slipping a cheeky Doris Day hit (*I'll String Along With You*) in between a Tchaikovsky cadenza and South American folk music. She plays, she talks, she sings and, at the end of the evening, her audience queue to meet her and to hear the harp explained Sonnemann-style — "Here, play it!").

"As a student, arts councils asked me to give concerts to remote communities and I felt people would not want to hear just Bach or a recital of music from the early 1900s," Christina says. "People in country audiences can be wonderful to perform to, but also quite challenging, and they've given me a certain confidence and willingness to experiment. I became very dedicated to talking concisely about the music, trying to give some illumination, while playing a huge diversity of music."

"I did wonder if this would be meaningful to people in the big cities of Europe and the US, who perhaps had more art and entertainment in their lives — so I was really amazed at how warm the response has been. I've definitely developed my own style here, because I didn't have a lot of judgment surrounding me. When I started composing, there wasn't that baggage of thinking, 'Can I compose when I haven't studied composition?' that I might have had in Europe or elsewhere. I just did it."

"It's been a lovely place to grow up." Christina believes her choice of instrument was made early. She recalls going to see the Australian Ballet's *Swan Lake* with her mother at the age of four and being attracted to "the biggest, prettiest, most expensively gorgeous instrument in the orchestra pit".

A generous bequest by her grandfather



CHRISTINA WAS DRESSED BY TASMANIAN DESIGN TEAM KYLIE RADFORD AND RICHARD POULSON FROM MORRISON. WWW.MORRISONSHOP.COM

**This page** Christina's pride and joy — an acoustic/ electric Camac harp from France. The ladder leads to a sleeping loft. **Facing page, clockwise from top left** Nellie's cottage; inside the cottage the original beams and the fireplace were left exposed — a contrast of old and new; the Sonnemanns — Margaret, Christina and Jack.

When the Sonnemanns bought Nellie's cottage at auction it was "more like a chicken coop"

