



Amy Kortuem's third release features elegant, sophisticated takes on the holiday music theme.

# harpfelt music

AMY KORTUEM PUTS MORE OF HERSELF INTO A NEW HOLIDAY RELEASE

by DREW LYON

Amy Kortuem's journey to the harp began with a gift from a friend and a nail clipper.

Jack McGowan, a family friend, called Kortuem one morning 17 years ago, insisting she get out of bed and go with him to the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, supposedly for a camel ride. After Kortuem agreed but bluntly voiced her displeasure, McGowan showed the Mankato native her life's purpose when he led her to the festival's harp booth.

"Jack had a knowing somehow that we needed to explore this harp together," Kortuem said from her lower North Mankato home. "And I sat down with the harp for the first time at the Renaissance Festival, and it was the '80s, so I had long nails and I said to Jack, 'give me your nail clippers,' and I cut them off that day. And it felt...right, it made sense. I could figure out what I needed to do, and I knew how to pull the strings to get the right sound."

In a story that has become a piece of Mankato musical folklore, McGowan bought a 33-string harp and a harp do-it-yourself guide for the two to share. Turns out, Kortuem said, they were both part of McGowan's grand scheme to attract her to the harp.

"We both studied the harp and we'd trade, but I'd keep it for a couple of weeks, then months. Jack finally called me and said,

'you can just keep it, since you love it so much,'" Kortuem said. "Many years later, he told me that was his plan all along."

"When someone gives you a harp, you don't turn it down," Kortuem said. "I would see harps and they were always very attractive, but I never really felt the pull to play one until I sat behind one."

Steadily grasping the subtle, powerful intricacies of the ancient instrument, Kortuem, then a junior at MSU, played publicly for the first time at church, mere months after the fateful September afternoon spent at the Renaissance Festival. Over the past 17 years, her audience has blossomed and left her concerts spell-bound by Kortuem's soothing, angelic melodies.

She has performed solo throughout the state, and in various orchestras and ensembles, including Mankato's Musicorum. Ultimately, Kortuem, said, intimacy with her audience is what she craves as a concert performer.

"I love the experience of being able to not only play for people, but to talk to them and connect with the audience," Kortuem said. "It's nice to be able to add beauty to events, but it's really special when I'm out in front and can see my words and music affecting people and click with them."

Though she's only written one original composition, Kortuem, in the old folk music

tradition, tackles timeless songs passed on through generations, rearranging them to fit her self-taught style.

"I take older songs and apply my musicality on them and make arrangements around them," Kortuem said. "It's a new facet of the song seen through me."

She has self-released three records, the spiritual *The Light and the Lady* and *The Harp Her Soul Required*, the latter a collection of Celtic traditional songs dedicated to her mentor McGowan. Kortuem's latest release is her initial foray into holiday recordings with *All Hayle to the Days*, a 10-song set of her holiday concert favorites intended, she said, to "make warmth in the coldest time of the year." The record, self-produced by Kortuem at Mankato's Two Fish Studios, features more storytelling-based songs, instrumentation and vocals.

"I've had so much pressure from so many different arenas to do something 'snappy, jingle bell Christmas,'" she said. "And I'd usually tell them 'that is a good idea, thanks,' and then go do my own thing."

"But I feel like with the gift of having a harp, I have a responsibility to do the right thing and affect people positively with it, rather than just for my own good," Kortuem said. "I can do this and help people transform their lives for as long as they listen to my music. If I'm going to do something, I can't help but be anything but authentic."

A classically trained pianist, Kortuem's listening tastes stretch far outside the harp. Her earliest memories of music are listening to a Gene Autry Christmas LP and Johnny Cash's *Live at Folsom Prison*.

"People always ask me what other harpists I listen to, and I don't really," Kortuem chuckled. "I listen to Alabama sometimes, and when things get really bad I go back to the '80s and listen to Van Halen."

Darkness into light, confusion into clarity are the feelings Kortuem induces to her listeners and herself, when her hands are around the harp, gracefully plucking the strings.

"There is something about the resonance chamber and the way the music vibrates through the air," she said. "The harp has a very physical affect, such a pleasing sound, and I can't help but think that's part of why people find it so appealing."

Kortuem, with her schedule filling up quickly during the holiday months, is slated to perform around the Mankato area in support of *All Hayle to the Days*. She is launching a CD release party November 26 at Good Counsel Chapel.

"Everyone has a gift," she said. "Some people are millionaires and can give money to hurricane relief. I'm a harpist. I can help bring people peace. I can help transform lives for as long as they listen to my music or as long afterwards as it affects them. That's what I can do."