

HEADLINE: Straight from the harp

SUBHEADLINE: Tonight a royal harpist will bring a regal instrument back to life after decades of silence

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

In the voluptuous lounge of The Oriental Hotel, there is a delight even more exquisite than the charm of the scenery: a celestial and enchanting sound rising from the hands of a graceful musician leaning over a golden harp, just taken out of the red velvet bower it was nestled in.

There are those who would pay a high price to marvel at such an exceptional scene _ the young and charming Catrin Finch, 21, personal harpist to Britain's Prince Charles, bringing back to life HRH Prince Chudadhuj's gold Grand Concert Harp, which had been left idle since the prince's passing some 77 years ago.

This will be the scene tonight when Catrin Finch's fully-booked solo recital begins at 7:30pm in the Royal Ballroom of The Oriental Hotel.

"It's a lovely instrument. It sounds fantastic really _ obviously a lot older than the one I have, but very well restored," Finch said. She had just landed in Bangkok and had already tried out the harp Prince Chudadhuj bought in 1916 from eminent British harp-maker Morley's.

"I am very honoured to be here and always excited to play on a different instrument," the young musician added. She said a harp was simply "the best thing in the world".

Prince Charles would certainly agree to this laudatory ranking of Wales' national instrument. It was he who decided to revive a 500-year-old tradition in the hopes of "encouraging Welsh culture and tradition".

Catrin Finch, a student at the Royal Academy of Music, was thus deemed fit for the job of official harpist to the Prince of Wales _ which carries an annual salary of 2,500 (156,900 baht), and runs for two years and has been left vacant since Queen Victoria's day (the last royal harpist was appointed in 1871).

Wearing a harp-shaped gold brooch that the prince designed for her, Miss Finch made her royal debut on May 12, last year, at a dinner hosted by the Prince at Margam Park, Port Talbot.

"I can't say how important it is for the popularity of the harp. It has been such a help," Finch said, whose career has immensely benefited from the title and the publicity which surrounds it.

Dubbed "Charlie's Angel" by the British press, Miss Finch is however "very keen to treat the position all the more seriously".

"I am really excited and honoured to be in a position to experience it. It is a fantastic opportunity and the highlight of my career so far," Finch commented, who laughs remembering the historic phone call from Buckingham Palace announcing her royal

appointment which was picked up by one of one of her flatmates one early morning in March 2000.

``I said, `Yeah, right, Buckingham Palace is on the phone," Finch recalls, whose first tough commitment was to keep the thrilling news an absolute secret for two months or so.

``They actually suspected something was up when they saw me starting to dress up really posh for my visits to the palace," Finch adds, whose royal education started with a few etiquette lessons and courses on how to treat the family, how to present herself, and even deal with the ferocious British tabloid press.

``That was very funny, especially being a student living in a shared apartment in London, and every now and then going to the palace," she said.

In Thailand and Asia for the first time, Finch was targeted by the Chudadhuj Foundation and the dynamic MR Sunida Kitiyakara in the midst of a career going ``on and on", ``up and up" and ``from strength to strength", as Miss Finch alternatively describes it.

The starting point of this vertiginous ascent actually dates back to the artist's early childhood when at age five _ already an assiduous pianist _ she attended a harp concert by Spanish harpist Marisa Robles.

``I was amazed and realised it was all I wanted to do," recalls Finch, who was bought a small Celtic harp for her sixth birthday and within a year was studying with well-known Welsh harpist Elinor Bennett. She studied with her until the age of 16, and then entered the hot house of London's Purcell School, enrolling in a four-year Bachelor of Music Performance Course.

Concerts, local festivals, national competitions, TV appearances and a string of awards followed, all in the wake of her parent's mortgaging their house to purchase an Italian Salvi harp as a present for the girl's 10th birthday.

``I am very grateful to my parents for having supported me. For parents to do that, it is very special, really. I am very lucky," Finch said, referring to the hardship her working class family with three children endured in order to pay the 13,000 (816,000 baht) bill.

No doubt the awards _ and rewards _ will keep coming.

``You dazzled the room with your virtuosity and musicality," Prince Charles said in a letter to her after one of her performances at St James' palace.

Let's hope the same can be said for tonight's unique concert.