Concert: The Robert G. Boehmler Community Foundation Series

Leigh Howard Stevens

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THE ROBERT G. BOEHMLER COMMUNITY FOUNDATION SERIES

Leigh Howard Stevens, marimba

Hockett Family Recital Hall
Wednesday, February 9, 2005
8:15 p.m.
Leigh Howard Stevens
Marimba

Great Wall
Leigh Howard Stevens
(b: 1953)

Four Preludes for LHS
William Penn
(b. 1946)

Andante
Johann Sebastian Bach
(original from Sonata in A minor for violin, BWV 1003) (1685-1750)

Selections from “Marimba When . . .”
Sweet Dreams
Piotr Ilyich Tschaikowsky
(1840-1893)

Serenade for the Doll
Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Ivan is Very Busy
Aram Khachaturian
(1903-1978)

Song of the Lark
Piotr Ilyich Tschaikowsky

Intermission

Adagio in A minor
Johann Sebastian Bach
(original from Sonata in G minor for violin, BWV 1001)

Beads of Glass
Gordon Stout
(b. 1952)

Asturias
Isaac Albeniz
“Leyenda”
(1860-1912)

Rhythmic Caprice
Leigh Howard Stevens

Use of photographic, video or sound recording is prohibited. Mr. Stevens performs on a Malletech marimba of his own design and uses Malletech mallets exclusively.

The Leigh Howard Stevens performance is made possible with funding from the Robert G. Boehmler Community Foundation, Inc.
Robert G. Boehmler, born February 2, 1915 to Albert and Sara Graf Boehmler, had a passion for music that began in his youth. He was a graduate of the Lyons School and went on to attend Ithaca College. As a clarinet major, he played in the concert band and was a member of the symphony, oratorios, and Little Theater Orchestra. Robert was also a member of the Oracle senior honor society and Adelphi, the freshman honor society. He served as business manager of the Cayugan, and president and vice president of Phi Mu Alpha. Following his graduation in 1938, Boehmler returned to Lyons as a music educator in the Palmyra-Macedon School District, where for many years he touched the lives of generations of students. He later earned his Master of Science degree in music at Ithaca College. Boehmler retired from the Palmyra-Macedon School District as director of music. Robert remained a close friend of many of his classmates throughout his lifetime, as well as a close friend and generous donor to the School of Music and Ithaca College. He passed away on September 20, 1998.

During Boehmler’s lifetime, he established the Robert G. Boehmler Community Foundation, Inc. to support music endeavors. Artists appearing at the School of Music funded by the foundation are listed below. In addition to tonight’s performance, Mr. Stevens gave a master class last night, and will solo with the Percussion Ensemble tomorrow night.

James Campbell, clarinet
Allen Vizzutti, trumpet
Free Flight
Rhythm & Brass
Leigh Howard Stevens, marimba
Weilerstein Trio

February 9-10, 2001
February 14-15, 2002
November 8-9, 2002
October 26, 2003
February 8-10, 2005
March 16-17, 2006

Program notes
by Leigh Howard Stevens (except where noted)

**Great Wall**

It is said that the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object that can be seen from outer space. My piece, on the other hand, sometimes cannot even be heard in the next room. The Great Wall is almost 4,000 miles long. My piece, only six minutes. Hundreds of thousands of political prisoners worked on the wall. Those who died in the process were buried in the wall. I composed my piece with only a little help from my friends, and as far as I am aware, there have yet to be any fatalities.

Perhaps the only valid reasons for choosing the name are that the piece sounds vaguely Asian, I have tried to suggest the great mass and expanse of the wall, and both eventually fade into invisibility.
Four Preludes
One of the first pieces I ever commissioned, while still a student at The Eastman School of Music, was from William Penn, who was on the Eastman composition and theory faculty at that time. This was a period of great experimentation for me: one-handed rolls, sequential stickings (using the mallets independently to play passages, rather than alternating hands in the traditional manner), various roll textures, new mallet sounds, etc. There were a host of new possibilities, but few pieces composed with these sounds in mind. The Penn Preludes are almost an historical catalog of these new techniques and sounds as they existed in 1973.

The first Prelude is a series of accelerandos; the second, a single "melodic" line with interjected chords; the third, a comical odd meter jaunt; and the fourth, a machine gun hail of notes, all over the keyboard. Instead of the traditional slow-fast-slow-fast plan, Penn chose slow-slow-fast-fast.

Bach on the Marimba
In my somewhat prejudiced opinion, the marimba is a superb instrument for the performance of polyphonic baroque music. Imagine a piano with moveable hammers -- one that allows the performer to adjust where the hammer strikes the string. Imagine further that the performer could change hammer hardnesses and materials at will -- perhaps even control which types of hammers play each voice. Now remove that mechanical contraption that separates the player's hand from the piano's hammers and put the player directly in control by having him actually hold the striking implements. Make one last "minor adjustment" to the piano by substituting rosewood bars and resonating tubes for the strings. Our "improved" piano is, of course, a marimba.

Albums for the Young
Many great composers have written miniature works for piano that were intended for young players. While some of these pieces seem to deal with child-like musical ideas and sentiments, others are quite adult in their musical and emotional content. This genre of music is particularly well suited for the marimba for reasons of texture and range.

Many "adult" keyboard works have thick textures that often contain chords of eight or ten notes sounded simultaneously. When these textures are scaled down for the four or six mallets a marimbist can handle, much of the massiveness of texture is lost. In contrast to this, the albums for the young are written with smaller hands in mind, frequently in a four-voiced texture -- perfect for an exact transcription to marimba.

In their large-scale works, composers frequently use the entire seven-plus octave range of the piano for dramatic effect. When transposed to the marimba's five-octave range, some of the color of these extremes is lost. Fortunately for players and listeners alike, the albums for the young usually fit perfectly in the marimba's range. The use of various mallet types adds dramatically contrasting colors, unavailable on the piano, and the addition of sustaining techniques can add a true legato to certain movements.
Through the years I have transcribed some thirty-odd works from Tschaikowsky’s Album for the Young, Robert Schumann’s Album for the Young, Claude Debussy’s Children’s Corner and Aram Khachaturian’s Adventures of Ivan. All four of these great albums for the young were recorded on my CD “Marimba When...”.

Ads of Glass
My most recent composition for solo marimba is a flowing tapestry of tonal sounds for five-octave marimba. The work is about 8 minutes long, and provides the marimbist the chance to showcase the dark, bitter-sweet sounds of the lower and mid-register of the marimba. It is dedicated to Leigh Howard Stevens, because the music was initially considered as material for a commission from Leigh for marimba solo and percussion quartet. As the work progressed, it became clear that the material was better suited for marimba alone. G.S.

Austurias (Leyenda)
This familiar work of Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz is best known to concert audiences as a piece for guitar. Rather than base my transcription on one of the many available guitar editions, which appear to be based on each other, (they share many of the same deliberate changes as well as errors of harmony and rhythm), I went back to the original piano work which appears in Cantos de España Op. 232. One of the benefits of consulting this edition can be heard in the repeated melody in octaves in the middle section. This tune is usually played as single notes or simple octaves on guitar. The original version has the octaves separated by two octaves. This subtle detail restores an eerie, haunting dimension, lost in the popular guitar versions.

Rhythmic Caprice
Three unusual “col legno” (with wood) effects are used in the work.

1) The birch handle is used on the edge of the bar instead of the mallet head
2) The mallet head and the handle are used simultaneously (dubbed a “marimshot” by my students)
3) The whole length of both handles are used to produce a “splash/cluster.”

The first section of the piece is all derived from a simple descending modal figure first heard in the right hand after the short introduction. In the middle section the new melodic interest is all in the performer’s left hand, while the right hand accompanies with progressively more complicated tics and splashes. The last section is based on a three-note fragment of the motive from the first section.

Very limited melodic and harmonic materials of the piece rhythmically evolve from simple, to complex, to polyrhythmic to driving, to spasmodic, ultimately returning to simple rhythm in the six-measure codetta.
Leigh Howard Stevens

Hailed by Time magazine as "the world's greatest classical marimbist", Leigh Howard Stevens' repertoire ranges from Renaissance music and the Preludes and Fugues of J. S. Bach, to original marimba works written by contemporary composers expressly for him. Much of this unaccompanied literature was considered technically and musically impossible by one player until the development of Mr. Stevens' new system of four-mallet technique. Percussionists and marimbists worldwide have adopted his revolutionary approach and his book on the subject of four-mallet marimba technique, Method of Movement, has been translated into six languages.

It is difficult to find a single aspect of marimba technique, repertoire or design that has not been profoundly changed by the work of Leigh Howard Stevens. From "Stevens Grip" to the types of motions used to play the instrument; from the length and material of the mallet handles to the wrapping and stitching of the heads; from the first height-adjustable all wooden marimba frame in the 1980's to the first fully-tunable resonators in the 1990's; from one-handed rolls and baroque ornaments to the use of contrasting roll types; from the early polyphonic Helble Preludes to the works of John Serry, David Maslanka and Joseph Schwantner to his own original compositions and transcriptions.

Considered "revolutionary" at the time, many of these concepts and developments are now used routinely by players and teachers around the world, and in fact, have become synonymous with contemporary marimba playing. It is no exaggeration to say that Leigh Howard Stevens has not just been at the cutting edge of the development of the marimba in the last 30 years – he has been the cutting edge.

This fresh approach to music making on the marimba has greatly expanded the instrument's compositional possibilities, stimulated composer enthusiasm for the marimba's use in solo and chamber music and ultimately led to a series of more than thirty world premiere performances by Mr. Stevens. The first performance of Raymond Helble's Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra by Leigh Howard Stevens and the Denver Symphony in 1980 was a milestone in the development of marimba literature. His digitally recorded all-Bach album has been greeted with rave reviews for its artistry by magazines as diverse as Stereophile and Billboard.

Devoted marimba lovers have sprung up all over the world – both players and general public -- converted by Leigh Howard Stevens' solo recitals, hundreds of college campus appearances, concertos with symphony orchestra, European concert tours, masterclasses and radio and television appearances both here and abroad. He has been featured in Time Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and appeared on National Public Radio's All Things Considered, and Voice of America's internationally broadcast, New York, New York. His celebrated musicianship, imaginative programming and exciting performances have inspired critical acclaim and standing ovations in forty-eight of the United States and 18 other countries. Mr. Stevens introduced the marimba to The People's Republic of China in a televised performance that reportedly reached an audience of 800 million viewers.

In addition to performing exclusively on an extended-range Malletech Marimba of his own design, he serves as a consultant and conducts educational masterclasses for Malletech. Mr. Stevens served as Professor of Marimba at the Royal Academy of Music, London from 1997-2004. He has been awarded four U. S. Patents for marimba design.

Mr. Stevens can be heard on past releases of the Delos, Musical Heritage Society, Musicmasters and CRI record labels, as well as current releases on Resonator Records.
About The Marimba

The marimba is at once one of the oldest and one of the newest musical instruments. While the first concerto for marimba and orchestra wasn’t composed until 1940 (by American Paul Creston), the marimba dates back thousands of years and may actually be the oldest musical instrument known to man.

A seven note lithophone, or “stone marimba” was discovered in Vietnam in 1949 by French pre-historian Georges Condominas. It is estimated to be 5,000 years old, which makes it the oldest known musical instrument specimen in the world. The bars of this marimba-like instrument, which range from 40 to 26 inches in length, were perfectly tuned to a Javanese pentatonic scale by the deliberate chipping and flaking of some ancient instrument maker. Similar instruments have also been found in the burial chambers of Egypt, and in other parts of Africa.

The wooden variety of this family of instruments appears to be indigenous to many primitive cultures in Asia and Africa. The marimba is differentiated from the xylophone-like instruments by the addition of a separate acoustic amplifier for each note. The idea of adding an identically tuned hollowed out gourd or other vessel to amplify and enrich each tone bar of the instrument was a stroke of genius of some unidentified primitive mind.

It appears that the marimba came to Central and South America with slave trade, bypassing Europe until North Americans brought the instrument to the Continent sometime in the second decade of this century. For this reason, the great European master composers were unaware of the marimba. The xylophone had a separate development in Europe, being played by roving Gypsy musicians and eventually making its orchestral music debut in 1874 in Saint-Saëns' Danse Macabre.

The evolution of the marimba from a lap-held, crudely tuned instrument of a few notes to today’s “Grand Soloist Marimba” came about strictly in the Americas. The change from one diatonic to two chromatic rows of tone-bars, arranged like a piano, was the contribution of Sebastian Hurtado, a Guatemalan, in about 1880. The perfection of the tuning of the bars, the addition of metal tubular resonators for greater volume, and the concept of tunable resonators for weather compensation was all accomplished in North America.

The vibraphone (or “vibes”), the jazzy little cousin of the marimba, is also an American invention (1916), and is distinguished by aluminum-alloy bars and a pedal system designed to dampen the long-ringing bars. The vibraphone is often fitted with an electric fan-like mechanism in the tops of the resonator tubes, which, when activated, gives the instrument a steady vibrato. Other instruments in the keyboard percussion family are the xylophone (essentially a small, high-pitched, brilliantly brittle-toned marimba -- with or without resonators); the glockenspiel or orchestra bells (small steel bars and narrow, very high-pitched range); and chimes or tubular bells (long tubes of special brass alloy, tuned to imitate church bells or carillon).
Milestones in the recent history of the marimba:

1901 The marimba is scheduled for its North American debut in Buffalo at the Pan-American Exposition. Cancelled due to the assassination of President McKinley in that city.

1903 John Calhoun Deagan in Chicago begins to make xylophones and orchestra bells with chromatic keyboards and resonators.

1908 The Hurtado Brothers tour North America with their chromatic marimba with wooden box-resonators.

1910 The J. C. Deagan Company begins manufacturing of chromatic marimbas.

1933 Clair Omar Musser conducts 100 marimbas at the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago. They perform arrangements of Wagner's *Pilgrims' Chorus*, Chopin, Elgar and Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

1935 The 100 member International Marimba Symphony Orchestra performs to startled reviews in Europe and at Carnegie Hall in New York City. 1940's Brass resonators on marimbas are replaced by cardboard tubes due to rationing of metals for war effort. Marimba range begins to shrink from five octaves to three and a half octaves in response to desire for portability.

1937 Leopold Stokowski toys with idea of adding bass marimba to the string bass section of the orchestra because of its full bass tone. After borrowing one from Clair Omar Musser, wisely decides against it.

1940's Clair Omar Musser breaks away from J. C. Deagan Company over issue of rehiring WWII veterans and founds Musser Marimba Company. Creston Concertino composed.

1950's Vida Chenoweth performs first solo marimba recital of all original marimba compositions. Commissions and performs Robert Kurka's Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

1960's Popularity of marimba increases as college music departments develop percussion programs, marimba ensembles and percussion ensembles. Important Japanese composers write works for Keiko Abe.

1970's and 80's Introduction of one-handed rolls, birch handles, single independent strokes and other new techniques by Leigh Howard Stevens spurs a burst of player and composer interest in marimba as solo instrument in USA and Europe.

1980's and 90's Marimba range begins to expand again to size that was common in 1920's (4 1/2 to 5 octaves). Major composers begin to write for marimba: Druckman, Miki, Reich, Schwantner, Berio, Henze.

1998: Revival of the marimba orchestra culminates in a performance at West Point, New York on March 28, 1998 with 134 marimbas on stage being simultaneously played upon by 184 marimbists, conducted by Dr. Frederick Fennell.