

A Continuing Pursuit of Excellence: An Interview with Stanley Leonard

By Brett Dietz

During his 38-year career as timpanist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Stanley Leonard performed internationally with the ensemble in concerts, television productions, and recordings. Former Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Music Director William Steinberg, in 1976 interview, commented that, “[Leonard] is such a fabulous figure, the number-one man in the orchestra. He is not just a timpanist, he is the embodiment of timpanum playing.”

Leonard is the author of *Pedal Technique for the Timpani*, a method book that challenges the overall capacity of timpani playing. Leonard’s compositions have been performed all over the world by professional and university percussion ensembles. He has presented master classes at leading conservatories and universities in the United States and abroad, and made several appearances at PASIC. He has served on the PAS Board of Directors and is a member of the PAS Symphonic Committee. Leonard has released two compact discs, *Canticle* and *Collage*, which feature his works for percussion ensemble and solo timpani. He performs and conducts on these recordings.

Dietz: *Congratulations on your new compact disc, Collage, and the anniversary of your 65 years in the world of percussion. Could you tell us where you were born and when you began studying percussion?*

Leonard: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and later moved with my parents to Independence, Missouri. My mother was a pianist and my father was a singer, so I grew up in a musical environment. When I was 11 I convinced my parents to let me learn how to play the snare drum correctly under the tutelage of the owner of the local music store in Independence.

I started junior high school shortly after and signed up for “third hour band,” which was conducted by a violinist who played with the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra. My family had been to concerts of that orchestra so we were familiar with some of the players. However, I never dreamed I would take lessons from someone in the orchestra. I traveled by bus and streetcar for an hour to get to the home of the principal percussionist, Vera McNary [now Vera Daylin].

She was an inspiration to me and provided me with the musical and technical foundation that I needed. I studied snare drum and later began training on marimba.

Dietz: *When did you begin playing timpani?*

Leonard: At age 14 I discovered the timpani. The Independence Little Symphony was conducted by a family friend. I decided I needed to begin playing in an orchestra.



I took my drum to the conductor’s office and auditioned. He listened to me play and then said, “Do you know anything about the timpani?” I replied that I knew what they were. He took me to the rehearsal room and brought out an ancient set of hand-tuned timpani with solid brass bowls made in Belgium. I actually have those timpani, now restored, in my home. He showed me how to hold the timpani sticks and said, “Come to next week’s rehearsal.”

That gave me a week to travel to Kansas City, buy a copy of *The Ludwig Timpani In-*

structor and try to be prepared for my debut as a timpanist. The first piece I played was Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony.” I was tuning the drums, so I leaned over to one of the horn players and asked him to play a “B” for me. He said, “Concert pitch?” I didn’t know what he was talking about, so I explained why I needed the “B.”

I then studied timpani with Ben Udell, the timpanist of the Kansas City Philharmonic. He was a direct connection to Saul Goodman, and the two of them became timpani idols for me. I began playing in the Kansas City Philharmonic when I was a senior in high school. After working a couple of years I went to Northwestern University and studied with Edward Metzinger, timpanist of the Chicago Symphony. After my freshman year I continued studying at the Eastman School of Music, graduating in 1954. My mentor and teacher was William Street; he took the rough edges off my playing. My percussion classmates at Eastman were John Beck, Gordon Peters, and Mitchell Peters—a pretty good group of drummers, I must say.

Dietz: *What were some of the challenges of being a timpanist with a major symphony orchestra like PSO? Can you share any moments with us that are special to you?*

Leonard: One of the biggest challenges for me was repertoire. All the helpful repertoire collections that are available today didn’t exist in the earlier days. I was familiar with most of the standard symphonic literature, but I had barely heard of Bruckner or Mahler and had to do some quick catch-up study. I had not performed much Wagner, and the Pittsburgh Symphony, when I joined, performed many of Wagner’s compositions. I had to rely on my own musical instincts as I started performing unfamiliar works.

During a first rehearsal of Dvorak’s “Violin Concerto” with Nathan Milstein I was caught off guard when it came time to play a little duet with the solo violin in one of the movements. The timpani plays a dialogue that is rhythmically opposite from the melody. I studied the score after that rehearsal. Being the youngest principal player was also a challenge. I received a lot of encouragement from other members of the orchestra

that was very helpful. I traveled the road from freshman to veteran performer with growing experiences.

There were many special moments during my 38 years with the symphony. A performance of Sibelius' "Second Symphony" with Eugene Ormandy became a legend because of its impact. A two-and-one-half month tour of the Middle East and Europe sponsored by the U.S. State Department was a monumental event. Performing under Hindemith, Copland, Bernstein, Chavez, Boulez, and a host of other composers conducting their own works was always a treat. Working with three different music directors during my tenure provided a broad experience of musical insights. We made over 50 recordings that included all the symphonic works of Sibelius, the complete symphonies of Brahms and Beethoven, music by Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Respighi, and many others. I had the opportunity to perform as part of the accompaniment to world-famous soloists. The PSO performed a highly successful TV series on PBS. One of the real joys was being able to create music with a great orchestra of world-class musicians.

Dietz: *When and why did you begin to write for percussion ensemble?*

Leonard: My first percussion ensemble was written for my ensemble at the then Carnegie Tech, now Carnegie Mellon University. I had a small class of students and needed music specifically for them; very little music was available at that time, 1958, that would meet those needs. That first piece, "Circus," is still being performed all over the world. I wrote it sitting in my car between rehearsals of the PSO. It was published years later. You can hear a performance of "Circus" on my first CD, *Canticle*, distributed by Ludwig Music. I continued writing for Carnegie

Mellon and later Duquesne University students.

I have also been commissioned to write pieces for specific groups and individual performers. The Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples invited me to write music for two of their annual Percussion Summit concerts. Both of those pieces are on the *Collage* recording. Tempus Fugit has invited me to write pieces for them. Mt. Lebanon High School in Pittsburgh commissioned me to write music for two of their winter concerts. I have written for the percussion ensembles at the New England Conservatory of Music, UCLA, Eastman School of Music, and Louisiana State University. Edward Stefan, timpanist of the Ft. Worth Symphony, commissioned me to write "Canto," a piece for solo timpani and trombone. I wrote a duo for percussion and bass clarinet that was commissioned by Kris Naragon, one my former students. I composed a trio for Maria Mellars and her percussion studio in Vienna, Austria. Frank Kumor, from Kutztown University, has been performing "Danza" in the United States, Spain, and South America. I wrote "Presenting Percussion" for Don Liuzzi and the percussion section of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Dietz: *Tell me about your new compact disc, Collage.*

Leonard: *Collage* is a collection of pieces I wrote between 1967 and 2007. It is a sampling of music for percussion ensemble and solo percussion that provides examples of my percussion works written during a 40-year time frame. The recording also celebrates my 65 years of participation in the wonderful world of music and percussion. The recording consists of performances by your ensemble and solos by you and me. The first track, "Kymbalon," was written for you

and your ensemble, Hamiruge, at Louisiana State University. It is a series of settings on an ancient Greek melody and emphasizes cymbals and gongs. "Shadows," for solo multi percussionist and keyboard percussion quartet, features you performing the solo on non-pitched percussion in a quasi-melodic fashion. I perform "Collage," a timpani solo I wrote specifically for this recording. There are eight pieces on the CD. The ensemble performances are close to being definitive as you can get.

Dietz: *What advice can you give to young percussionists who are trying to make their way in the music world?*

Leonard: Explore, study, practice, and perform.

Explore the variety that exists in today's musical world. Study with a good teacher. Practice with patience and dedication. Perform and perform, because that is the only way you can perfect your practice. Develop realistic goals for your future.

Brett William Dietz is Assistant Professor of Percussion at the Louisiana State University School of Music. He has performed at three PASICs and is a founding member of the Tempus Fugit Percussion Ensemble. Dietz's first solo CD, *Seven Ghosts*, was released in 2006. He was the winner of the 2005 Merrill Jones Young Composers Band Composition Contest, the 2002 H. Robert Reynolds Composition Contest, 3rd Place Winner of the 2002 PAS Composition Contest, and recipient of the 2001 Pittsburgh Foundation Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts. He has studied percussion with Andrew Reamer, Stanley Leonard, and Michael Burritt. PN

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