

# Reaching Out: The Percussion Summit

By Stanley Leonard

The house lights dim, the stage goes dark. A solitary figure carrying a lighted candle appears on stage. A soft percussion sound is heard, followed by more sounds and increasing dynamics. Lights slowly illuminate 14 percussionists playing a huge array of instruments. The sounds of the music enthrall the audience as it ascends into a sonic world many have never before experienced! Welcome to the annual Percussion Summit concert at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples, Florida. This evening opens with a theatrical performance of Alexander Lepak's "Crescendo."

The Percussion Summit concert is a popular performance at "The Phil." Held each September, it presents an eclectic variety of music performed by an ensemble of professional orchestral percussionists. These instrumentalists, who often are at the back of the stage, now take their place in the front. The diverse audience—families, young adults, and some who have never been in a real concert hall—converges with anticipation and leaves inspired.

Myra Janco Daniels, the CEO of the Philharmonic Center for the Arts stated, "The arts are more than just entertainment. They also inspire and enlighten us. At their best they touch our hearts and souls, showing us new possibilities in our lives and in our world. They have the ability to reach everyone, from toddlers to retirees." The Percussion Summit concert helps fulfill this artistic goal.

How did this unique percussion concert originate? How does it fulfill the artistic goal of presenting percussion music to a broad spectrum of the public? I spoke with John Evans, timpanist of the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra and founder of the concert, who also serves as Master of Ceremonies for the performance.

**Stan Leonard:** *How did the idea for a percussion concert come about?*

**John Evans:** The Naples Philharmonic Orchestra has a series of programs for young children called The Magic Carpet. These concerts focus on instrument families of the orchestra. In the late 1990s, a few of the players in the percussion program suggested that a similar concert targeting older youth and adults might find an appreciative audience. So I presented the idea to the staff at the Phil. They were interested. Planning began in the fall of 2000 for the first Percussion Summit concert, which was presented in September 2001.

**SL:** *Who was involved in the original planning?*

**JE:** The Philharmonic staff was an integral part



L to R: John Evans, Tom Sherwood, Laurie Lyons (she has the cymbals next to the chimes), Mark Goldberg, Craig Benson, David Coash, Kurt Grissom, John Bannon, Neil Grover, John Parks, John Shaw, Patrick Shrives, James Dallas, Kevin Garry.

of the initial planning. The Center provides production and marketing support. Since I understood the logistics, instrumental, and musical needs of the program, it was best for me to be in charge. I have been the administrator/organizer from the first concert to the present. However, this concert would not happen without the support and participation of the Philharmonic Center staff.

**SL:** *Who are the performers? Where do they come from? Are there some who participate on a regular basis?*

**JE:** The first concert had eight players: four from the Naples Philharmonic and four from the Florida Orchestra in Tampa. The next year, players from the Jacksonville Symphony also participated. From time to time, players who were once in the area and now perform elsewhere return to be a part of the concert. There have been as many as 16 players involved in one concert. In 2009 we had performers from the Naples Philharmonic, Jacksonville Symphony, the Florida Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony, and the Syracuse Symphony. There is a cadre of performers who have participated in every performance since the beginning. We have a unique combination of talent and cooperation in these concerts. We also have to be prepared for performer cancellations and the need for additional dedicated players. The concert has to be scheduled early in the fall to accommodate the working schedules of the performers.

**SL:** *Who acts as conductor?*

**JE:** Most of the pieces are performed without a conductor. Someone from the ensemble usually conducts a work if it is necessary.

**SL:** *What styles of music are included in the concert?*

**JE:** We are trying to bring something new to a diversified public audience. The first half

of the concert consists of more traditional percussion ensemble music—not too esoteric, although we do try to educate our audience by performing current percussion music. The second half might be called the "pops" half. It features a popular guest artist with the ensemble. The concerts have presented world premieres of music written for specific programs. We have been fortunate to have as many as 1,100 in attendance, so the concert format is very important.

**SL:** *I have been privileged to write three pieces requiring a large number of players for Percussion Summit concerts: "Traveling Music," "Hurricane," and "Janissary Band." Have other composers written music for the event?*

**JE:** Michael Udow wrote "Time Lines," a work for solo snare drums and ensemble, for Alan Abel to perform. It requires 14 players. I write arrangements for much of the music on the second half in order to feature the guest artist as soloist with the ensemble.

**SL:** *Have you used any unusual theatrical embellishments to present some of the pieces?*

**JE:** Absolutely! From time to time the concert begins with percussionists coming on stage from the audience or from the wings of the stage. Lighting effects are very important, and black light, strobe lights, color, and dimming have all been used as part of the performance of a specific piece. One concert had a surprise when 13 bass drums dropped down from the ceiling of the stage attached to a long rod to perform "Hoo-Daiko" by Robert Damm. Also there is the challenge to make sure that everyone in the hall can see what is happening on stage.

**SL:** *Who have been some of the guest artists? Are there any anecdotal stories about them?*

**JE:** We started inviting guest artists the second year of the concert. That same year was the

beginning of the clinics involving the artists in an educational experience prior to the summit concert. Guest artists have included Al Abel, Danny Raymond, Zoro, Tommy Igoe, Peter Erskine, Bob Becker, Neil Grover, Ruben Alvarez, and She-e Wu. They each have a unique musical message to bring to those who attend the clinic. A few of the artists have performed as part of the ensemble on the first half of the program.

We have a social event at my house the day before the concert, which everyone enjoys. Bob Becker was challenged to a chess game during his visit. He made some good moves that were not appreciated by his opponent. In 2004 the concert was cancelled at the last minute because of Hurricane Ivan, but we had the party anyway before everyone departed the next day. The next year you were commissioned to write a piece and it became "Hurricane" in order to placate Mother Nature!

**SL:** *How have the concepts for the performance grown or changed over the years?*

**JE:** The popularity of the program has allowed us to use more performers. This way we can program a wider variety of music and everyone is not playing all the pieces. It also provides opportunity to rehearse in greater depth since we only have two days to bring it all together.

**SL:** *How is the Florida PAS chapter involved in the workshops and concert?*

**JE:** The Florida PAS chapter co-sponsors the clinic and provides financial and logistical support for the guest artist. They also provide advertising through their Website communications with members.

**SL:** *Who are other sponsors?*

**JE:** The Philharmonic League has underwritten the concert for the past two years. We could not have presented the event without their help. Several companies from the percussion industry have been generous in providing sponsorship for the artists. The Collier County Education Foundation has provided assistance.

**SL:** *In what ways does the Philharmonic Center for the Arts support this program?*

**JE:** The Phil provides the performance venue, production facilities, and markets the concert. The staff has been very positive in their support of the program. The production crew often provides creative solutions to problems, such as how do you drop 13 bass drums from the ceiling simultaneously? How do you keep track of the placement of 60 different percussion instruments during a concert?

**SL:** *What kind of Summit plans do you have for the future?*

**JE:** We are exploring some new ways to present percussion to a broad public and encourage the writing of new music for that purpose. There are many new areas of percussion music coming into the forefront today, and we want to be able to present them to the public.

**SL:** *What would you say to others who want to present an event like this?*

**JE:** Good luck! [laughs] Be ultra organized and have a supportive, established organization as a partner in the planning and presentation. This is crucial to creating a successful event.

**Stanley Leonard** is a performer, educator, and composer. He was Principal Timpanist of the

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra for 38 years. He performed internationally with the orchestra on television, radio, and on over 50 recordings. He performed with the Pittsburgh Symphony presenting world premiers and American premieres of works for solo timpani and orchestra. He is a member of the PAS Symphonic Committee and has presented on several occasions at PASIC. His compositions for timpani, percussion solo, and ensemble are published in the United States and Europe and performed worldwide. He can be heard performing and conducting his music on the CDs *Canticle* and *Collage*. PN

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