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There Is Music For You Here...

Meet Stan Leonard



▲ Stan in his home studio. He and Peggy were so gracious to invite me into their home. I hope you find Stan as fascinating as I did. Photo by J. Jeffrey Calhoun.

I first met Stan about 6 years ago when he came to my office, at that time in Park Shore, to have an ad done for the Percussion Arts Society's Annual Convention Publication. I had no idea that this man of small stature was such a giant in his field, percussion.

Stan was in love with percussion, the sounds of the drum, ever since he was a little kid.

"It was sort of like I was destined to be a drummer," he said. "My mother was a very good pianist. She insisted

that my brother and I learn to play the piano. So we started studying piano when we were about five years-old, but I really wanted to play drums."

After the family moved to Missouri, when Stan was 10 or 11 years-old, they bought him his first little toy "kind of drum," and he took music lessons from a guy at the local music store in Independence.

"That's how it started," Stan reminisced. "It's been a continual process ever since. I'm still learning." ▶

Stan started playing professionally when he was 17 in the Kansas City Philharmonic. Stan's teachers, principal percussionist Vera Darlin and timpanist Ben Udel, played in the orchestra. This was one of the reasons he was given such a wonderful opportunity at such a young age. He still played in the William Chrisman High School Band.

Stan attended Northwestern University for part of the first year of college, then he attended another college where his wife, Peggy, attended for the rest of the year before going to the Eastman School in Rochester, New York. Peggy and Stan have known each other since the second grade. Peggy is also a musician. She has a minor in music but got her graduate and under graduate degree in Education.

"Peggy used to accompany me when I played marimba solos for various organizations, when we were growing up in high school. She got pretty good at taking a marimba apart, and helping me put it back together so I could stick it in the car," Stan chuckled.

Stan was a percussion major at Eastman, graduating in 1954 with not only a Bachelor of Music degree but also a Performers Certificate in Percussion. Stan was a charter member of the first Eastman Wind Ensemble. Many of his colleagues went on to later life positions as Principal Percussionist of the Chicago Symphony, Timpanist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Timpanist of the Rochester Philharmonic & Professor of ▶



◀ "I created my first timpani sound on these Belgian made ^acirca 1907) timpani. I played on these drums in the Independence Little Symphony. Later my father rescued them from the trash heap and shipped them to Pittsburgh. I had them restored and they are now in our living room."

Stan shared them with me when I visited his home in Kings Lake.

U.S. Army 19th Band, 1955. ▼

Percussion at Eastman. I would say that is pretty good company to keep.

Stan joined the Army and became a member of the U.S. Army's 19th Army Band in 1955. He was actually the Chief Clerk Assistant Conductor and Percussionist.

Stan remembered, "It was kind of like having a bad job, but it was in music, and that was my field. We had one good thing, every week we were the show band. There would be a big jazz band and they added me as a percussionist to play timpani, bells, and cymbals, and things like that. It was a show band for an ABC program called Soldier Parade. The hostess was Arlene Francis."

Stan went on to tell me that the show was like a giant talent show. People from all over the country would come to sing, but everybody was in the army. He even remembered that Steve Lawrence (before he was known by that name) was one of the people on the show. Stan opened the show by playing a pair of cymbals. That was all you saw on the screen was Stan's two hands playing the cymbals. ▶



“Back in Pemberton, where Peggy was with our little first child, she could look at the TV and she knew it was me because she could see my wedding ring. It was ‘CRASH!’ Then the other business would start,” Stan laughed out loud.

In 1956, Stan was hired to play in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Stan remembered that he was just getting out of the Army. He played the first three weeks of the season while still enlisted. The Symphony gave him a week off so he could return to Fort Dix and muster out. Then Peggy, Stan and their young son moved to Pittsburgh.

“We lived in Pittsburgh temporarily

for 40 years,” Stan said. “It was just going to be a stop along the way to someplace else, but it turned out to be a wonderful place to stay.

Pittsburgh was just starting to change from its steel, coal town to a vibrant city. We felt fortunate, as the time passed, that Pittsburgh was changing, and we were part of that change, and the growth.”

Stan had a distinguished thirty-eight year career as Principal Timpanist with the PSO. His career included national and international concert performances, television series, solo appearances with the symphony, two world premier performances of commissioned works and two American premieres. He has ▶



▲ Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra soloist 1958, 1964, 1973, 1981 and 1984. Two world premieres, two American premieres. This photo was taken in 1973.

performed on more than fifty recordings with the Symphony and he performed under the likes of William Sternberg and Andre Previn.

Stan was also an educator and composer.

“When I first went to Pittsburgh, I taught at Carnegie Mellon, back then it was called Carnegie Tech,” Stan told me. “I taught there for 20 years. Then I sort of got a little concerned. I’m teaching all these students, what are they gonna do for a living? So I took a sabbatical from teaching in the university. I taught students at home. I had a real, pretty large studio in the basement of our house, with an outside door. I taught a lot of kids at home. Then one of the percussionists in the orchestra who had been teaching

at Duquesne University was getting ready to become the timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. He was going to be leaving Duquesne, and it just so happened that the dean of the school of music there was one of my former percussion students,” Stan continued.

So, Stan decided he would give it a try. He told me that it was probably the best thing he ever did as far as teaching was concerned. He taught there for 10 or 12 years.

“I had wonderful students, and a wonderful environment. I had a really good time. The last four years I taught at Duquesne, I lived here, in Kings Lake. I flew back and forth to teach,” Stan said. “At first, I went twice a month. Then after one semester of that, I told the dean that I ▶

couldn't do that anymore. We have got to figure some other way."

Stan loved the kids, and he loved the University. He would go up for three days a month. He was also conducting the percussion ensemble, but reluctantly had to give that up.

"I just majored in giving my timpani lessons to the students. I would fly up on Wednesday, then I went back on Friday night. But I only did that once a month then. So it wasn't quite as bad. Then around 2001, all of my students that I had started with were getting ready to graduate, and the next year I was going to be starting all over with a whole new batch. That's when I retired," Stan smiled. You see, Stan has never really retired. He is now devoting more time to composing.

Stan has always composed music.

"The first piece I ever wrote for percussion ensemble was in 1958," he told me. "It was really an exercise for my students at Carnegie Tech. It was a little piece with several movements that described the sounds of the circus. So the piece was called..."

You guessed it, Circus. That piece is still being played all over the world! Over the next ten years, Stan wrote most of his music for his students. Not too many ensemble pieces, but lots of teaching material for individual instruments. Then about ▶



▲ Hamiruge Ensemble, the percussion ensemble at the Louisiana State University, conducted by Brett W. Dietz, at the “Collage” recordings. Photo from 2007.

1969, Stan got really interested in percussion ensemble. But it was after they moved to Florida that he says he really started to churn out the music. Because he was “retired”. So he thought.

Being an amateur musician, I was curious how one writes music for percussion. I am used to reading music for the piano and organ where you have staves. The notes are written on a scale. Remember your old music lessons in grammar school? The lines of the G-clef corresponded to egbdf (Every Good Boy Deserves Favor) and the spaces spelled FACE. I did not understand how that would translate to percussion. Here is how Stan explained it.

“There are non pitch percussion, and then there are pitched percussion. A marimba, something like that would have pitch. But a snare drum, a bass drum, it’s all written on one line. The rhythms are there just like they are anywhere else. If you’re not improvising, there’s no chords. You have to play the notes that are printed there, the rhythmic notes. There are different systems. Sometimes they put the snare drum part on just one line. I like to write notes, even non pitched percussion, I like to write them on a staff, it makes it seem like you’re playing a piece of music.”

Stan has over forty of his pieces for percussion and timpani published. He also has a book, *Pedal Technique for the Timpani*, which was published in 1988.

During his tenure with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, he played on more than four dozen recordings. His first CD, *Canticle*, was recorded in 1996. His second CD, *Collage*, was recorded in 2007 at the Louisiana State University. Stan conducted several ensemble works as did his former student, LSU professor Brett Dietz. Stan ▶

is also featured on this CD with the solo performance of "Collage" on his personal Hinger timpani.

Other recordings include Reunion, Acclamation (which highlights his performance and music for organ, timpani and trumpet) and Jubilate featuring music for handbells.

Stan went on to tell me about some of his new music that has yet to premiere.

"I have three pieces now. Danza Bamboo, which features new instruments I fashioned out of actual bamboo. This one is from the Eastman School of Music, my Alma Mater. Main Street from Kutztown University, and Fanfare Celebration from the Three Rivers Ringers. These haven't been played yet. They're supposed to be played this fall. They're the kind of pieces that I could write anything I wanted. I didn't need to worry about whether anybody was going to be able to play it. Some of the things that I wrote when I was teaching, well let's say I was very careful to make sure that I knew that people would be able to understand the part and play it. It's nice to be able to just write whatever you want, and not worry about that. It's a wonderful feeling!"

Stan and I continued to talk at length. He is an amazing man who has been all over the world to share his music. Stan and Peggy are now docents at the Naples Botanical Garden and love looking out over the lake from their home.

"During my musical career, one of my great joys has been the friendships made among colleagues, in my community and around the world because of the language of music." This is the closing statement in a little book Stan graciously shared with me that was produced to celebrate a milestone birthday. The very last thing written on the final page of the book says "To Be Continued."

What a fitting statement. After spending most of the afternoon with Stan, having him share some of his memories

and showing me prizes he has collected from his journeys, I can say without a doubt that Stan Leonard is still making music that will last well beyond my lifetime. Stan's hope is that percussion music will continue to grow among the younger generations. Not just the rock and roll drummer, but the art of the pedal for the timpani and the wondrous sound of the marimba. We need to encourage the younger generation to stop texting with the keyboard and start playing notes on a keyboard. Bang the drum. Crash the cymbals. Ring the bells.

Part of the rewards of doing these stories is the opportunity to meet people like Peggy and Stan Leonard!

If you would like to learn more about Stan you can visit his website www.stanleyleonard.com

The best way to end this article is how it started. The line we have used in all of the advertising that I have ever produced for Stan. The line that describes his life and storied career, "There is music for you here." ■