Stanley Leonard: A Life in Percussion

By John Soroka

In the summer of 1994, Stanley Leonard retired from his position as Principal Timpanist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. During his last week of rehearsals and concerts, John Soroka (Principal Percussionist of the PSO) spoke with Leonard about his career and his plans for "retirement."

John Soroka: *I'd like to know what changed the most about orchestra playing, or what remained the same during your long tenure with the PSO.*

Stanley Leonard: A different style of orchestral playing has developed over the years. I have noticed that conductors seem to want orchestras to produce more and more sound and play with a more projected kind of sound than we used to do forty years ago. It seemed like conductors used to have a more natural concept of loud sounds. I have a feeling that it might be due to the spectacular way that recorded sound has developed over the years. Conductors and musicians are much more used to hearing a quality of presence in the recorded sound. Now they expect that same quality and character in the concert hall. Years ago, we were able to play more naturally and not be quite as concerned with projecting the sound in such a strong manner.

Soroka: *What techniques have you developed or changed in order to be able to accomplish that?*

Leonard: The advent of the plastic timpani head has assisted in sound production, because you are able to play stronger and use slightly heavier sticks without the danger of breaking the drumhead, as we would have done if we had been using calfskin heads. I use sticks with a little bit larger diameter handle. The diameter of the handle is a significant factor in producing a bigger sound. You have to adapt to each concert hall, too. Some concert halls require using a general range of harder sticks, if there is considerable reverberation. Drier sounding concert halls require a general range of slightly softer sticks in order to produce the proper character of sound.

Soroka: *Could you speak about the types of mallets you use?*

Leonard: I have tried, over the years, to develop a selection of sticks that will provide me with the kind of tone colors that I need to play any piece of music. I don't make too many sticks myself, but I have designed sticks for stick makers to make for me. I'm always thinking in terms of the colors of the sounds. I have tried to develop sets of sticks that answer the needs of the music, articulate the music correctly—both rhythmically and dynamically—and provide proper musical nuance. I may use several pairs of soft sticks—each pair having a different size head, a different type of core—in order to achieve a particular kind of sound. The same with hard sticks—I'll use several pairs that are all of a different character.

Soroka: *With what you've just described in terms of a life-long approach to exploring colors and doing that partially through different sticks you've created and acquired, have your insights into playing Beethoven or Brahms symphonies changed? How have these works remained fresh over the years?*

Leonard: First, let me say that these are two of my favorite composers—not only because of the music they wrote, but also because of the kind of timpani parts they wrote, which seem to fit the music so well. When I'm playing, I'm always thinking how my part fits into the total musical picture. From time to time I get new performance insights and will say, "Oh, I never noticed that this particular passage played a certain way or with a certain dynamic could achieve a slightly different feeling here." Freshness continues as a part of the exploring process you're always going through when you're playing, even though it's a work you may have performed literally hundreds of times. To me, playing a Beethoven symphony is always a fresh experience because I enjoy playing it so much. I have become so familiar with his works I'm able to really listen with a depth of perception that I didn't have when I first began playing. When I first started, I was concerned with the mechanics of fitting the notes into the rest of the music and the orchestral tonescape. As the years have gone by, I've been able to think more about the perceptions I have about the music itself, and that has been really helpful to me in interpreting and performing.

Soroka: *Would you comment on what you've appreciated or respected about some of the conductors under whom you've performed?*

Leonard: A percussionist always enjoys performing with a conductor who has a good sense of rhythm and can communicate that sense through the baton and through his or her gestures on the podium. Starting in the present and going backwards, I appreciate Lorin Maazel's wonderful sense of rhythm and ensemble. The clarity of his baton technique and consistency is appreciated by all of the musicians. I appreciated the flexibility and the musicianship of André Previn. He has the ability to interpret Russian and French music with an understanding that other conductors never communicated to me. William Steinberg taught me how to understand and appreciate Brahms, Beethoven, Wagner and the German repertoire. I appreciated the emotional and sentimental heart that he put into the music of Mahler. I loved the way Eugene Ormandy created orchestral sounds. I have never played with anybody who developed the sound of an orchestra like Ormandy did.

Soroka: *So these conductors have served as teachers, and through their interpretations, you were able to gain insights about the composers and performance. What lessons have remained with you from the percussion teachers with whom you studied?*

Leonard: I think that each of my teachers had an emotional and spiritual impact on the things that I do now. I began studying timpani as a teenager with a Saul Goodman student—Ben Udel, who played timpani in the Kansas City Philharmonic. He taught me a lot about the musical aspects of playing the timpani—something that I really grabbed hold of. Ben was an incredibly intense and devoted musician.

Stanley Leonard

He taught in a way that helped me develop a real sense of listening to what I was doing when I was playing.

My first percussion teacher was Vera Daylen. She taught me about character and color on all of the percussion instruments. She was a marimba virtuoso, a student of Clair Omar Musser. I studied also with Edward Metzinger, who was in the Chicago Symphony. He taught me a lot about controlling the placement of the timpani stick on the drumhead. My teacher at Eastman was Bill Street, who refined all of these techniques that I had been gathering over the years. He was what I would call "the gentleman of timpani players." He taught me about playing with a musical style, and with an approach to the drum that respected the instrument, the music. He always emphasized striking the instrument so as to produce a singing musical sound.

Soroka: *Could you talk a little bit about your percussion experience, including your beginnings as a timpanist?*

Leonard: When I was seventeen, I began my professional career as a percussionist with the Kansas City Philharmonic. My teacher Vera was the principal percussionist, and my teacher Ben played the timpani. That was great to be able to perform with them, where I learned all of the major percussion pieces by Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff and others. I spent a lot of time getting scores out of the Kansas City Public Library. In those days we didn't have all the wonderful repertoire books we have today. I hand-copied out all the major parts of those pieces from the score, so I could become familiar with all of the percussion parts that I eventually played with the orchestra. I just played the triangle part to start out with, then graduated to tambourine, and then played the snare drum on many of those pieces. It was an incredible opportunity for me to be able to learn the repertoire in a professional orchestra that way. The more I did it, the more I was convinced that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I began playing the timpani when I was fourteen years old. I played timpani in a little orchestra in my home town, Independence, Missouri. I actually wanted to play percussion; I didn't know much about the timpani when I was fourteen, but I went to the conductor of the orchestra and said, "I'd like to play in your orchestra," and so I played a few little drum things for him, and read some music. Then he said, "Do you know anything about the timpani?" and I said, "Well, very little," and he said, "Come with me." He showed me the timpani and a pair of sticks and how to sort of hold them, and he said, "Come to next Tuesday night's rehearsal." That's how I began. The first piece I played on the timpani was the opening movement of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. I had a good time figuring out how to tune the drums; they were old-time hand-tuned Belgian timpani with calfskin heads. I immediately bought a copy of the *Ludwig Timpani Instructor* so that I could find out more about the timpani. In that book there was a section on pedal timpani, written by Joseph Zettleman. I was really inspired, and eventually my high school got a set of pedal timpani and I was able to play those exercises that Zettleman had written. I learned how to play scales and arpeggios on the timpani, which really opened up a whole new world for me.

Soroka: *During this period of time did you find yourself being more attracted to the timpani as an instrument and seeing that as the way you wished to express yourself musically in the future?*

Leonard: I played timpani in my little town orchestra, and then a year or so later, I began playing timpani in the University of Kansas City Orchestra. The timpani started to become my real focus in percussion. It seemed as though that was the way I could express myself musically as I wanted. And, in a kind of selfish way, it also gave me the opportunity to play more than a percussionist.

Soroka: *You've written a book about pedal technique for the timpani, which certainly fills a major gap in the educational performance practice repertoire for that instrument. Could you speak about the development of the book?*

Leonard: Over the years a lot of people I talked to, including students that came to study with me, thought that the pedals were just used for tuning, and that tuning was an isolated part of what you did on the timpani. The movement of the sticks over the drumhead and producing the sound was perceived as the most important thing, and tuning was some kind of necessary evil. I always felt that using the pedals was part of the performance technique of the timpani, and so I developed the idea that to be a total timpani player you had to be able to use the pedals just the same way that a harpist uses the harp pedals and a trombone player uses the slide. Pedaling is part of the whole experience of producing the sound, playing the notes and articulating the music. I wanted timpanists to be able to think of the pedals as being a natural part of the total process of playing the timpani, as an integral part of your playing, not just some-

thing you brought in from the outside. There were techniques to change the pitches rapidly that would also help articulate the music and make it easier to play some parts, depending on the pedaling used. All these ideas had been floating around in my brain, and finally about seven or eight years ago I decided to start putting the concepts down and developed exercises that would help articulate these concepts.

Percussion section of the Eastman Wind Ensemble, Frederick Fennell, conductor, March, 1954. Stanley Leonard, timpani; percussionists (left to right) Jim Dotson, John Beck, Mitch Peters and Gordon Peters

Soroka: *I think that, at times, people view the timpanist and the timpani as an island unto itself in the larger ocean of the orchestra. I would like to hear what you have to say about blending the timpani with the whole percussive musical texture.*

Leonard: I believe that you're talking about balance, which is incredibly important in music. The timpanist is kind of a lonely figure at times. And sometimes you feel lonely when you're playing, too. You have to be continually aware of the way your playing is articulating the music. I think that articulation—or communication—of the music is the key thought here. When you are articulating the music, you are thinking about balance in terms of the dynamic, musical nuance, rhythmic structure and how that rhythmic structure is fitting into what everybody else is playing in the orchestra. In one sense, the timpanist, being alone, can be a leader. I think of the timpani more as a binding force. Not so much a "telling everybody else what to do" force, but a "getting everybody together kind of feeling" force.

The sound of the timpani creates a certain tone color for the rest of the orchestra, too. It has an effect on the total sound of the orchestra in a way that's really kind of unique. Here you have this drum that you're striking and yet you're producing a pitch—a musical timbre, a musical character, and that character is affecting every other sound that is being played in the orchestra. The timpani functions as a harmonizer, as a balancer, as a binder in both the tonal sense as well as the rhythmic sense. The timpanist must understand when it's time to play stronger with greater urgency in the rhythmic feeling to keep everything together, and when to back away, but still have the binding power to keep things together.

Take, for instance, something as simple as the notes at the beginning of Brahms' *Symphony No. 1*, where the timpani plays a long series of repeated notes. You can play that passage as if you're pounding a nail into a piece of wood, and play it perfectly rhythmically together. Or you can play it like part of the structure, part of the inner energy of the music, and it acts as a real binding force for all the other longer sounds that are going on in the orchestra. You have to think in terms of the movement of the rhythm, the dynamic character of the sound, and also the inner focus of the music—going from the first note of the first measure to the last note of the passage. You really must immerse yourself in the music and make it be a part of your inner self, and express that in the energy of your performance.

Soroka: *With your retirement from thirty-eight years of service with the Pittsburgh Symphony, what do you plan to do now?*

Leonard: Well, I don't intend to give up music, but I intend to do a lot more fishing. [laughter]

Soroka: *Aside from the fishing, Stan!*

Leonard: I will continue teaching privately and conducting the percussion ensemble at Duquesne University, where I'm on the faculty. At the moment I'm writing a solo for one of my students to play on a recital, so I intend to keep writing pieces, including some more percussion ensembles—I love to do that. I intend also to present masterclasses around the country, using a variety of themes, possibly conducting ensembles and even performing with ensembles. Through these masterclasses, I want to be able to share with people some of the things I've learned.

Soroka: *What advice can you give younger performers who have their eyes on achieving the kind of musical life that you've been able to experience and enjoy?*

Leonard: I must say that I grew up in a different performing era than people today. It seems as though there were more opportunities for me to play because there were fewer percussionists. Today, percussionists have the opportunity to communicate with other percussionists, and I think that's very important. The PAS has really provided a forum for communication that we never had before, and I think that's very good. I believe percussionists should always try to find an opportunity to study with a teacher who is experienced in the field in which they want to work. When I say a good teacher, I mean a person who is involved professionally in that field. If you want to be a classical percussionist, you have to study with a professional orchestral percussionist. If you want to be a jazz player, you have to study with a good professional jazz player. If you want to be an educator, you should go to a place where you can get training from a person who has the right concepts and approach to musical education.

The next thing is to perform. In real estate, it's location, location, location. In music, it's perform, perform, perform. That's the key. If you want to be a performer, you have to take advantage of every opportunity to perform. Every opportunity you have to play helps you develop as a performer. Sometimes you have to play some rather crummy things, but you still have to play, and that's what is important. Always make it your goal to have good instruments, sticks and mallets to play with. That's really an important thing, to have your own musical tools with which you feel comfortable.

During the past school year Stanley Leonard has presented masterclasses at several universities including the Eastman School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the University of Akron. He can be heard performing and conducting his own works on a soon-to-be released CD produced by Ludwig Music titled Canticle—The Music of Stanley Leonard. **PN**