

# Those Who Wait...

A symphony percussionist must have the soul of an artist and the hands of a safecracker. But, above all, he must always be ready.

By Abby Mendelson

**O**n stage, the light is strong and getting hotter. But it is still cool in the last row of the Pittsburgh Symphony, where Stanley Leonard, a slight, bespectacled 52-year-old man who appears 20 years younger, sits alone, peering silently over his gleaming copper-bottomed tympani, through the rows of musicians, at guest conductor Michael Tilson Thomas. Piano concerti do not generally require much work of tympanists, and Brahms' "Second" is no exception, so Leonard has little to do during the rehearsal but wait for the moment when he will be able to use his white-headed mallets to underscore a rhythm or presage a dramatic climax.

Tilson Thomas has found what he wants and looks up at the musicians before him. "It's *A natural*," he says, gesturing with his arms, "yum-ba-yum-ba-yum." A few heads nod; here and there a hand flashes up with a pencil, marking a brief notation. Tilson Thomas runs a bony hand through his collar-length hair, sets himself, and swings his arms down. At the front of the stage, in khakis and a blue knit shirt, pianist Misha Dichter's forearms ripple as he launches energetically into the Brahms. The sound is lush and flowing, the strings and woodwinds cascading behind the soaring, frenetic piano. All the musicians are intent, and busy. Stanley Leonard, his back straight and head held high like a wary soldier's, listens and waits.



**A**lthough Leonard himself has had the rare opportunity to sit in the soloist's spot and perform tympani concerti, a symphony percussionist's lot generally means anonymity. For the two Brahms piano concerti, for exam-

ple, the duties for which Leonard and associate principal percussionist John Soroka share, it means a well-placed thud now and again, a roll or two here and there, and much, much dead time spent in a tuxedo and bow tie under hot lights. That, of course, is the chief difference between the percussionists and the rest of the orchestra, aside from the sheer number of instruments they are responsible for. Because while the violins, for example, play an entire evening virtually without stop, a tympanist or a percussionist (who might play everything from snare drums to xylophones to chimes) has to wait and then be ready to rap a wood block or strike a triangle with just the right pitch and timbre—and at just the right moment.

Of course it looks easy. Yet symphony percussionists can listen to 100 different players and detect subtle differences in each: the hands have different qualities—a wrist is quicker, fingers looser, release faster, or cleaner, or sharper. And it all matters, for there is no place for a tympanist to hide. They may sit in the back, but they're frequently alone, and a bad rhythm or a misplaced note can throw off a whole section. Playing percussion may appear to be a lot of banging and clanging, but it's a job for someone with the soul of an artist, and the nerve, timing—and hands—of a safecracker.

The five men who regularly perform with the Pittsburgh Symphony developed the hands and the musical sense after years of practice, a regimen which continues with every score. Sometimes they may practice as much as one hour alone for every hour in rehearsal and performance, for tone and timing, learning and relearning an intricate xylophone solo or the crisp rattle of a

glockenspiel accompaniment. In fact, most percussionists fall in love with their life's work early, often by age eight, dedicating their lives to symphony work.

The pattern is fairly standard: they are encouraged by parents, take lessons, play in school, attend concerts. If they are good enough, they see rewards—by moving up through youth orchestras, getting freelance work, landing positions with small symphonies. Although some do play in rock or jazz bands, by the time a percussionist has chosen symphony life it becomes his only option: fail, and there's nothing else, save teaching and pickup work. They all have auditioned many times, of course, before panels of their peers, key orchestra members, conductors, and selected others. In Pittsburgh, for example, the men, who range in age from mid-20s to mid-50s, learn quickly that their individual styles must conform both to the percussion section as well as the orchestra. Certainly, there are moments when a percussionist can be self-indulgent and flashy—but clearly this is a job for those who do not demand the lion's share of the spotlight. Yet, within their own backrow purview, they consider themselves stars as much as anyone.

The Pittsburgh Symphony's five percussionists, whose salaries spread gently from the \$35,000 union minimum to something around \$65,000, also understand a symphony's rigid hierarchy. Here, for instance, the best tympani parts go first to principal Leonard, then to associate Soroka. The 32-year-old Soroka, on the other hand, is also principal percussionist, and he divvies up the rest of the work—xylophones, cymbals, glockenspiels, circus drums, wind chimes, cowbells, and more—according to the talents of his men. Assistant principal Gerald Unger, a soft-spoken blond, 45-year-

*Abby Mendelson is a contributing editor of Pittsburgh Magazine.*



*Tympanist Stanley Leonard has grown up with the orchestra. He remembers when a good symphony salary was \$120 a week.*

old, is likely to pick up a key drum part or a complex vibraphone passage; further down the line, Edward Myers, a 50-ish bear of a man, may play the chimes or slap at a wood block; and at the very end of the pecking order, Don Liuzzi will whack a gong or slam a set of cymbals—making a lot of noise that doesn't require much technique from the 24-year-old freshman. Although Liuzzi is treated as an equal backstage, and seems as genially cocky about his craft as his older colleagues, he is still an apprentice—albeit a gifted one—and it will be quite some time before he presumes to sit on Stanley Leonard's stool on Mahler night.



The orchestra is back from a break and, Tilson Thomas and Dichter at the fore, is working the kinks out of Brahms' "First Piano Concerto." John Soroka sits behind Stanley Leonard's tympani—Leonard's personal set, which, unlike other principals elsewhere, he has no qualms about sharing with his associate. Tilson Thomas stops the action, and the sounds slowly cease. Soroka, stands, arms folded, glancing at his score. "Two bars before D," Tilson Thomas says, and raises his hands expectantly.

The music resumes, and suddenly Soroka is alert, his two white-tufted sticks poised and parallel above the central drumhead. There is a sudden crescendo, and Soroka releases a furied roll of thunder, his face taut, arms and chest straining, eyes intent upon the conductor at the opposite end of the stage. The brass march their notes forward, and Soroka, his back and legs straight, neck muscles knotting and bulging, goes with them, wrists snapping down then up to get the sound crisp and right. His sticks descending one after the other along with Tilson Thomas' sharply dropping right hand, Soroka's rhythms run note for note with the French horns, an insinuating voice below their higher, more insistent call.



The orchestra members have a nicely appointed lounge on Heinz Hall's second floor, yet by and large the percussionists eschew it, preferring instead their own hot, windowless 12-by-20 foot storeroom backstage. Room 176, as it is marked, is crammed end to end and floor to ceiling with drums and cabinets and cymbals—the stuff of their art. Although the five do not socialize offstage, they seek their own company at work. Perhaps it is the nature of their craft, or their physical position in the orchestra, but they are loners, both onstage and among themselves.

Stanley Leonard has been there longer than any of them, except Edward Myers, 27

years in all, through the quest for legitimacy under William Steinberg, the much-heralded move from the aged Syria Mosque to refurbished Heinz Hall, and the Symphony's assumption of world-rank status under Andre Previn. "I feel I've grown up with the orchestra," Leonard says simply.

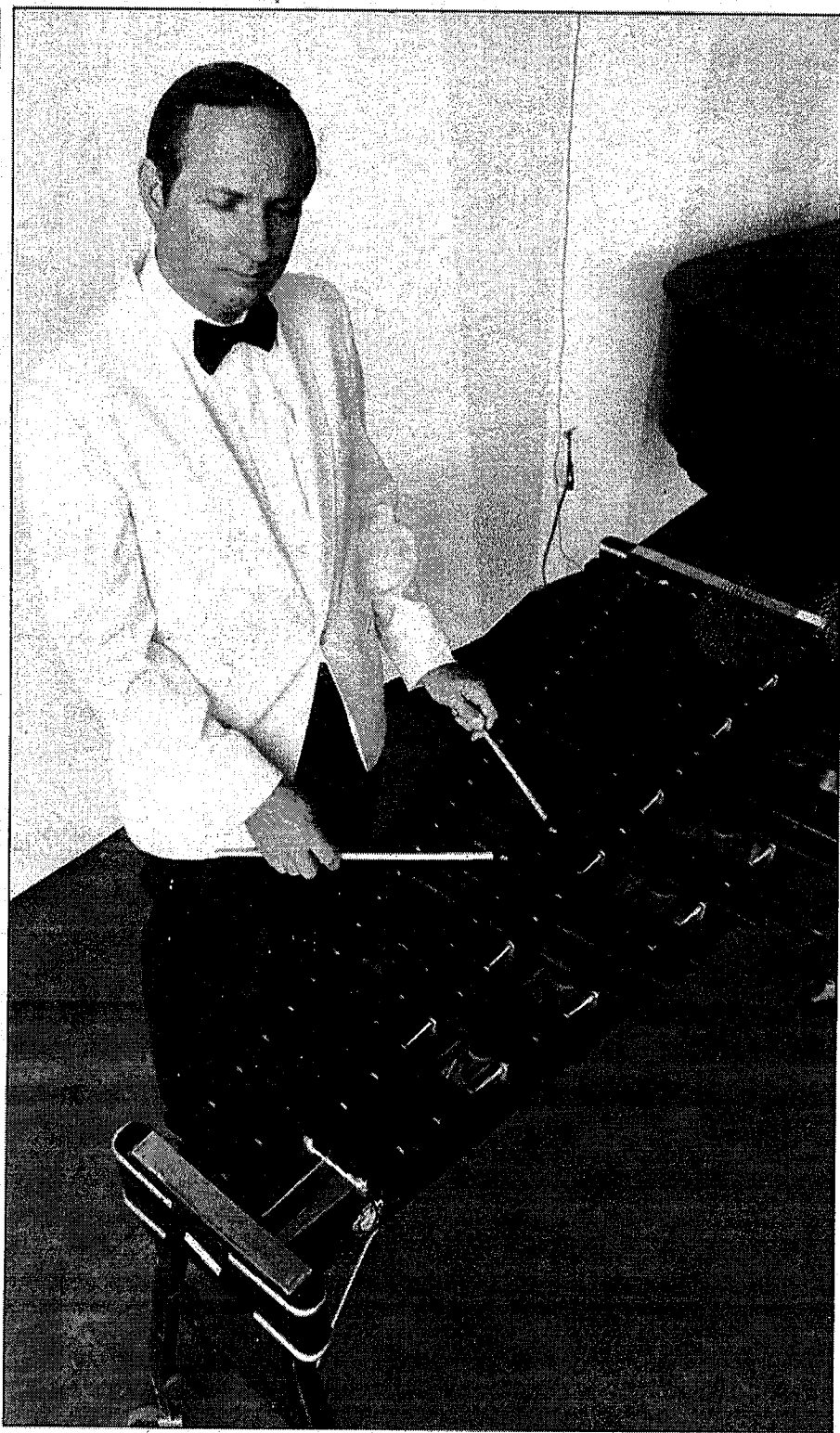
Indeed, his quarter-century has been a time of richly rewarding personal and professional growth. He entered the ranks at the tail end of the "Dark Ages," when literally two—and not 200 musicians—applied for a permanent chair, and a good contract paid \$120 a week for 26 weeks—with unemployment checks for the other 26.

But no longer. Leonard now commands the kind of salary that permits his own sabbatical from teaching—except for a projected series of master classes next year at Duquesne. Similarly, he has achieved the kind of accolades afforded only to distinguished soloists—by having his home orchestra commission a piece especially for him, "In Celebration," which he will perform next year both in Pittsburgh and Toronto. Perhaps the best part, though, is the recognition he's slowly acquired over the years, something that makes Stanley Leonard smile a bit. Recently, for example, a Meals-on-Wheels delivery to a family member came with a question: was she related to *the* Stanley Leonard? The answer was yes, and the beaming volunteer said proudly, "we've been subscribers since he first came to the orchestra."



**W**hite-jacketed musicians scurry back and forth through the wings, the morning's ragtag army suddenly gone respectable. They practice last-minute runs and trills, nodding to themselves and each other, oblivious to the crowd swelling into the hall, to the light reflecting off eyeglass frames and gleaming trumpets. Onstage and isolated, Stanley Leonard gazes idly at the half-filled seats, at the score laid out before him as his colleagues gingerly pick their way through the chairs crowded onstage. His mallets are carefully spread out in a black traveling case beside him, and he tests various pairs, tapping the round white tops of the drum heads, listening carefully, testing a tension nut here, adjusting a silver T-wrench there. A slight shift of his high stool, a subtle maneuver of the mallets in the case, a mannered tug at collar and cuffs, and—silent and staring and strangely boyish—he's ready.

Tilson Thomas and Dichter come onstage with a flourish, accompanied by applause, and the concerto begins, the strings powerful and declarative, the piano excited and discursive. Leonard, sitting quiet and alert, provides an odd contrast to the sound



*Assistant principal percussionist Gerald Unger, who gave up a principal's chair in Dallas to come here, must play everything from xylophone to bongos.*



*At 25, Don Liuzzi is the kid of the percussion section. He had to beat out 50 other musicians for his job.*

and fury around him, a single spot of restive stillness in the moving orchestra. "As a tympanist," he will say later, "you feel part of a team, but you feel isolated as well. You have to be aware of everything, to have a unique conception of what's going on before you play. You have to be involved. I get weary sitting there sometimes. But I never get bored."



**I**f Stanley Leonard resembles nothing so much as a steady, slightly aged Boy Scout, John Soroka is the class clown and back-row cut-up, nervous, open, and valuable. It is a study in contrasts: offstage, for example, Stanley Leonard is given to church choirs and handbell ringing; Soroka prefers cross-country motorcycling, flea-market scrounging, and nurturing a record collection that runs into the thousands. Given his energy it seems remarkable that Soroka is able to sit and wait as long and as quietly as he does. During Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony," for example, a percussionist remains on stage and does absolutely nothing for three entire movements. "We sit," Soroka says, "and wait, like an outfielder who's always there, but only needed for a moment."

Like most percussionists, Soroka began his career early. By the time he was seven, for example, he had asked to study music. Just a year later he announced that percussion would be his life's work—and was so enthralled that "sometimes I had to be locked out of the practice room," he says. By age 16 he was playing at Tanglewood, working in part with a young conductor named Michael Tilson Thomas. Some, of course, are intimidated by the high-level competition—but all it did was whet Soroka's appetite for orchestral life, which he fed during high school and college with part-time jobs for opera and ballet companies, work which netted him roughly \$10,000 a year, all in his native Philadelphia. Then there was a five-year stint with the Baltimore Symphony, which he left five years ago for his current post, a move that gave him virtually everything he wanted: a world-class orchestra, international tours, television and recording work, and the inconsequential matter of an \$11,000 pay increase. "It was definitely a major-league situation," Soroka says. "I'm quite fortunate."



**T**he five men mill in the back of the stage, crowded among numerous drums, a delicate metal glockenspiel, a handsome wooden xylophone in a battered silver shipping case, a large gong, wind chimes, and much more, the area looking like nothing so much as an overcrowded pawnshop. Michael Tilson

Thomas calls for Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," which opens with a quick-wristed xylophone spot. John Soroka, a pencil perched behind his ear, runs through it—and although Tilson Thomas does not notice, Soroka is unhappy. He was off-tempo by a hair, or a bit too loud. He grimaces, and clutches both hands in the air, and growls audibly.

Gershwin was a jazz writer above all, with a noticeable love of percussion, so Leonard, Soroka, Unger, Liuzzi, and the bearded and balding Paul DeChancie, standing in for Edward Myers, have a great deal to do. They stand on risers, above the rest of the musicians, a phalanx leading, prodding, cajoling—stating and restating the musical themes. They seem all in motion at once, five blurred and indistinguishable parts of a single engine. Stanley Leonard hammers his tympani. John Soroka raps a quick melody line on his xylophone, then races to a triangle for a key note, then back to take some licks on the glockenspiel. Don Liuzzi pauses, the blue knob of a mallet pushed up under his chin, then without warning he lays a swift, sharp undercurt into the belly of a black-and-gold gong, and with the sound still spreading, hops four steps backwards to take up his position at an enormous bass drum. Gerald Unger lays down a rhythm line on a vibraphone. Paul DeChancie runs a few riffs on the snare drum. They are all in motion, all at once, a production line going full tilt.

Later, Sarah Vaughan and her trio come onstage signaling a brief respite for the percussion section. While Stanley Leonard sits alone behind his tympani, the other four create their own diversions, mugging, gesturing, sharing private jokes. During a sultry song, John Soroka shakes his behind exaggeratedly, much to his colleagues' delight. Jerry Unger throws a few sheets of music on the vibraphone, then plays a quick riff on the bongos. "Tito Unger," Don Liuzzi says while Paul DeChancie ripples a bit of mock-applause. John Soroka turns to them and belches audibly and the three dissolve into muffled laughter.

Michael Tilson Thomas waves the sound down, calls for a "soft and silky" rendering of "Fascinatin' Rhythm." The men are poised: Unger over bongos, Liuzzi on conga, Soroka with guiro, a dried, notched fruit gourd which he scrapes with an Ace pocket comb he has dug out of his jeans, a small black one missing numerous teeth. Then it is "My Man's Gone Now," and Soroka takes up a position at the chimes, gives them a few belts, then races back to his xylophone, pushing a strayed and unwary Jerry Unger out of the way like a wide receiver moving off the line. He is hardly there before he does a quick two-step to the vibraphone, all the time keeping up with the

song's rolling tempo. Finally, there is the big finish, a multi-voiced clamor all of a piece. Slender, youthful Don Liuzzi holds aloft two massive cymbals, pauses, grimaces, then, his back curved, Liuzzi pumps his leg, steps, and produces a booming metallic crash just before all the music snaps shut. "Groovy," John Soroka mutters, and seconds later they are gone from the stage.



**J**erry Unger's position with the Pittsburgh Symphony meant giving up the principal's chair in Dallas, a sacrifice the Akron native made to play in a better orchestra and be closer to home. For Don Liuzzi, on the other hand, the trip to Pittsburgh meant immediate recognition and a sizeable salary—all at the age of 24. Like the others, he fell early and hard for drums—at first it was his brother's Beatles records, later symphony orchestras in Boston. But times had changed dramatically from the days when Stanley Leonard came aboard: more than 200 people applied for the Pittsburgh's fifth percussion position, and roughly 50 of them performed grueling auditions on xylophone, bells, snare drums, cymbals, and more. Although Liuzzi had auditioned three times before—in Vancouver, San Francisco, and Montreal—he had never made it past the prelims. Here, the 50 were cut down to 10, the 10 to two, and Liuzzi hung on, despite flubbing some notes at the outset. Even that last day, he says, "I had no illusion that this job was mine."

He has fit in well with a group that has no single identity. He himself favors the outdoors, a schoolyard basketball court near his Shadyside apartment, cross country skiing; Jerry Unger is a confirmed suburban midwesterner; Ed Myers is big and flashy; John Soroka likes his motorcycles; Stanley Leonard is a quiet churchgoer. "The section is very interesting," Liuzzi says, "because everybody's different."

Misha Dichter is taking one much-deserved ovation after another: his Brahms "Second Piano Concerto" was brilliant, and his audience is hardly unappreciative. To the crowd's delight he embraces Michael Tilson Thomas and kisses principal cellist Anne Williams, and the bravos keep pouring from the mezzanine and the balcony. The three musicians are flushed, sweating and beaming in the light.

In the back of the stage, Stanley Leonard sits quietly, like a preoccupied man in a physician's waiting room. When the applause has straggled to a stop, and the musicians begin to stand, he carefully replaces the top on his black, monogrammed mallet case and walks silently offstage to a nearby freight elevator. He is done for the night. □

