

The Marimba in Carnegie Hall and Town Hall from 1935–62

BY REBECCA KITE

During the 20th century, the marimba was used in the United States in an enormous variety of performance situations. These include jazz groups and marimba groups (trios, quartets, etc.) playing popular music and light classics, Guatemalan and Mexican marimba ensembles, and the massed marimba orchestras organized by Clair Omar Musser in the 1930s and '40s. Marimba soloists began performing in formal recitals and concerts by the 1940s as well.

While researching the history of the marimba and marimba concert music for use as background information in the Keiko Abe biography I am writing, I discovered some very interesting facts about marimba performances in the major New York City venues. By looking at the performances of marimba and xylophone soloists that took place in the two main recital venues in New York City between 1935 and 1962, Town Hall and Carnegie Hall, I found that the marimba was known as a solo recital instrument in these venues as early as 1945 and that the xylophone was used in a solo recital instrument as early as 1937.

I relied on a number of different sources in my research for this article. My research materials included the PAS publications archives, dissertations, correspondence with the Archivist and Museum Director at Carnegie Hall, and online newspaper archives including www.newspaperarchive.com and the New York Times online archives. This article is limited to the history of performances I could find with these resources. My work in this subject, 20th century marimba performance in the United States, is not exhaustive, and this is a research area that should continue to be explored.

I would like to thank David Eyder, Jim Strain, Randy Rudolph, William Moersch, Kathleen Kastner, and Gino Francesconi for their help in my research for this article.

INTERNATIONAL MARIMBA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The first documented performance I

have found was the May 16, 1935 concert of the International Marimba Symphony Orchestra (IMSO) in Carnegie Hall. This was the 100-piece group for which the King George marimbas were made. (For more information about this ensemble, refer to the extensive and excellent research that has been done by David Eyder.)

A number of IMSO members went on to have distinguished careers, including William Ludwig Jr., Jack Conner, and Burt Jackson.¹ Fresh out of college, Laurence and Mildred Lacour (who married immediately before the IMSO began touring) were also members of this group. In 1950, the Lacours organized and undertook an evangelical missionary tour to 130 cities in Japan, taking their two King George marimbas with them as part of their musical quartet.

This tour was the first time a marimba was taken into Japan. Tens of thousands of Japanese heard these instruments. These King George instruments (numbers 90 and 91)² are the marimbas that Keiko Abe, already a professional xylophonist, heard as a young teenager and that so impressed her with their beautiful, organ-like sound.³

YOICHI HIRAOKA, XYLOPHONE SOLOIST

On November 24, 1937 Yoichi Hiraoka, a well-known NBC radio artist, performed a recital of classical pieces and light classics in Town Hall. The recital included the “Bach Violin Concerto in E Major” with string quartet (made up of members of the New York Philharmonic string sections), melodic excerpts from longer classical pieces (probably themes from famous opera arias, overtures and symphonies) with piano accompaniment, and Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee.”⁴

RUTH STUBER – THE FIRST MARIMBA CONCERTO

In 1939, Frederique Petrides commissioned Paul Creston to write a marimba concerto to feature one of the members of the orchestra she organized and con-



Ruth Stuber

ducted, the Orchestrette Classique. Ruth Stuber was the timpanist of this group; however, because of her extensive experience as a marimbist, she wanted a marimba piece to perform for her concerto opportunity with the orchestra. Stuber had performed in the 1933 Century of Progress marimba orchestra and had studied marimba with Musser and George Hamilton Green. She was living in New York and working as a freelance musician and performing club dates with her marimba trio and as a marimba soloist.⁵

The premiere of the “Concertino for Marimba” by Paul Creston took place on April 29, 1940 in the Carnegie Chamber Hall with Ruth Stuber, marimba soloist, and the Orchestrette Classique with Frederique Petrides conducting, in a program during their regular season. The concerto, the first ever written for the marimba, was well received.⁶

DORIS STOCKTON – MARIMBA SOLOIST

Doris Stockton, a native of Chicago and student of Musser, was a nationally known marimba soloist during the 1940s. The first documented performance date of hers I have found is in 1940⁷ and the



Doris Stockton

last is in 1962.⁸ Over the span of these 22 years, she performed across the United States with several appearances in New York, numerous appearances through the Midwest, and at least one appearance in California at the Hollywood Bowl. She also recorded a four-record set of transcriptions of classical music as a marimba soloist accompanied by Russ Case and his orchestra for RCA Victor in 1948, titled *Marimba Classics*.⁹

Stockton performed a solo marimba recital on January 31, 1945 at Town Hall, accompanied by a pick-up orchestra made up of members of the New York Philharmonic and, on some selections, by a pianist. Clair Omar Musser conducted the orchestra. The program included "Perpetual Motions" of Weber and Paganini, "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso" by Mendelssohn, "Polonaise Brillante" by Weber, an etude and the "Scherzo Caprice" by Musser, and short works by Paradies, Pachulsky, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky. This concert included transcriptions of classical pieces and works written specifically for the marimba.¹⁰

On June 7, 1946, Stockton was one of three featured soloists on a New York Philharmonic pops concert in Carnegie Hall. She performed a number of transcriptions and, in an encore, a piece written specifically for marimba. The program included the "Scherzo" from Litolf's Fourth Piano Concerto-Symphony and Paganini's "Moto Perpetuo," both with orchestra. Her encores in-

cluded Chopin's "Prelude in C minor" and Musser's "Etude in E-flat" for marimba.¹¹

CELSO HURTADO – SOLO MARIMBA IN CARNEGIE HALL

I have found documentation for only one solo marimba recital in Carnegie Hall, not only in the time period covered in this article, but up to 1980. This recital was performed by Celso Hurtado, who was a member of the Hurtado Brothers Royal Marimba Band of Guatemala. They began performing together around 1900. Over the years, this group changed personnel and eventually split into different performing groups. The members of this ensemble and its offshoots had performing careers of over 50 years. Celso was very gifted as a soloist as well as ensemble player and gained fame in Guatemala and in the United States for his virtuosity.¹²

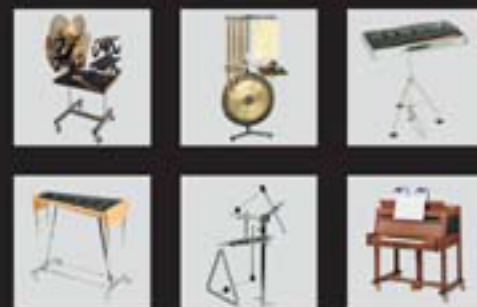
On April 7, 1947 Hurtado performed a solo program on marimba at Carnegie Hall, accompanied by Narciso Figueroa on piano. The program included transcriptions of music by Paganini, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, Sarasate, Lecuona, Chopin, and Liszt.¹³



Celso Hurtado

JACK CONNER – VIBRAPHONE AND MARIMBA IN TOWN HALL

John (Jack) Conner was a versatile musician, at home in his roles as an orchestral percussionist, a jazz vibes player (he played an hour's worth of jazz with a trio at the West Point Marimba Festival in March 1998), a featured marimbist



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Jack Conner, PASIC 1977

touring for years with Andy Williams, and a marimba soloist.

On February 12, 1949 Conner premiered the “Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone” by Darius Milhaud with the St. Louis Symphony at Kiel Opera House in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁴ Conner commissioned Milhaud to write this concerto for him several years earlier, prior to his work with the symphony, while he was a staff musician for KWK Radio in St. Louis. In the 1948–49 concert season Conner was Principal Percussionist of the St. Louis Symphony, and the opportunity arose to premiere this new concerto when conductor Vladimir Golschmann programmed a concert featuring concerti. Violinist Zino Fransiscotti performed two violin concerti on this same program.¹⁵

On September 27, 1950, Conner presented a solo recital at Town Hall, accompanied by Edwin McArthur on piano. The program—transcriptions and music written specifically for the instrument—included one movement from the Milhaud “Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone,” a Mozart sonata, part of Bach’s “B-flat Partita,” and compositions by Tartini, Paganini, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Albeniz, and others.¹⁶

VIDA CHENOWETH – MARIMBA SOLOIST

Vida Chenoweth, originally from Enid, Oklahoma, attended college in Chicago, where she studied with Musser and began her professional marimba performing career. She obtained professional management and concert booking services by the Columbia Lecture Bureau, and by the mid-1950s she had moved to New York City.

The Columbia Lecture Bureau booked and publicized Chenoweth’s Town Hall debut concert, which she performed on November 18, 1956. Her program included marimba solo works, a duo piece with flute, and pieces accompanied by piano.¹⁷ The works that were written for the marimba are “Chorale Prelude on Hassler’s Melody” by Eugene Ulrich, “Mirage” by Bernard Rogers, and the “Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra” by Paul Creston. Works written for other instruments that she transcribed for marimba are “Petizada” by Heitor Villa-Lobos (a piano suite) and “Canonic Sonata III” by George Telemann (performed with flute).¹⁸

The Orchestra of America, an ensemble founded by director Richard Korn, performed concerts devoted to music of American composers. On the second con-



Vida Chenoweth

cert of its 1959–60 season, Korn programmed the premiere of a composition written in 1956 by a promising young composer who had recently passed away: the “Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra” by Robert Kurka. Chenoweth, for whom the piece was composed, premiered it on November 11, 1959 at Carnegie Hall. This orchestra concert also included the premiere of “Symphony Three” by Charles Wuorinen.¹⁹

Chenoweth performed the “Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra” by Creston on the final concert of the second season of Korn’s Orchestra of America on March 22, 1961.²⁰

On January 15, 1962 Chenoweth presented her second Town Hall recital. This concert included transcriptions of music written for other instruments and compositions written specifically for the marimba. Transcriptions included music by Bach and “The Martyrdom of the Insects” by Villa-Lobos. Music written specifically for the marimba included “Suite for Marimba” by Alfred Fissinger, and “Miniatures” and “Three Country Dances” by E. Matthies.²¹

HIRAOKA RETURNS TO CARNEGIE HALL

Yoiichi Hiraoka returned to his adopted home country of the United States after a 20-year absence. He concertized and taught in Japan during these intervening years. Upon his return to New York, his musician friends in the New York Philharmonic booked a concert

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at Carnegie Recital Hall in order that they could perform together again. On November 27, 1962 Hiraoka and his friends performed a concert of xylophone music, which included most of the favorites he had performed almost 30 years before.²²


AFTER 1962

There seems to have been a 15-year gap in marimba performances in major New York City venues. The next performance I have documented is Keiko Abe's appearance on a concert presented by Music from Japan at Alice Tully Hall in 1977. The 1970s also brought the addition of new venues for marimba solo performances including Alice Tully Hall, Merkin Hall, and Kauffman Concert Hall.

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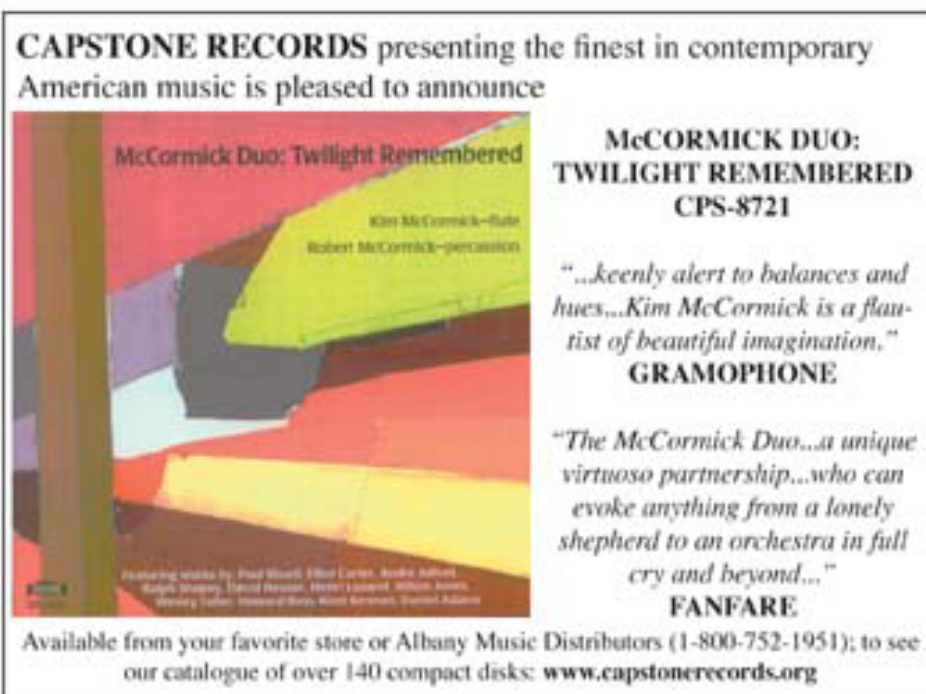
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