

The Birth of the Creston Marimba Concerto: An Interview with Ruth Jeanne

By Sarah Smith

THE FIRST MARIMBA CONCERTO was written in 1940 by Paul Creston. The *Concertino, Opus 21* was commissioned by Frederique Petrides, the conductor of the all-female orchestra, Orchestrette Classique, in New York City. Ruth Stuber, timpanist in the orchestra, premiered the marimba concerto on April 29, 1940 in New York's Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.

The Composer

Paul Creston was born Giuseppe Guttivergi on October 10, 1906 in New York City to a poor Italian immigrant family. In 1927 he changed his name to Paul Creston and married Louise Gotto.¹ Creston received no formal training in theory or composition but did study piano and organ. He decided on a career in composition in 1932. Henry Cowell introduced Creston to the New School for Social Research in 1934, the same year Creston began playing the organ at St. Michael's Church in New York.

In 1938 Creston received a Guggenheim fellowship, and after being awarded the New York Music Critics' Circle Award for his *Symphony No. 1* in 1941, he was among the most widely performed American composers. Creston's compositional trademark was rhythm, and he commonly used shifting subdivisions of a regular meter to enhance the rhythms. Another feature of Creston's writing style was the use of long and florid melodies. His harmony is very lush and impressionistic, and his forms are based on classical models.

Creston received many awards and commissions. He was the president of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors (1956-60), the director of ASCAP (1960-68), and a professor of music at Central Washington State College, Ellensburg, Washington from 1968-1975. He authored *Principles of Rhythm* (1964), *Rational Notation* (1979) and numerous articles. Creston died in San Diego, California on August 24, 1985.²

The *Concertino, Opus 21* was composed in 1940 as a commission from Frederique Petrides, and it was Creston's only work for solo marimba. This concerto is one of many virtuoso works Creston wrote for different instruments that were suffering from a shortage of solo or concerto pieces,

including saxophone, harp, trombone and accordion, all of which have become classics in their respective media.³

The Commissioner

Frederique Petrides was born in Antwerp, Belgium to a musically gifted family. She began studying piano and by the age of seven had also begun to study violin. Petrides was a member of her family's string quartet, which often gave recitals.

She studied the conducting of Felix Weingartner and was later invited to New York by Dimitri Mitropoulos to watch the New York Philharmonic rehearsals. While in New York, Petrides enrolled in a conducting class at New York University. Although very talented, she was unable to permeate the male world of conducting prevalent in the 1930s. Her only option was to start her own orchestra, and in 1933 founded the Orchestrette Classique, an all-women orchestra that would eventually grow from fourteen to thirty-five members.⁴

Petrides also edited and published *Women in Music* with the help of her journalist husband, Peter Petrides. It contained news and facts pertaining to women conductors and the women's orchestras in America and abroad. This was the first and only such publication of its kind in the world. *Women in Music* was published from 1935-1940, and comprised sixty issues.⁵

The Performer

Ruth Stuber, now Ruth Stuber Jeanne, is currently living in Granville, Ohio. In 1940, Ruth Stuber was performing in and around New York City as a marimba soloist and was hailed in the papers as the foremost female timpanist. She established a marimba trio that played in clubs in the later thirties and early forties, and most importantly, premiered the first marimba concerto ever written.

Stuber Jeanne's musical accomplishments are outstanding. She studied with Clair Musser and George Hamilton Green. She met Gene Krupa and Harry Breuer and also played in one of John Cage's first concerts.

Jeanne is now known for her many marimba ensemble arrangements. This remarkable woman still maintains a

marimba group, teaches private lessons and is currently the timpanist with a local symphony.

When composing the concerto, Creston sent Stuber his manuscripts as soon as he had written them. Stuber would play through the pages and return them with her suggestions. Creston's compositional techniques for writing the concerto included playing at the organ with his feet acting as the mallets.⁶

The following interview was conducted in March, 1995.

Sarah Smith: How did you get started in music?

Ruth Stuber Jeanne: My father, Benjamin Franklin Stuber, was a musician, and he started me on piano, drums and composition. Later, he had me study violin, which was his instrument. He wrote a methods course for strings called *The Melody Way*.

Smith: Where are you from originally?

Jeanne: I was born near Chicago. We moved to Newark, Ohio for two years and then to Warren, Ohio. This is where my father started string education in the public schools—around 1918. He had approached the superintendent of the Akron Public Schools with the idea, and was given the go-ahead. However, there were no method books available, so he wrote his own. Then he was asked to



Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne



Program from the Orchestrette Classique's seventh season, dated April 29, 1940. It was at this performance that Creston's *Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra* was premiered.

start the strings program in the Detroit public schools, and from there to Evanston, Illinois.

I eventually attended Northwestern University and graduated as a violin major in 1932. Because there were no jobs available, I lived at home for a year. This was good, as it turned out, because Musser started organizing the World's Fair Marimba Orchestra at the Deagan factory in 1933. Musser organized smaller groups around the country that would practice on their own, with the thought that before the performance, we would have a few rehearsals, then perform in Chicago. I was in the group that rehearsed at the Deagan factory. There were about five or six of us in that small group. Musser also gave me lessons at the time.

Smith: Where did these lessons take place?

Jeanne: Musser came to my house for those lessons. He would stop by on his way to or from the factory. I remember that he had a great artistic style about his playing. I had about three lessons with Musser. One of the first things he did was to cut an inch off the ends of my mallets because he thought my hands were small.

Smith: How did you and the other members of the World's Fair Orchestra obtain your marimbas?

Jeanne: We purchased the marimbas through mail order. Each instrument had the owner's name on a gold-colored plaque in the front. These were the 1933 model marimbas. The marimbas were either 3 1/2 octaves or 4 octaves. Mine was 3 1/2. The marim-

bas had very heavy brass resonators and the rails had a green mother-of-pearl type finish on them.

Smith: How were the marimbas divided?

Jeanne: There were one hundred of us: eighty 3 1/2-octave marimbas and twenty 4-octave marimbas. I can't remember if we stayed in our groups for the concerts, but I do remember that we were not divided by parts. All of the first-part players did not stand together—we were intermingled. Musser had written all the arrangements and they were very good. We played a total of five numbers: *Bolero* by Rosales; *Finlandia* by Sibelius; the *Largo* from Dvorak's *New World Symphony*; Wagner's *Pilgrim's Chorus* from *Tannhauser*; and the *Repaz Band March*, which is no longer available. We performed on the steps of the science building on Lakeshore Drive at the Chicago Convention Center.

Smith: Were you involved in the other orchestras Musser organized?

Jeanne: No, my family moved to Florence, Alabama where my father started a private music school. I taught with him, then accepted a position in Montgomery at a small women's college where I taught violin, theory and orchestra for two years. Things didn't work out in Alabama because the pay was too low, and my parents urged me to go to New York to play and study with George Hamilton Green. My aunt, Martha Stuber, was already living there, and they thought the opportunities would be greater in New York than in Alabama.

Smith: During your study with George Hamilton Green, what books did he use?

Jeanne: It was a piano book by Cramer called *Fifty Technical Studies for the Pianoforte*. I still have this book. He had certain exercises from this book that he recommended for the marimba. [Note: This book was published by BF Wood Music Company, Boston.] I also studied timpani with Herbert Braun. Braun was the timpanist for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. I met Harry Breuer then as well.

Smith: What did you do in New York for a living?

Jeanne: I came to New York and lived with my aunt for a month. She only had a one-and-a-half room apartment, so I moved to the YWCA. I worked at Macy's department store on Saturdays and Thursday evenings. I taught at a small school on Long Island, and as a member of the Orchestrette Classique, shared the profits of the ticket sales. I also played out at club dates with my trio. The trio consisted of marimba, piano—Beatrice Goroe—and violoncello—Margory Cree. We had all been living at the YWCA when we met. I eventually taught them both to play marimba and we performed marimba trios. This and the experience of playing in Musser's group spurred my interest in arranging for marimba ensembles. Our trio was registered at the main YWCA, and we would get calls for club dates.

Smith: Tell me about the Orchestrette Classique.

Jeanne: It was a women's chamber orchestra that had about thirty to thirty-five players in it. Margory Cree, the cellist, and I were contacted through the YWCA to be members. The conductor was Frederique Petrides, and if it wasn't for her, there would not have been the Creston *Concertino*. Petrides wanted to feature, at some time, all the members of the orchestra. I had been playing timpani in the group, but there were no available timpani concertos. Since I had the marimba with me in New York, I suggested that as an alternative. She liked the idea and set out to commission any composer to write for the instrument.



Ruth Stuber's trio (left to right): Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne, marimba; Beatrice Goroe, piano and Margory Cree, cello.

Smith: Did she know Creston?

Jeanne: No, he was in New York looking for pieces to write. He was teaching and playing organ around town at that time. I think he agreed to write it so he could get his name around more. It took Petrides about a year to find him.

Smith: How was Creston compensated?

Jeanne: As I recall, he might have been paid directly from Petrides' own pocket, but I am not sure, and do not know the amount, if any.

Smith: When did Creston begin writing the Concertino?

Jeanne: It would have been February of 1940. He finished it in March, and we performed it on April 29 that same year.

Smith: How did he compose the Concertino? Had he heard you play?

Jeanne: After Creston was commissioned, he came to the YWCA and I played a few violin transcriptions on the marimba that I had been doing as recital pieces. I probably played the *Overture to Mignon*, as well as others. Creston was an organist and would work out many of the passages with his feet. As soon as he finished portions, he would bring them by the YWCA for me to try out.

Smith: Did you offer any suggestions as to the notes or ask to have anything changed for technical purposes?

Jeanne: No. I had no input on the notes, and I had no trouble with the technical demands of the piece. I credit this to my study with Green. I do think the third movement is marked too fast. I didn't play it at MM = 120, and Creston never said anything to me about the tempo.

Smith: Did he make any revisions after hearing it with the orchestra, after the rehearsals, or the concert?

Jeanne: No, I don't recall any. I remember not having too many problems with the piece.

Smith: I noticed he has some mallet indications in the manuscript.

Jeanne: Yes. I used rubber mallets for the first and third. I used soft wool for the second, and switched to rubber for the middle section of that movement. I also used wool for the soft section in the first movement—it makes a nice contrast.

Smith: Was there a recording made of this premiere?

Jeanne: Creston had hired a recording engineer, but through some mistake, the piece after the *Concertino* was recorded. We were all very disappointed. I was heartbroken.

Smith: Did you get a chance to perform the piece again later?

Jeanne: Yes. The second time I played the *Concertino* was at a music festival called YADDO. This was September 7, 1940, and Creston was conducting. I have a recording of one of our rehearsals, but not the performance. The Orchestrette Classique performed the *Concertino* again on December 10, 1940. I also played the *Concertino* on April 15, 1950 with the Hudson Valley Symphony Orchestra, with Petrides conducting.

Smith: Do you still have the manuscript?

Jeanne: I sent the original to the Percussive Arts Society museum, but I have copies. I also have the first commercially available music for the *Concertino*, published by Independent Music Company.

Smith: Did you use this version or Creston's manuscript for the premiere?

Jeanne: I memorized his manuscript. I remember there being a few discrepancies in the two versions.

Smith: Tell me what you remember from the day of the performance.

Jeanne: It was an evening concert in Carnegie Chamber Music Hall—the smaller performing hall. The *Concertino* was the second half, I believe.

Smith: Did you have to play timpani for the first half?

Jeanne: No. Actually, the cellist from my trio, who was also in the orchestra, played timpani for me.

Smith: Was there any written correspondence between you and Creston?

Jeanne: No, he had hand-delivered the portions to me, and we talked about things there.

GOLDLINE
Introduces
The
"EMIL RICHARDS
MODEL"
**CONCERT
BASS DRUM
STAND!!**

Model GL-201

"ED BROWN and "GOLDLINE" have come up with the bass drum stand of THE FUTURE! Check it out—it's got knee action and foot space. A PERCUSSIONIST'S DREAM!"

EMIL RICHARDS

HAND MADE IN THE U.S.A.
FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:
GOLDLINE
PERCUSSION PRODUCTS
P.O. Box 349 • Sagle, ID 83860
PHONE (208) 265-5353
FAX (208) 265-5640

Smith: I've read the reviews of the premiere. They all seemed favorable. What were your impressions?

Jeanne: No one really knew what a marimba was. It was 1940, and the instrument was not that popular. I was happy with the performance.

Smith: You were using the 1933 model marimba you had purchased for the World's Fair Orchestra, right?

Jeanne: Yes, that's why the *Concertino* doesn't go below F. Creston knew the range of my instrument and wrote specifically for it.

Smith: How did you move the marimba from place to place?

Jeanne: It would take me four or five trips to get it all down the stairs. I remember those heavy brass resonators were difficult to move. I wrapped the bars in cloth, and the whole thing fit into the back seat of a taxi cab.

Smith: Tell me about your life after the Concertino.

Jeanne: I met my husband through a mutual friend and we got married in 1942. I didn't play much marimba after that. I did play in a group that John Cage put together. He was in New York at this time experimenting with different sounds. He said he didn't feel capable in traditional harmony so he wanted to compose for new sounds.

Smith: Did he have you alter the marimba's sound any?

Jeanne: No, he liked it the way it sounded naturally. I played the marimba part to Henry Cowell's *Ostinato Pianissimo*.

Smith: What brought you to central Ohio?

Jeanne: My husband worked with Bell Telephone Laboratories, and he was transferred to this area.

Smith: I think everyone knows you now through your many marimba arrangements. How did you start arranging?

Jeanne: After we moved to Ohio, I started a marimba ensemble in Granville. We needed music, and since I was interested in arranging, it seemed a perfect opportunity. Doctor James Moore, head of Permus Publications, offered to publish my arrangements and I was delighted.



A photo of Paul Creston from the *New York Times*, April 28, 1940

Endnotes

¹Walter G. Simmons. "Paul Creston: Maintaining a Middle Course." *Music Journal*, Dec. 1976, 12-13.

²Walter G. Simmons, "Paul Creston." *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 20 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie. London: MacMillan, 1980, II, 535-536.

³Simmons, *Music Journal*, 13.

⁴LePage, Jane Weiner. "Frederique Petrides." *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the Twentieth Century*. London: Scarecrow Press, Vol. 2, 1983, 191-192.

⁵LePage, 204

⁶Informal lecture given by Ruth Stuber Jeanne, April, 1994, Ohio State University. PN



Dr. Sarah E. Smith received her DMA degree from Ohio State University and is currently an Assistant Professor in Percussion at Mississippi Valley State University. Smith

received her Master's degree in percussion performance and wind conducting from Western Michigan University and her Bachelor's degree in music education from Ohio Northern University. Prior to teaching at MVSU, Smith was an adjunct lecturer in percussion at Muskingum College, New Concord, Ohio. She met Mrs. Jeanne while working on her DMA Document.

WE'VE MADE
A WORLD OF
DIFFERENCE.



FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, ONE COMPANY ALONE HAS BEEN THE FIRST AND FINAL NOTE IN TUNING FOR RENOWNED ORCHESTRAS AND UNIVERSITIES WORLDWIDE.

FALL CREEK
MARIMBAS

"Let us change your tune."

RETUNING REPAIRING REFINISHING
REPLATING REPLACEMENT

XYLOPHONES MARIMBAS
VIBRAPHONES GLOCKENSPIELS
CELESTAS



BILL YOUHASS, OWNER

1145 Upper Hill Rd. Middleburg, New York 11907
716 551-8111



RECITAL PIECE FOR
SOLO SNARE DRUM

by
Guy G. Gauthreaux
\$4.00

AEOLIAN FANTASY
Four-mallet marimba solo,
unaccompanied

by
Guy G. Gauthreaux
\$6.00

Available from your dealer or direct:
PIONEER PERCUSSION
Box 10822, Burke VA 22009 USA
(Include \$3.00 shipping for all direct orders)