

FROM WHENCE CAME PAUL CRESTON'S CONCERTINO FOR MARIMBA AND ORCHESTRA OPUS 21? -- THE SOURCE: RUTH STUBER JEANNE AND THE NEW YORK ORCHESTRETTE CLASSIQUE, FREDERIQUE PETRIDES, CONDUCTOR (1940)



An Interview with
RUTH (STUBER) JEANNE
by
SHIRLEY HIXSON

A singular question keeps reoccurring to the inquisitive mind of a mallet percussionist. "What prompted composers like Paul Creston and Darius Milhaud to write major works for an instrument which, at the time of composition, was considered a vaudeville novelty - the marimba (and in Milhaud's case, the vibraphone)?" The question still remains virtually unanswered concerning Milhaud and his Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone although research is continuing and some interesting facts have been discovered. His publisher, Jacques Enoch, has revealed:

Darius Milhaud first wrote a Concerto for Marimba (and vibraphone) and orchestra. As he thought- and also myself - that there was not much possibility to work on a work of marimba, he made a version for piano and orchestra which was called "Suite Concertante" and it is on that title that the work was printed, indicating that the part for marimba could take the place of the part of piano with the same orchestration.

However, Darius Milhaud and myself were pleased to see that there was a great demand for the Concerto for Marimba (I suppose that there are very few works for marimba) and less demands for the version for piano.¹

However, the search for an answer to the initial question concerning the Paul Creston Concertino for Marimba has been much more rewarding, and has come from a diminutive, charming, and energetic little lady named RUTH STUBER JEANNE. It was a privilege to meet Ruth at the Ohio Marimba Camp this past summer (1975) where she serves on the staff as a teacher and arranger for the marimba ensemble, whose repertoire she calls "her bag". However, this was not always "her bag"!

For Ruth was initially a violin major in her youth, but while living in Evanston, Illinois she had the opportunity to study with Clair Omar Musser and to participate in his famous Marimba Band at the Chicago World's Fair. She notes "there were 80, 3½ octave marimbas and 20, 4 octave marimbas; and it is with Musser that I learned real artistry."

However, if it was with Musser that she learned artistry, it was with George Hamilton Green that she learned technique. Ruth had gone to New York to seek "fame and fortune", and there began studying with Green. He taught almost exclusively from Cramer's 50 Selected Studies for Piano edited by Von Bulow, while Musser had concentrated on his own arrangements of well-known classics.

It was while in New York that Ruth Jeanne (then Stuber) became associated with the 30 member, all-girl Orchestrette Classique, directed by Frederique Petrides. Miss Petrides had great respect for Ruth and her outstanding ability, calling her "the foremost woman tympani artist in America",² and

together they suggested to Guggenheim Award winning composer, Paul Creston, that he write a special solo for Ruth to Play on the marimba. The result was Opus 21, the Concertino, completed in March 1940. Miss Petrides decided to include it on the April 29, 1940 concert of the Orchestrette Classique at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall. Ruth tells us "There were not many other concerts scheduled for that night, so we had several critics in the audience." It is interesting to read what some of the critics had to say about that premier performance of the Concertino.

Louis Biancolli of the New York World Telegram headlines his column with "Marimba Joins the Classics"

"Under cover of night, the soft-toned marimba slipped quietly into classic port yesterday at the Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.

The trick was turned under the joint auspices of Paul Creston, who composed a Concertino for it, Ruth Stuber, who handled the mallets and Frederique Petrides' Orchestrette Classique, who played the accompaniment.....

Mr. Creston has known how to keep a small orchestra supporting the marimba's timbre. The concertino is well made. Simplicity itself, it goes its lush, purling way in one or two veins, chiefly Ravel and Mr. Creston's mildly modernistic self.

The second movement grazed suavely through Ravel's Pavanne pour une Infante Defunte, probably unintentionally. The last movement is all Creston. The concertino has real sensuous appeal. Of course, with the marimba one always feels that given the marimbist, it plays itself. In other words, everything that comes from it sounds right.

Miss Stuber wielded the mallets as to the manner born. Her legato was a thing of airy flow. Hammers and blocks seemed barely to touch, Miss Petrides kept her Orchestrette in slick rapport. In fact, the whole ensemble sounded like a large marimba with snug accessories.³

Irving Kolodin of the New York Sun, had this to say:

Her (Frederique Petrides) particular contribution last night was in listing the first performance of a concerto by Paul Creston, for small orchestra - and most unexpected of instruments - the marimba, with Ruth Stuber as soloist. This is a more decorous version of the implement known in jazz circles as "the woodpile" or xylophone - but with a larger range and the all-important addition of resonating tubes beneath each wooden bar. By this means the percussive character of the sound produced is somewhat lessened, giving a slighter, more sustained quality.

All this is important to the effect of Mr. Creston's work, for the score has but a distant resemblance of the music usually heard from the instruments of this type. In the first



Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne ca. 1940

movement (which is the best of the work) there is the suggestion of an indigenous Hindemith, using short rhythmic well-defined thematic material as the basis for a straight-forward, concise movement.

The slow movement (marked "calm") has a good deal of atmosphere, a nice blending of tone colors and a particularly rich part for the solo instrument, though the derivative aspects of the music diminish one's interest in it....Mr. Creston's ideas run a little thin in the finale, which is well below the standard of the two preceding movements. His work was expertly played by Miss Stuber, who is not only a fine technician but also a musician of taste and spirit.⁴

Howard Taubman said, in the April 30, 1940 issue of the New York Times:

A concertino for marimba and orchestra - at first blush, that might read like a manifestation of the silly season. But don't laugh; it wasn't. Such a work by the American composer Paul Creston had its first performance last night at the concert of the Orchestrette Classique, directed by Miss Frederique Petrides at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall. The soloist was Miss Ruth Stuber, who is a tympanist in the orchestra.

The program stated flatly that this concertino "is the only work ever written for this instrument in serious form". Until some musicologist produces evidence to the contrary, the claim will be considered justified. It may not be the last work, because Mr. Creston made it an effective vehicle for his ideas and because Miss Stuber played it with skill as well as art.

The marimba has its limitations as a solo instrument, but Mr. Creston wrote well within them. He is, moreover, a composer with ideas and invention. Of the three movements - marked "Vigorous", "Calm", and "Lively" - the first seemed the freshest and most original in thematic material. All three are worked out with technical assurance, with the marimba player receiving ample opportunity to display virtuosity.

Mr. Creston writes with rhythmic bite and variety and occasionally, with a delightful lyrical strain.

Miss Stuber, looking trim and chic in a fluffy yellow gown, was agreeable to behold as well as to hear. She made light of the concertino's difficulties. She managed a delicately graded tone, and she knew how to sustain a broad phrase and how to skip up and down the length of the marimba with grace and speed. The work was thoroughly prepared. Miss Petrides and her players joined with Miss Stuber in a smartly turned out interpretation. Mr. Creston was on hand to acknowledge the applause.⁵

The Orchestrette Classique included the Concertino in its repertoire for the following season and Ruth again appeared as the soloist on the Dec. 10, 1940 concert at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.

On Sept. 7, 1940, Miss Stuber traveled to Saratoga Springs, N.Y. where she performed the Concertino with the Taddo Chamber Orchestra. Howard Taubman also covered this concert, along with Henry W. Simon from the PM's Weekly - who wrote:

A third was Paul Creston's Concertino for marimba and orchestra; It had its cheap moments, but the idiomatic writing for the odd instrument, the ability to sustain a melody in the second movement, the effective rhythmical contrasts of the third and Ruth Stuber's elegant playing made a pretty highbrow audience go pretty wild.⁶

These were the first three performances of the now popular Concertino. However, Mrs. Jeanne points out that it is interesting to note the discrepancies between the original manuscript and its present published version. (The subject of a later article.) Mrs. Jeanne has all the old manuscripts from Creston and she explained that the first copies were available on a rental basis only from a reproduction firm called Independent Publishers.

She also stated that Mr. Creston himself worked out some of the sticking and in a most interesting manner. He is an organist, and therefore used his feet to determine the proper, most facile sticking!

After many successful appearances with the Orchestrette Classique, Ruth was contacted by John Cage to assist him in an all percussion concert at the Museum of Modern Art. Another interesting fact in the interesting life of a lovely and talented lady!

Ruth is presently living in Granville Ohio where she has been principal second violinist in the Licking County symphony Orchestra for many years. However, this past year she is happy to report that she was again "promoted" to tympanist! But in talking with her, it seems her most valued recent achievement to date was when her senior citizens ensemble, composed of: 3 recorders, 1 marimba, 1 snare drum, 2 melodicas, and 1 violin won first prize in the 4th of July parade.

1. From a letter to the author dated May 16, 1975, received from Jacques Enoch.
2. The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 31, 1940, magazine section, Everybody's Weekly, "Young Woman With A Drum"
3. New York World Telegram, Louis Giancolli, April 30, 1940
4. New York Sun, Irving Kilodin, April 30, 1940
5. New York Times, Howard Taubman, April 30, 1940
6. PM's Weekly, Henry W. Simon, September 10, 1940

The Interviewer

SHIRLEY HIXSON is an avid scholar of marimba literature and performer of the instrument. She is percussion instructor at Muskingum College (Ohio) and presently completing the requirements for a MM degree in Marimba at the Ohio State University.

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