

I LOVE TO PLAY . . .
P.A.S. INTERVIEW WITH KAREN ERVIN,
SOLO/PERCUSSIONIST
 by Jim Petercsak done expressly for P.A.S.



Karen Ervin is one of the best-known solo percussionists in the United States. She has twice been a prize-winner in international competitions and is the featured artist on two solo recordings. Ms. Ervin is currently on the faculty of California State University, Northridge and is extremely active as a recitalist and Ludwig/Musser clinician.

Jim: When did you begin to study music and why did you pick the percussion instruments?

Karen: I played piano as an elementary and junior high school student. I began by playing bass drum in the junior high orchestra and band. I really enjoyed it and wanted to study percussion seriously; but my parents objected very strongly to the idea of a girl playing percussion. They talked me out of it for a number of years. I played cello for a while, and I was terrible at it. Finally, when I became a senior in high school they permitted me to study percussion. I finally won out. That's how I got into it!

J: Terrific. How did you chose to become a percussion soloist. You just mentioned that being a gal percussionist didn't sound very exciting to your parents. Why did you go the whole route and become a solo percussion player rather than a marimbist?

K: I like playing all the percussion instruments. I also enjoy practicing and getting into the studio, woodshedding and learning the piece; then taking it out and playing it for people. At one time I considered becoming primarily a marimbist, but I always got too much of a kick out of playing all of the other percussion instruments. I worked on all the instruments for so very long.

J: You were disappointed in playing only one?

K: Yeah. I think so, for me.

J: How about primary influences? Do you have any primary influences and instructors?

K: Absolutely, William Kraft, to be honest without a shadow of doubt. His influence on me was primarily as my timpani instructor. However, our lessons were much more involved and dealt with life and the arts and what music means. How to play musically, how to live well, and all kinds of esoteric matters rather than just timpani techniques.

J: How to enjoy?

K: How to enjoy, exactly! He's absolutely a major influence and a great friend.

J: That's great. How about your playing background? Many people know of Karen Ervin the percussion solo player, but how about your professional playing background?

K: I played in the Norfolk, Virginia Symphony and also in a number of small orchestras. I free-lanced in L.A. for a number of years...you name it, I played it...(opera, ballet, shows, recordings, percussion ensembles), the whole bit. I'm beginning to do some of that again as a matter of fact. A lot of orchestra playing.

J: Your recent recordings are well accepted and are present in many of the libraries of music schools throughout the country. Do you have any new recording ventures coming up in the future?

K: I almost hate to answer that because there is a recording project that I have been working on for the last year and a half. I keep telling people that I think it's going to happen and then something gets in the way. Let's put it this

way"...I'm working on it, I'm hoping but I can't give any definite guarantees..."

J: What about the young players you hear today? You played a recital last night, you presented a clinic yesterday, you are coaching a couple of the students today...how do you feel about the young player?

K: For one thing they are much more advanced for their level and years than we were at their age. They are playing music as freshman that scared the heck out of me as a senior. There are high school students playing pieces that we wouldn't have thought of playing as juniors and seniors.

J: What do you think has brought that about?

K: I think that there has been a great revolution in percussion playing in the last ten to fifteen years. I mean more music being written, techniques being expanded; and I think, we have seen the influence of teachers. My teachers didn't think of having me do things at such an early age as the students do today. As a teacher I am expecting more of my students too. As in athletics, people do things better, faster and stronger at an earlier age.

J: There are a lot of percussion players and soloists today. At the Percussive Arts Society's International Convention held at the Eastman School of Music you heard some of these young players. Is there going to be room for them and a professional outlet in the future?

K: That is a good question and difficult to answer because the statistics tell us the answer is no. There really isn't a professional outlet for all the fine players today. We are teaching more students in the State of California who have outstanding professional potential than there are jobs for them. Yet I still have the idealistic belief that if you're really good and really care enough you are going to make it. It may be hard, and it may take a long time, and you are going to have to be better than you had to be ten years ago; but I sure wouldn't discourage a really talented student from trying. That's what it's all about. I might tell him what it's like out there, but I would never tell him not to play if that is what he or she wants to do.

J: Do you have any special or favorite players?

K: In what area?

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J: Percussion in general.

K: I don't have any particular favorites. There are many fine players whom I admire and respect tremendously. In the keyboard area, of course, the jazz vibist Gary Burton, Dave Freidman, Dave Samuels...its absolutely great what they are doing. I was knocked out by what Leigh Stevens and Gordon Stout did at the P.A.S. Convention. Incredible playing! Orchestral percussion players...there are a lot; I don't even want to begin to name names because there are just so many great percussion players and timpanists in the world.

J: Do you have any advice for the young students of today? Any special advice that might help them?

K: No. Not really. The only comment is that I like to see and hear students playing the music. I still think we tend to get a little too involved in technical problems and forget that the music is the important thing.

J: You don't agree with the practice of editing music, do you?

K: No, not in changing music but in really thinking about speaking through the music and letting the composer speak through his music.

J: In your clinic you addressed yourself to the subject of rehearsal and practice techniques for the students. Do you have any advise that you would like to pass along to the readers of this interview regarding practice techniques?

K: Well, I have many ideas that I crusade for. To boil it down: I would say I believe 100% in careful, slow practice habits. I don't think you learn anything practicing faster than you can play correctly. Also, practice as you are going to play in terms of dynamics, in terms of using the kinds of motions that you will eventually use. It's a big subject but I think that boils it down, Jim.

J: What about organizations like the Percussive Arts Society. Are they really helpful? If so, in what way?

K: I'm strongly in favor of P.A.S. For one thing the publications are getting information out to areas where they are needed. Most areas of the country are made up of small towns, main

streets, etc. At least students are able to get an inkling of what is going on with a more national scale and I feel that is great. I also investigate the magazines all the time to look for literature from various programs. A great way to find out what is available and where. Also, I believe something like the convention (P.A.S.) that just happened in Rochester is so important and so fantastic. Just to get people together, to be able to hear what is going on firsthand to learn what other people are doing and plan to do. I came away from it terrifically inspired. I wish more than anything that every single one of my students could have flown out from California to hear and see the events. You tend to get into your own little rut; you think your way of doing things is the only way; and then suddenly, you hear that there are twenty new ways of doing things. It's an expanding horizon for you. For me it is anyway.

J: You do a lot of traveling, do you enjoy going to different schools, presenting clinics and playing recitals?

K: I love it! I have been working on this particular tour for three weeks, going to a number of different states. I am being helped by Ludwig/Musser. I play the Musser marimba. I love to play, that's why I do it. I love to get out on stage and play the pieces that I like, and show them off to people. I don't mean show me off, but show the pieces off. Also, I learn something every place I go. Either by hearing a student play well, and being "gassed" by the playing or finding out some information I didn't know before. Also, sometimes by hearing a student playing poorly and by the questions that are asked. People often ask me questions I never thought about; this also helps to stimulate the thinking process. I like to work with the students and faculty members at different locations throughout the country. It is great.

J: It was a joy to have you here and we hope you will come back again in the future. Thank you for this interview.

K: I loved it! Thank you, Jim.

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