

Bells, Mallets & Drums

First-time concert-goers might expect OU's Percussion Ensemble to be nothing but a bunch of drums. If so, they are in for a big —and very pleasant— surprise.

by Michael Waters

photos by J. Pat Carter

The University of Oklahoma Percussion Ensemble has earned any number of distinctions during its decade-and-a-half history, but the latest is surely the most unusual. The Ensemble has devised a guaranteed method for melting the hardened heart of any Christmas-season Scrooge.

The dozen-member Ensemble saw the release of its second recording, *Christmas Bells, Mallets & Drums*, under the name SoundStroke in late 1990. Initially released in a limited pressing, the CD/cassette gave listeners a chance to savor the group's interpretation of 14 sacred and popular holiday favorites through the shim-

mering and distinctive use of bells, chimes, marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, snare, toms, timpani — and much more.

As Christmas '91 approaches, the group's directors and members eagerly expect national distribution of the recording to not only broaden the Ensemble's audience, but to help provide funds for scholarships as well. For not only is the recording "a lot of fun to listen to," as Director Richard Gipson attests, but it is also the first commercially-marketed holiday release by a university percussion ensemble.

But this recording first is only one of the ways in which the OU Percussion Ensemble has been one-of-a-kind. "We're unique in that we focus on the mallet (keyboard) instruments," player/instructor Lisa Rogers notes. "We're unique in that we have a commissioning series which regularly commissions new, serious works from composers for the ensemble, and publishes their music through the OU Percussion Press, allowing us to premiere new material and thus influence our medium.

Continued



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An early opportunity to showcase some of the Ensemble's commissioned works for a national audience came in 1985, when the group was invited to perform at the PASIC gathering in Los Angeles. The Ensemble prepared a full concert of its own commissioned works. Sometime later, Gipson decided to have a high-quality, digital archive recording made of the group in order to capture permanently the skill and determination that went into the Los Angeles performance.

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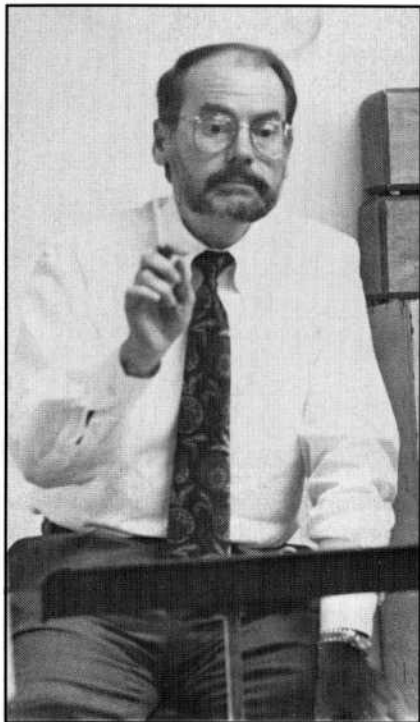
The resulting compact disc release, *Laser Woodcuts*, showed the Ensemble to be capable of spotlighting a deft melange of music — from Prokofiev to ragtime, from the complexity of the "Diabolic Variations" to the easy-listening pop of Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are."

Despite its connoisseur-label limited release, the CD attracted attention from national reviewers. *Stereo Review* magazine hailed it as a skillful mixture of "beautiful, somber pieces" and "a dominating mood . . . of joy and fun."

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“And we’re unique because of the two recordings we’ve done,” she adds, referring to a 1986 release, *Laser Woodcuts*, as well as the Christmas recording. “Today you see a few more programs coming out with compact disc releases, but I think this program really started it.”

According to Associate Director Lance Drege, the Ensemble is composed of the top 12 of the approximately 25 players in the percussion studio. Members of this year’s Ensemble are Glen Buecker, John Chipman, Jay Cloar, Michael Gatti,



Ensemble Director Richard Gipson

Melody Gibson, Chris Harris, Todd Johnson, Joe Ragan, Lisa Rogers, Michael Siberts, Staci Stokes and Scott Cameron. The remaining percussion players are organized into an Ensemble II; the groups are split further into subsections, which include a marimba band and a steel drum band.

Drege notes that the Ensemble I players have distinguished themselves not only on disc but on the performance stage. OU’s group performed at the “Winner’s Concert” at the 1990 Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in Philadelphia after its audition tape was chosen from submissions by percussion ensembles all over the nation.

Drege, a past performer with the Ensemble, assumed its directorship on an acting basis in mid-1991 when Gipson, the founder and permanent director, was named interim provost for the Norman campus. Gipson had served half-time in University administration since 1988 as an executive assistant to the University president.

While slowing down his day-to-day involvement with the Ensemble over the last three years, Gipson has continued teaching doctoral students, conducting major concerts for the Ensemble and arranging.

Gipson takes a fatherly pride in the Ensemble’s varied accomplishments, which he sees as linked with the progress of the Ensemble and the progress of the medium. He explains that percussion ensembles have taken some major steps forward, even since the founding of the OU Ensemble in 1976.

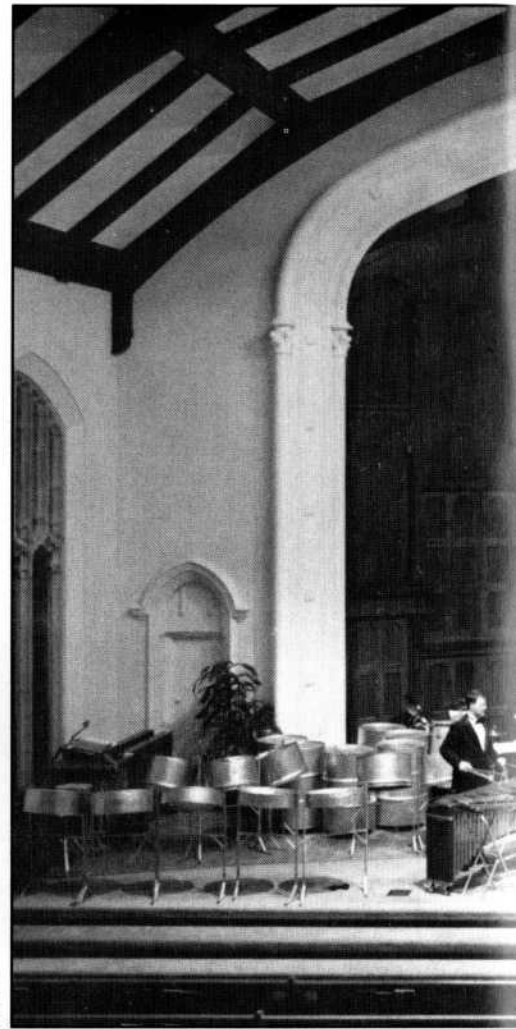
“It’s important to understand that the percussion ensemble is really a 20th century innovation. It’s been around for 50 years, and the medium has been maturing only recently. Even now when you ask people, ‘What’s a percussion ensemble?’ they’ll tell you, ‘It’s a bunch of drums.’ Not too many people are interested in hearing a concert of a bunch of drums.”

Because of the lack of commercial interest, he says, “There hasn’t been a lot of serious repertoire written for the medium. That’s why in 1978 I started a commissioning series. That’s how you have to build a repertoire—find top-notch composers, then commission them to write.”

Gipson followed this first-of-its-kind program by establishing the OU Percussion Press in 1983, giving composers additional incentive to write new material.

“Commercial publishers don’t want to publish these things, and so our goal was to publish these commissions ourselves and make them available to other percussion programs around the country and the world.”

By the end of 1985, the commissioning series had been responsible for the creation of 10 new serious works, and since then the number has risen to 14. Some are written primarily or entirely for keyboards, while others employ the full range of percussion instruments. Yet all boast a uniformly



Gill Jain

ABOVE: The annual concert given in Norman’s First Christian Church by Director Gipson’s Percussion Ensemble, Marimba Band and Steel Drum Band, has become a major event on the University’s music school calendar.

AT RIGHT: The Steel Drum Band, here rehearsing for the fall concert, scored one of the big hits of the 100th anniversary season with its appearance at the Centennial Leadership Symposium.



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The Percussion Ensemble's associate director, Lance Drege, follows the score as Gipson takes the baton. A past performer with the group, Drege has filled in as acting director during Gipson's tenure as the Norman campus' interim provost.

The Percussion Ensemble offers the opportunity to perform on center stage to musicians who are normally relegated to the background.

attention of Nashville record producer Robert MacKenzie. MacKenzie's verdict on the CD was, "We really ought to do something with this group."

MacKenzie had suggested the possibility of recording a gospel CD but was even more receptive to Gipson's proposal that the Ensemble record a collection of Christmas hymns and popular holiday tunes. So, "two years, 14 arrangements, and hours upon hours of work later," says Gipson, the Ensemble finished its biggest foray yet into commercial recording.

While *Christmas Bells, Mallets & Drums* features less of the Ensemble's serious side than the first recording, Gipson says the release still displays the percussive group's adroitness at shifting musical gears.

"Although it is all Christmas music, you certainly get a different feel listening to 'The Christmas Song' than when you listen to 'Away in a Manger.' Overall, one of the most interesting things about a percussion ensemble is that we can straddle between serious



A marimbist studies a piece of music scheduled for the Ensemble fall concert.

and popular styles and be equally appealing in both.

"Very rarely you'll find a symphony orchestra do a Brahms symphony, then come back in the second half and do rags and hoedowns. It's just a little too mixed-message. But we do this very casually on our recordings and in our live concerts as well."

According to Drege, the Ensemble tries to perform on the national level at least every three or four years and since 1985 has traveled to Indianapolis and Colorado Springs for convention appearances, as well as Los Angeles and Philadelphia. The Ensemble takes advantage of convention trips to play in as many as half-a-dozen cities in the surrounding area.

Generally there will be one or two major concert appearances per semester at OU, numerous Christmas concerts, the annual statewide percussion festival and tour dates around the state, usually scheduled between semesters. More than 50 Oklahoma communities have hosted Ensemble concerts, and Gipson finds the predominant response to the group to be one of pleasant surprise at just how much a percussion group is capable of doing.

"One of the things I enjoy the most about this medium is that generally when you play a concert, the large majority of the listeners are going to hear something they didn't expect to hear . . . It brings them much more satisfaction than they thought they were going to get.

"If the music is really good, if your listeners are engaged, and the music surprises them — those three things can merge to create a powerful aesthetic experience," Gipson adds.

There is one aspect of public performance that the Ensemble players agree is distinctly not fun—setting up the gear. Their instruments are diverse, numerous and bulky enough to fill a 24-foot rental truck. The players often spend as much time packing and unpacking for a performance as they do making music.

Yet, as Drege notes, the Ensemble's performances offer a special lift for the performers as well as listeners, by taking musicians who are customarily shunted toward the background and putting them on center stage.

"It wasn't until I got to college that I found out that, as a percussionist, you could make music on your own," Drege says. "When you play in a band or in an orchestra, percussion instruments are usually just there to support the other music. But when you get into percussion ensemble, you *are* the group. You're the melody, you're the harmony. And so the students here feel like they're contributing a lot more."

Players in the Ensemble, who gather formally twice a week for hour-and-a-half rehearsals, agree that performing in OU's percussion program offers challenges and responsibilities not found in other scholastic musical groupings.

The performers have to be able, for instance, to switch from striking a xylophone to striking a drum in a matter of seconds. One minute a percussionist might be tapping mallets against a marimba, and the next minute be required to pound a Chinese water gong, or scoot a bass bow across a vibraphone.

"When you play percussion in this program," notes Melody Gibson, a graduate student, teaching assistant and Ensemble member since 1987, "you have to know how to play all the instruments. And that's much different from, say, a string player." She adds that since the medium is still fairly young, "all the pieces that are written for us are 20th century works, and they're usually substantially harder than what a lot of the other groups play. We have a lot more changing meter, strange rhythms, things like that."

Teamwork is an essential in such an environment, notes the Ensemble's newest member, sophomore Staci



The percussionists thrive on the challenge of participation in the Ensemble, the versatility required to switch between the instruments in a matter of seconds.

Stokes. "We have to play our own part and be aware of everybody else's part at the same time. A lot of times we share instruments with each other. We actually have to synchronize our physical movements to make sure we're not bumping into each other. Obviously, it's real important to get along with everybody."

"At this university, there's such a high level of musicianship," Melody Gibson concludes. "That's part of what's attracted me and kept me coming back year after year, because I like playing in an ensemble that is one of the top 10 in the country."

Director Gipson is quick to point out that many of the Ensemble's achievements would not have been possible without financial support from the University of Oklahoma Associates, the \$1,000-a-year donor group whose funds enable OU to provide seed money to special projects.

"Associates funds have helped us to perform at national conventions; they've been used to defray some of the expenses associated with making the CDs. We've used some Associates money to assist in the commissioning series, and Associates money provided the seed grant that established the Percussion Press."

The talent, ingenuity and hard work that has fueled OU's percussion program, however, cannot be measured in dollars, nor can its series of firsts and unique achievements be tallied on a balance sheet.

Gipson is slated to return to full-time work as director next year. He anticipates more commissioned works spawning more performances, and thus more recordings generating in turn a wider range of commissioned works. The future for OU's Percussion Ensemble seems to stretch ahead with as many energizing possibilities as the still-young medium itself.

So much accomplished in so short a period of time—and all to the accompaniment of bells, mallets and drums.



Editor's Note: Christmas Bells, Mallets & Drums is available on cassette tape (\$9.98) or CD (\$12.98) from the OU School of Music, 560 Parrington Oval, Norman, OK 73019, or call (405) 325-2081.



Members of the Percussion Ensemble, many of whom also perform in other School of Music groups, rehearse formally twice a week for an hour and a half.