

# AN INTERVIEW WITH LEIGH HOWARD STEVENS

by Lauren Vogel

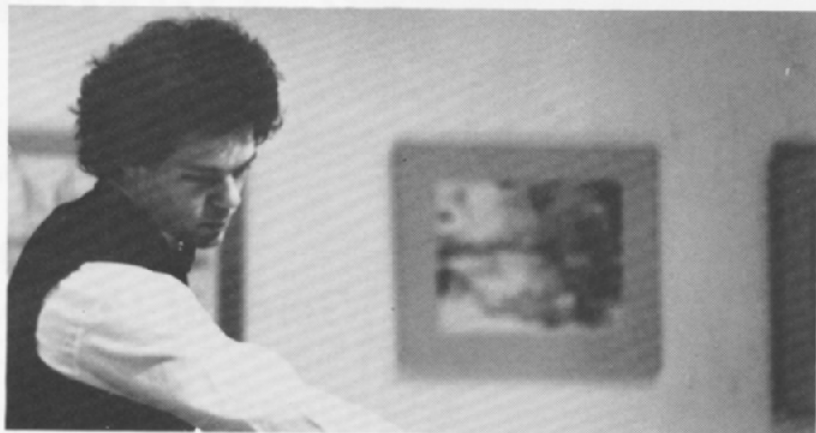


Photo by  
Sam Silver

**LV:** When did you start playing mallets?

**LHS:** I was a rock-and-roll drummer, playing snare drum, bass drum and cymbal parts in concert band and orchestra through high school. That's the point at which I finally convinced my parents that it wouldn't be a major embarrassment to the family heritage if I were to become a musician. But, I discovered much to my dismay, that I couldn't major in rock-and-roll at any of the conservatories. So, in order to prepare for all-state and college auditions, I went to a music store in town and rented a little xylophone.

**LV:** Had you been studying percussion privately with anyone?

**LHS:** I studied drum set with Joe Morello and Glen Weber, and later, concert percussion with Bill Laverack, who was a Juilliard/Goodman student.

**LV:** What would you say was Joe Morello's greatest contribution to you now as a musician?

**LHS:** Morello showed me that there were ways of answering a technique question in terms of one's actual physiology. He always had a complete, logical answer that was immediately convincing, and so I didn't need a leap of faith to believe him. What it comes down to is this: By using

intellect, one can solve technical problems and systematize technique so as to improve speed, accuracy, endurance . . .

**LV:** What were your early experiences with the xylophone?

**LHS:** I made a very important series of "mistakes" when starting xylophone that proved to be the

foundation of my present career. Number one, I had the notion that since many chords required four pitches, all mallet players would naturally play with four mallets. So, from the beginning, I was playing four mallets. The second mistake I made at the instrument was to sustain a “C” and “G” with the left hand and play a scale with the right.

LV: **Rolled it?**

LHS: Yes, a one-handed roll. Then reversed it and sustained the two notes with the right hand and played scales with the left. This, I found out when I got to my first teacher, and confirmed when I got to Eastman, had never been done before! That is still a great shock to me—I can’t imagine why it hadn’t.

LV: **How did you start to incorporate this new motion into literature?**

LHS: First of all, people say that **someone** along the way must have used a one-handed roll. If it was used in vaudeville times, great, but unfortunately for us, it was kept a secret. One of the pieces pointed to is Bernard Rogers’ *Mirage*. What is meant, (according to Vida Chenoweth, for whom the piece was written), is to roll the low chord and let it ring, and then go up and play the melody on top. Another case that is brought up is Miyoshi’s *Torse III*. There is a spot in the first movement where a one-handed roll goes very nicely. That is a case where you think a one-handed roll **might** have been intended by the composer, but was never performed that way until very recently. The opening octaves of the Fissinger *Suite* is another excellent example.

LV: **What was the reaction in college to your one-handed roll?**

LHS: The situation was much the same—no one had seen my rotary strokes or an independent roll. I had expected that when I got to Eastman I would come in contact with solo marimbists who earned a living from the marimba . . . you know, paid rent with it! Of course, it turned out there weren’t any people like that. I sized up the situation and saw that there certainly **could** be a market for solo marimba playing—contrary to what I was told. I made my decision during my first semester at Eastman: I

did not want to be an orchestral percussionist; I was really going to zero in on marimba playing and see what I could do. At that point I was still playing Burton grip.

LV: **When did you first change your grip?**

LHS: What I’m doing now is really the fourth grip I’ve used. When I first went to the instrument I started out with the traditional cross-stick grip. Then I went to a music store to look for some marimba and xylophone literature and came across Gary Burton’s books. I learned his grip and used it until about halfway through my freshman year of college. After arranging to study with Vida Chenoweth, I discovered that I would have to learn Musser grip! I researched some articles and they made absolutely no sense to me—the grip seemed cramped, tense, and weak. So, in a last ditch effort in the six months before I went to New Zealand, I tried to modify it in a way that would be versatile enough to live with for

the rest of my life. Much of what I do today is an outgrowth of that first six months of scrambling: That’s when I came up with the vertical hand position, (in contrast to flat-palmed Musser players), pivoting around either unused mallet, (instead of lifting the unused mallet out of the way), and moving the end of the inside mallet through the palm for larger intervals.

LV: **Tell us more about your grip.**

LHS: If you were to flip through my book you might say, “Hell, I can learn to be a brain surgeon in the same amount of time!” It really isn’t that complicated. What we’re looking for in a marimba grip, or for that matter in a bow grip for violin, is **freedom of motion**. That is the key to playing a musical instrument. That requires fingers to be in contact with the sticks in a very intimate manner so they can control these delicate motions.

LV: **You’ve written probably the most innovative method book on the market today, *Method of Movement for Marimba*. Since**

- you just mentioned it, why don't you tell us how that came about.**
- LHS: When I started to delve into the possibilities that this rotary hand motion presented, I made up my own exercises to practice and kept a ledger for about six years. I actually started writing the text in 1974, and worked on it until 1978, when I thought I had a finished manuscript. That's when the work really began! Polish, retype, polish, retype. Really, there's close to ten years of work involved in *Method of Movement*.
- LV: **When you were talking about your grip, you mentioned studying with Vida Chenoweth. What was that like?**
- LHS: First of all, there are no kangaroos in New Zealand—that's Australia. Three days a week we met from nine in the morning until noon and from two in the afternoon until five. When I would finish the day, I literally could not straighten out my fingers. Vida's biggest influence on me was the dedication, love, discipline and single-mindedness with which she approached everything that she touched. She's never stated it explicitly, but I think she would agree that nothing is worth doing unless you do it as perfectly as you are physically and mentally capable of. Like not putting a preposition at the end of the last sentence.
- LV: **What did she teach you about technique?**
- LHS: We really didn't talk much about technique—except for one thing that really stays in mind. She asked me in the course of working on a piece to play a scale more staccato. I was very confused about this because some people were telling me to play staccato by pulling away from the bar—using more "lift." Other people were telling me to tighten up and punch into the bar—to use **more**, not **less** weight. As I say now, "They both can't be right, but they both can be **wrong**." Whenever we have two things that appear to be opposites, we sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that one must be right: but often the answer lies between the two . . . or somewhere else entirely. Vida looked at me very curiously and said, "What are you doing?" I was using lift, so I immediately switched modes and started to punch. She then said, "**What** are you doing?!" She pushed me aside and just played dead-strokes up the scale. I felt like a complete idiot because the answer was so simple: Dampen.
- LV: **After you spent the summer in New Zealand, you returned to Eastman. How did you spend the rest of your time there?**
- LHS: Well, it was basically a running battle with the administration at Eastman because I sought to pursue a single-minded approach of playing marimba. I was required to play snare drum, timpani and orchestral excerpts in order to get through the degree program, but really had no interest in it. What I ended up doing was concentrating on marimba and "getting by" on the other instruments. When I say "getting by," I don't mean to be self-deprecating, because I was lucky enough to receive performance honors with my Bachelor of Music degree—what Eastman calls a "Performer's Certificate"—that included timpani, multiple percussion, the whole gamut.
- LV: **When did this solo marimba career really get off the ground?**
- LHS: In 1976, the Percussive Arts Society Convention was held in Rochester, and I was asked to do a lecture/demonstration. That was probably the largest gathering of percussionists to date. There seemed to be a spontaneous interest in what I was doing—probably 99 and 44/100ths of the audience had never seen a one-handed roll or heard literature that technically demanding—Helble *Preludes*, *Grand Fantasy*, and Bach's B-flat *Prelude and Fugue*. I will be eternally grateful to Ernest Muzquiz and Bill Youhass, who were the first two people to ask me to perform at their schools. That first year out of college I did seven appearances, which I thought was spectacular. Those snowballed into about twenty the second year.
- LV: **You performed your New York City debut at Town Hall. What do you remember about that concert?**
- LHS: The Town Hall concert was—although I'm very glad I did it—
- one of the toughest experiences of my life. I made a very foolish programming decision in trying to premiere two of the most difficult pieces that had ever been written for marimba on the same program. The Serry *Night Rhapsody* was delivered to me six weeks before the performance. I was on tour three of those weeks. The Helble *Toccata Fantasy* I had been working on only a few months. Eleven hundred people in the audience, a New York City debut, New York critics, these two monstrous works . . . you're talking about coronary arrest!
- LV: **I remember the audience was standing and clapping, and you just kept coming out for bows over and over . . .**
- LHS: It was a very kind audience.
- LV: **How did your mallet design come about?**
- LHS: Sometime in 1971, Dave Mancini, (who is now the drummer for Maynard Ferguson), walked into my practice room at Eastman and handed me a pair of Jose Bethancourt mallets and said, "Try these." I wasn't wild about the sound, (which might be the reason he gave them to me), but I noticed that suddenly I was playing more accurately.
- LV: **Is that the first time you used a wooden dowel?**
- LHS: It wasn't a wood dowel—it had some flex to it—but it was much **less** flexible than anything I had used before.
- LV: **So you had been using rattan**
- LHS: Yes, I'd been using rattan, but I immediately went out to a hardware store, got dowels, knocked off the heads on all my mallets, put them on wooden handles and have been using wooden handles ever since. That was step one in developing my own mallets. Step two was that I had been listening closely to marimba players perform in a variety of settings. The thing that was abrasive to me was that every note played had a percussive noise with it. It was a crude sound to my ears. So, from that point on, I started to wrap my own mallets and tried to discover the principles upon which one could reduce that slap and get more tube sound, more bar sound, and less yarn sound.

- LV: **What makes them different from other mallets on the market that have wooden handles?**
- LHS: The sound. I think that with most of the mallets on the market, almost no thought has been given to the actual sound properties—other than soft or hard—no thought to whether the thing can roll, whether it has slap, whether it has sudden coloristic changes or continuous color changes, one tone, or whatever!
- LV: **What makes your keyboard so special?**
- LHS: It's an M250 keyboard but I have been very fortunate to have been allowed to hunt through the Musser stock on many occasions to find the very best bars I can. I'm sure I've invested 100 hours and several thousand dollars in air travel back and forth to La Grange to acquire those bars. I now have a keyboard that I'm very happy with—that usually does what I want it to do—which is an extremely difficult proposition for a marimba. The marimba is such a finicky instrument—when it's not 72 degrees and 50% humidity, you can usually forget it. It's very difficult to make a marimba that will sound good under a variety of weather conditions.
- LV: **I've heard that you have acquired Clair Omar Musser's Canterbury marimba. Can you tell us about that?**
- LHS: The Canterbury marimba was the first low "A" marimba. It is most easily identified by the gloss-black bars. Clair had this particular instrument made specially for him. As you can imagine, he was very selective about the bars that went on his personal instrument. It differs from all the other Canterbury marimbas in that it has brass resonators. It has some of the same features and gauges as the others do too—including a thermometer and built-in metronome. When Clair moved into his apartment and had to part with this instrument, he decided that he would like me to have it. I made a special trip to California to purchase it in May of 1980. It's something that has a tremendous amount of historical significance, as well as the fact that it is just one hell of a marimba!
- LV: **What about your European concert tours?**
- LHS: My first was a real thrill for me because I was playing for very discerning audiences. They were with me on every note, every nuance.
- LV: **When was that tour and which countries did you perform in?**
- LHS: That was November and December of 1980. I performed in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, and Germany.
- LV: **What got you interested in doing transcriptions?**
- LHS: Most of the transcriptions on the market are terrible. As something to keep a student busy? Fine. For a professional to perform? Totally unacceptable. Let me give you an example. In one case I had signed a contract to do an Artist Series recital at a particular university. They 'cancelled' the contract with me after I submitted the program because I had transcriptions on it. Somebody on the Arts and Lectures Committee said that

they had had "bad experiences" in the past with marimba transcriptions. Well, so had I! Little did he know that we were both on the same side of the argument. Now that the marimba is being heard so much in public, we have to be very critical about the quality of transcriptions. The bottom line as to whether it gets performed should be: Does it sound like it was written for marimba?

**LV: I know that a lot of your repertoire consists of pieces that were written for you. Do you actively pursue commissions, or do people bring music to you?**

**LHS:** Both, but it's rare that I get an unsolicited work that I end up playing. This is not to discourage people from sending me music, because I love to get new pieces, and whenever possible, read through them. I am very selective about who I commission because of the expense involved. I am also very explicit in my instructions to the composer. As a result, I think we've had some additions to the repertoire that will stand the test of time. Some real fine contributions.

**LV: What are some of the pieces that were written for you?**

**LHS:** Maslanka's *Variations on Lost Love*; Helble's *Toccata Fantasy, Grand Fantasy, the nine Preludes, Movement for Marimba and Harpsichord*, his *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*; John Serry's *West Side Suite*, his *Night Rhapsody*; William Penn's *Preludes* . . . I'm also in on the commission of *Concerto for Marimba and Percussion Ensemble* by David Maslanka. These days, the commissioning of a major composer requires so much money, you almost need a foundation behind you.

**LV: Tell us about your performances with symphony orchestras.**

**LHS:** I have been trying to do more of that lately, but it's very difficult to interest orchestra conductors. I would imagine that most have never even been to a solo marimba concert. Also, there are far fewer orchestras that hire soloists than there are recital series—about 500 orchestras, but several thousand recital series. Last May I had the opportunity to premiere the final revised version of Helble's *Concerto for Marimba and Orches-*

*tra* with the Denver Symphony.

**LV: When you're on tour, how much practicing are you able to do?**

**LHS:** Unfortunately, not nearly as much as I'd like. The demands of traveling are such that I'm lucky if I have an hour to warm up before I go on stage.

**LV: Are you ever going to make a record? I know everyone must ask you that.**

**LHS:** I have been holding off over the years while all my friends and relatives have been releasing albums. If I'm going to put something down on vinyl, I insist that, for the sake of the instrument, the production be of the highest quality possible.

**LV: Do you have any advice for aspiring young marimbists?**

**LHS:** Let me quote Vida Chenoweth. "Geniuses don't need it and amateurs don't listen."

**LV: One last question. Without prying into anything personal, what kind of lifestyle does a concert marimbist lead?**

**LHS:** The investment of time required by the art is enormous, so my lifestyle is pretty crazy—the clock is my biggest enemy. The unique responsibility of being a soloist on a pioneer instrument like the marimba, requires total

commitment if we ever hope to be compared to the world's great violinists and pianists. Anything less can only produce mediocre results. Robert Frost sums it up for me. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference."

*Lauren Vogel is currently a percussion major at the University of Texas at Dallas. She has performed with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Dallas Ballet Orchestra, and the Dallas Civic Symphony. She has been vice-president of the Texas Chapter of PAS for the past two years, and is editor of their newsletter. David Maslanka's popular marimba work, My Lady White was written for her.*

**Mr. Stevens will be presenting a marimba concert at the PASIC in Dallas at 8:00 p.m. November 20. Don't miss this opportunity to hear one of the outstanding marimba artists of our time.**

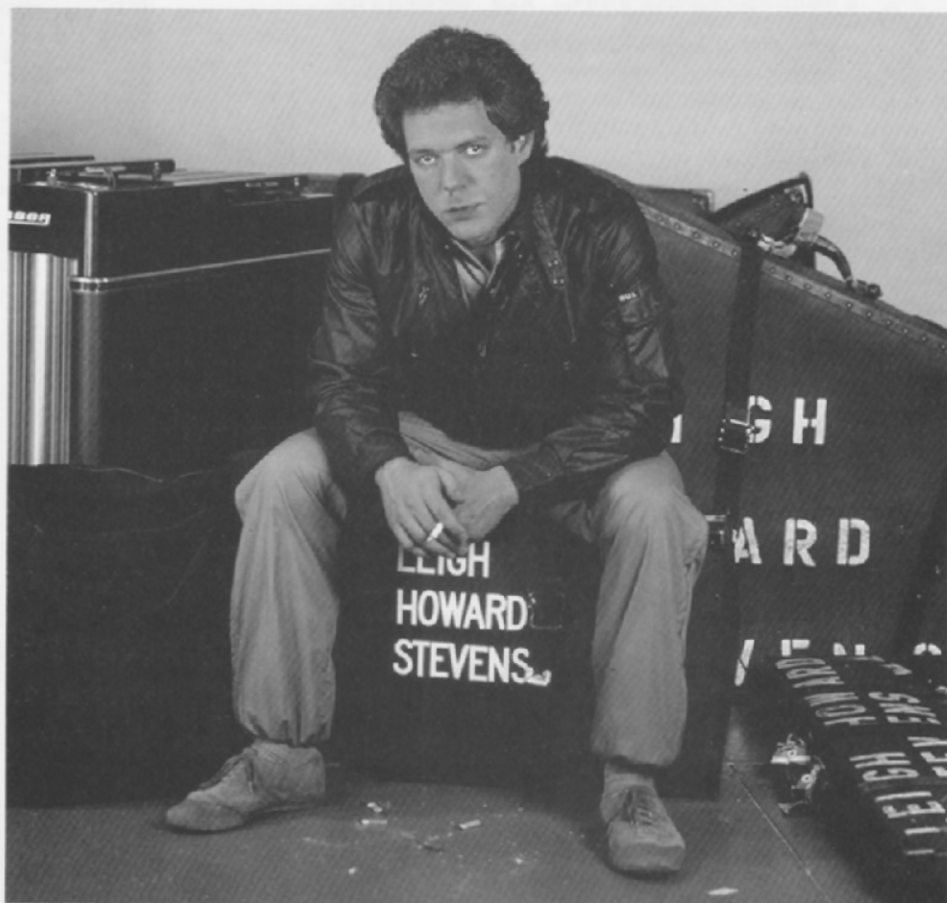


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