

CLAIR OMAR MUSSER AND THE MARIMBA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

by Marg Holmgren



THE IMPERIAL MARIMBA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: A group of 50 women and 50 men playing 100 King George Model marimbas at Carnegie Hall, New York. Mr. Musser on the podium.

Many of us have heard of the legendary marimba symphony orchestras that were so popular during the 1930's and 40's. Indeed, there are many around who participated in those groups and have wonderful stories to tell of their experiences. But for those of us who were not fortunate to hear those groups, our chance is coming! PASIC-78 will recreate the famed Marimba Symphony Orchestra after auditioning to find 50 of the finest young marimbists available. Joel Leach will be responsible for organizing and directing this group.

Clair Omar Musser himself had hoped to be present at PASIC '78, but this amazing man, well into his 70's in age, has conflicting engagements in the form of an extended performance tour of England and Western Europe that will prevent him from attending. However, in searching for some insight into the creation of the first marimba orchestras, I personally asked CLAIR OMAR MUSSER innovator, composer, arranger, virtuoso, recitalist, educator, conductors, designer, ad infinitum, how he came to be involved so closely with the popularity of the marimba and the marimba symphony orchestras. His answer was to present his entry into and path through a life as a marimbist in the form of the following six chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

Musser was in the fifth grade, Lincoln School, Pennsylvania, with his violin for his Christmas program participation. A prominent school director, Mr. Ammon Bucher, had just purchased an Edison phonography and loaned the instrument to the program. His five "cylinder recordings" featured violin selections; Enrico Caruso; Christmas music; and "The United States Marine Band", featuring Thomas Mills playing "Four Little Black Berries", a solo on the xylophone. This last selection caused a virtual uproar among those at the Christmas program. The people whistled, screamed, applauded, yelled and asked for the number to be repeated. Mr. Bucher played it again and the acclaim was more ecstatic than before. Young Musser was awe-struck. He bashfully went to Bucher and asked to see the recording that had caused so much excitement. When he read that the soloist, Mills, played a xylophone, he was stunned. What kind of an instrument could possibly be identified with such a word beginning xy.... He went to the back of the schoolroom to page through the large Webster Dictionary for this word, xy.... To his amazement, there it was - a picture of a xylophone and mallets with a description as well. He decided it would be fun to use mallets to "beat out" tunes, especially after having heard the audience screaming their love for this instrument, which was new to him.

He begged his Philadelphia Aunt to get this instrument and in short order, he was in possession of a three octave Deagan xylophone and taking lessons from Permin Burger in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His teacher told him that the greatest xylophonist in the entire world was George Hamilton Green. Young Musser acquired a number of Victor recordings by Green and secretly determined to eclipse this celebrated virtuoso some day in the future. By the time he had learned several overtures and semi-classics and performed a number of recitals, Chapter Two loomed up in this young percussionist's life.

CHAPTER TWO

Like a rainbow in the sky, a famous "Big Band" under the baton of Earl Fuller arrived in Lancaster to perform a concert at the Brunswick Hotel. This deluxe band was heralded as number one, direct from New York and featured a large, super Deagan marimba-xylophone, no. 4726, played by Abraham Hildebrand. Hildebrand, introduced as the leading marimba soloist of the world, featured four mallet arrangements accompanied by this great 18 piece swing band and the young Musser was utterly floored. Upon his acquaintance and conversations with the marimbist, Musser inquired where he ever learned to play like that. Hildebrand promptly replied that he had studied in Washington, D.C. with the unquestionably world's greatest teacher, Philip Roseweig. Rosenweig was from Warsaw and had earlier taught dulcimer and cimbalom in Poland and Paris before settling in America and dedicating his life to the large, four and a half octave marimba-xylophone, which Deagan had just introduced to the music world.

CHAPTER THREE

Young Musser naturally had to go to Washington and Baltimore to study with Rosenweig. Also, his precious aunt came to his aid and presented him with a deluxe four and a half octave, no. 4726, Deagan Marimba.

CHAPTER FOUR

Musser, now considered a well-trained recitalist and heralded as a virtuoso by many commentators, secured New York City management and toured the U.S., Canada, and Europe, first playing the large theatres, a Warner Brothers Vitaphone film, and eventually guest appearances with Symphony Orchestras. He performed concerti by the great masters - Bach, Chopin, Mendelssohn and Paganini.

CHAPTER FIVE

Musser was appearing in Chicago as soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Frederick Stock. Through a social affair, he met vice-president, Charles Dawes and his brother Rufus, who had just been elected president of the Century of Progress Committee. At a dinner in Winnetka, Illinois, attended by the officers of the forth-coming Century of Progress Exposition, Musser heard the earnest expressions of Dawes and his associates explaining how deeply they would like to present something NEW and musically epochal for this World's Fair. Musser remembered how, as a very young lad, his father had raved about the 19 piece Honduras Marimba Orchestra which was featured in 1915 at the San Francisco World's Fair. Musser promptly joined in the discussions and proposed that the committee authorize the sponsorship of a 100 piece marimba symphony orchestra for the Century of Progress Exposition. Musser agreed to design a special super deluxe "Century of Progress Model" marimba, train all the orchestra members, and write and conduct the music. The pages of history report the unprecedented success of this orchestra and the sign posts to Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SIX

We now find Musser designing the King George Marimba for the famous 100 piece marimba symphony orchestra that toured Europe with phenomenal musical success. Gold medals, awards, citations and wildest musical acclaim was their reward before returning to New York's Carnegie Hall and the American accolades. The New York Times reported "The perfection of intonation of the ensemble, its rich sonority and the uniqueness of the effects gave last night's Concert at Carnegie Hall exceptional distinction.....it made an intimate appeal to the intelligence and emotions of the man of today."

Other marimba ensemble groups and orchestras under the magical baton of this dedicated marimba maestro include the spectacular 25 piece "All-Girl" Marimba Orchestra Musser produced for Paramount Pictures and their opening performance at the Oriental Theatre, Chicago, February, 1929. Another group organized and conducted by Musser was an exciting 50 piece marimba orchestra for concerts in Tulsa, Oklahoma in April, 1940. Musser also produced a super marimba ensemble of 75 members for several concerts in Chicago in July, 1951, sponsored by NAMM, featuring 50 marimbists playing Paganini's "Moto Perpetuo" solo in unison! His 100 piece Imperial Orchestra, of record with concerts in Paris, Brussels and

Orchestra, of record with concerts in Paris, Brussels and Carnegie Hall prompted Marcel Coudyre of "L'information, Paris" to report "The Imperial Marimba Symphony Orchestra obtained a splendid success at the Salle Rameau. Of exceptional instance is the Orchestra's blending of tones and good symphony. Not the slightest monotony is noticed after a long audition of the rhythm of this music."

Musser conducted a 125 piece marimba orchestra sponsored by Phillips University, Enid, Oklahoma, April 1941 and a 150 piece marimba orchestra, Chicago, Sept., 1941. He also conducted a deluxe 200 piece marimba orchestra sponsored by the Chicago Tribune at Soldier's Field to an audience of 111,000 people in September of 1949. Musser's 300 piece marimba orchestra appeared on the North Stage at the Chicago Fair, September 1, 1950, featuring a 100 piece vocal choir and an unprecedented battery of contra-bass marimbas.

CODA

Mr. Musser ended his recounting of his musical life at this point, but any of us who know him or of him know that this is only a scratch in the surface of an extraordinary life. He, of course, continued and still continues to be a marimbist-musician-scientist of endless facets and interests.

In recent years, his close associate has been Professor Joel Leach, head of the percussion department at California State University Northridge and a leading percussion and jazz educator. We eagerly look forward to hearing the PASIC '78 MARIMBA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA under the direction of Joel Leach at PASIC '78 in Tempe, Arozona this coming October. The magic begun by CLAIR OMAR MUSSER will be heard again!

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