

Tafelmusik

GET TO KNOW DAVID CAMPION

This is one in a series of informal interviews with members of the Tafelmusik Orchestra and Chamber Choir. This week we introduce you to David Campion, timpanist with Tafelmusik since 1982.



How old were you when you started to make music, and what was your first instrument?

It's so cliché, but my mother still has the pots with dented bottoms that I used to play on when I was three. I survived piano lessons, but by sixth grade got to leave school early every Friday to take the subway downtown for Orff classes on drums, voice and recorder. The drums won out.

Where did you grow up, and when did you first move to Toronto?

Most often people in the arts in Canada begin somewhere else and eventually end up in Toronto. I'm an exception – I was born in Toronto, grew up in Etobicoke and moved downtown to go to the University of Toronto in the late 70's. I lived here until moving to Stratford in 1990.

What made you decide to choose the timpani?

When I was in high school the Etobicoke Youth Orchestra couldn't convince any university percussionists to join a group so far from downtown Toronto. Our school had no orchestra but I'd had fun playing in one at InterProvincial Music Camp in Parry Sound the previous summer so I thought I'd give it a try. The first programme was the Finale from Beethoven's Symphony no. 5, Sibelius' *Finlandia*, and *Music for Orchestra* by Vaclav Nelhybel with an enormous timpani solo. I felt like a rock star. I had no idea classical music could be so intense. I'm still amazed.

Did you have a teacher who inspired you?

My first percussion teacher was Roger Flock. He showed me that real people with normal lives can create magic with music in ways beyond what they could ever imagine. And I consider myself blessed to have been able to study, travel and work with Russ, John, Bob, Bill, Robin and Michael, the original members of the percussion ensemble Nexus. Magnificent men, all.

How did you first get involved with Tafelmusik?

While I was road managing for Nexus in 1982 Bob Becker had been asked to play a programme for Tafelmusik. He couldn't but asked me if I would be interested, warning me that the "drums were a little funky." I'm not sure if it was at that first show that the timpani rolled off the tripod into a patron's lap who, without missing a beat, picked it up and held it on the broken stand for me until the piece finished, but those old wooden kettles were funky indeed. After 25 years I'm still not sure that there's a way to put into words what playing with this orchestra is like – these musicians create some of the finest music in the world and every concert is a greater privilege than the last one.

Do the timpani travel with the orchestra on tour?

The first drums to tour with the orchestra were our smaller baroque drums made by Ben Harms in New York. However as our relationship with Bruno Weil has grown, and we're playing more classical repertoire, we've needed larger drums so flight cases were built for my classical drums. Sadly, since 9/11 air travel with larger instruments has become all but impossible and we now have an arrangement with a European company to supply us with timpani when we tour there.

We see you putting your ear to the timpani frequently during a concert. Are you tuning when you do this? If so, how do you tune while the orchestra is playing?

I spend a lot of my time onstage with my ear or my nose down at the drum heads. Period timpani have heads made of skin and they continue to either take in or release moisture depending on the climate of the concert hall. On a humid summer day I fight to keep enough tension on the heads because they absorb so much water. And in the winter it's so dry that if you're not careful that \$400 drum head can split from drying out. The head begins to change the moment you stop tuning so to check the pitch I will put my ear close and gently flick the drum head to hear the note. If there's a bit more going on around me and I can't hear that way I'll get very close to the drum and hum softly at the pitch I want – when it's dead on it will resonate back at me. A timpanist has to be able to hear the pitch he wants no matter what the orchestra around him is playing so we learn to hear and sing different intervals in our heads. And in concert the tuning fork is one of our best friends.

What do you do when you are not playing the timpani?

Music careers can keep you away from home. I love being able to spend time with my wife, Anne, and my young adult children, Arielle and Dylan. For 25 years I have played principal drum kit/percussion in the orchestra at the Stratford Festival. I enjoy playing lots of other percussion instruments from many cultures – drum kit, frame and hand drums, modern orchestral and contemporary music. I'm a bit of a Mac fanatic and I like working with my hands doing woodworking and home renovating. And tea, a crackling fire and a book are a good pastime too.

Who is your favourite composer?

Drawing from the music I play with Tafelmusik my favourite composer is Ludwig van Beethoven. His compositions forever changed the way that composers would write for timpani in orchestral repertoire.

What is your favourite piece of music?

Musicians shouldn't have to answer this question. It's like trying to name your favourite child. If I spin the wheel, at this moment in time it stops at Variation 9 (*Nimrod*) from Edward Elgar's "Variations on an Original Theme" (*Enigma*), op. 36.

What kind of music do you listen to, besides baroque and classical?

A lot of jazz; also alternative singer/songwriters; world music from ... everywhere.