

Don Liuzzi in a lesson with Yibing Wang
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

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The Divine Tone

DON LIUZZI INSPIRES HIS TIMPANI AND PERCUSSION STUDENTS TO TRANSLATE IDEAS INTO MUSIC.

BY DIANA BURGWYN

On a quiet May afternoon, the percussion studio at Lenfest Hall suddenly comes to life, as five Curtis students haul around an assortment of sizeable instruments and faculty member Don Liuzzi arrives, toting several heavy plastic bins and canvas bags. It's time for percussion class: a lively hour of demonstration, discussion, and performing for peers.

The first subject today is timpani heads, the skin stretched across the top of the instrument: how thick or thin the membrane should be, how much they cost, who makes them. Asked to find the backbone on various heads, the students are having a bit of trouble. “Geez, guys, I didn't think it would be that hard!” says Mr. Liuzzi.

Next he hauls out an assortment of sticks and mallets. Yellow puff sticks are good for Debussy, he says; wood sticks for Mahler, bamboo for Mendelssohn. Bamboo needs five layers of linseed oil so it won't crack. Never get a mallet with a flat core: “It's slap city. You get a kick instead of a tone.”

The students are intent but relaxed. There is a palpable sense of camaraderie between them and their teacher, and they are eager to share their own knowledge with the group.

Now it's time for some music, and second-year student Yibing Wang is the performer. She plays an excerpt from Darius Milhaud's ballet *Creation of the World*, switching frenetically from one instrument to another: bass drum, tenor drum, snare drum, field drum, two different sizes of cymbals, a wood block, a tambourine, and a cow bell. “There you go—yes!” enthuses Mr. Liuzzi after an especially intense passage.

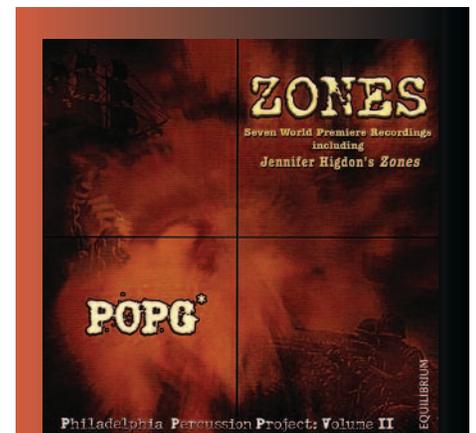
Watching percussionists navigate their many instruments is a lot of fun for the onlooker, but for the player it is immensely difficult. So the requirements are steep: Imagine not even being accepted at Curtis unless you have excellent relative (if not perfect) pitch and not being able to graduate unless you have achieved mastery of every percussion instrument in a symphony orchestra.

Mr. Liuzzi's area of specialization is timpani, the first percussion instruments to have been embraced by orchestras. (Their earliest exponent was the French baroque composer Jean-Baptiste Lully.) Timpani, he says, are considered the head of the percussion family, and their role is both harmonic and rhythmic.

After earning his Master of Music degree from Temple University under the tutelage of renowned pedagogue and Philadelphia Orchestra percussionist Alan Abel, Mr. Liuzzi took a position with the Pittsburgh Symphony, playing percussion. Here he gained invaluable experience with a huge variety of instruments. In 1989 he was appointed principal timpanist at the Philadelphia Orchestra—the fourth in its 115-year history—and in 1994 he joined the Curtis faculty.

MASTERING MULTIPLE GENRES

Over the years Mr. Liuzzi has transformed the Curtis timpani and percussion department. A man of genuine modesty, he says that his position with the Philadelphia Orchestra left him little time to learn the expanding repertoire for other percussion instruments or to maintain the technical skills on those instruments and genres that he wanted to impart to his students. He launched a series of guest appearances and master classes by other gifted musicians that led eventually to four faculty appointments. Grammy Award winner Scott Robinson, a Curtis graduate, focuses on drum set, which teaches independence of limbs



Zones Showcases Curtis Percussion Faculty

Don Liuzzi recently executive-produced the latest recorded offering from the Philadelphia Percussion Project, which brings together the members of the Philadelphia Orchestra with other distinguished percussionists in the area, including his fellow Curtis faculty members Rolando Morales-Matos and Scott Robinson. *Zones*, on the Equilibrium label, features world-premiere recordings of new works by Mr. Liuzzi and Mr. Morales-Matos, as well as Curtis composition faculty Jennifer Higdon, among others. The CD or digital downloads are available online at www.equilibrium.com.

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and the all-important steadiness of tempo. Rolando Morales-Matos is an internationally known Latin jazz percussionist. Eric Millstein is an orchestral percussionist and Robert van Sice is a marimba soloist who has premiered more than 100 contemporary works; both are very active in chamber music.

"Don has kept his finger on what the students need and how to deliver that to them," says Paul Bryan, dean of faculty and students. Indeed, the Curtis timpani and percussion department is now widely considered to be the finest program of its kind in the United States, with students who are, in Mr. Liuzzi's words, "uncannily wonderful." Along the way he founded the school's contemporary music group, the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble (now directed by David Ludwig, dean of artistic programs).

Mr. Liuzzi's ultimate goal is not only to see the students graduate with a well-rounded education but with a clear sense of their life's musical mission. "It's so exciting to see your musical children finding out where their love is."

"He is so inspiring as a teacher," says Yibing Wang. "And he will do whatever he can to help us fulfill our dreams." Hers are to play with an orchestra and teach percussion to children. "I am already designing classes for them," she says, "so they can learn rhythm, gain confidence, develop a work ethic, learn how to communicate, and, most importantly, have fun"—a value that Mr. Liuzzi instills just by the example of his outgoing and generous personality.

ALL-CITY FINALE

Mr. Liuzzi has invested a great deal of his own time in educating young people. Having been principal French horn with the Philadelphia School District's All-City Orchestra as a youth, he recently capped his tenth and final year as the ensemble's leader and conductor by taking the group to Italy last summer, its first-ever tour.

Then it was back to his usual breakneck pace in Philadelphia. Mr. Liuzzi is looking forward to next April, when he will premiere a timpani concerto that Maurice Wright is composing for him. And he's completing a book, *The Timpanist Can Sing*.

His life as a musician and teacher revolves around much more than the mastery of an instrument. Rather, it is conveying the emotional content of a work. "We are not just automatons providing rhythm," he says. "We translate ideas into sound and sound into ideas. I want a timpani roll to sound like a breeze just came through that window and blew the curtain. I want it to sound like the bottom of the earth."

"The timpani must add to the meaning of the words," Mr. Liuzzi tells Yibing at a lesson, as they work through the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Sometimes, he notes, the instrument has to interrupt and even contradict a beautiful passage of music with a crude, contradictory emotion. Or where the text refers to the vastness of God's loving embrace of the world, her playing of the word "millions" must subtly underline this profound idea. A deeply spiritual man, Don Liuzzi has one last thought to offer, a quote from the theologian Mary Baker Eddy.

"If the divine tone be lacking, the human has no melody for me." ♦

Diana Burgwyn is a Philadelphia-based writer whose articles have appeared in Overtones, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and Symphony, among other publications.



WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Don Liuzzi

"The school's smallness allows you the mental space to grow and discover what you want to do. Find your love and home in on it. The percussion field is so full of possibilities, and here [students] can explore that.

"In the past we just didn't have the right facilities for percussion. But in Lenfest Hall, the physical space is phenomenal. The windows add light and the rooms are big enough for you to get the feeling of how the instruments really sound. The soundproofing is so great that we have two rooms together, and you don't know who the heck is [playing] next door!"