

Chapter 2

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The Members of Nexus

In the previous chapter, I argued that although Nexus has been innovative, it has deep traditional roots which can be traced back to the musical traditions of Philadelphia and Rochester. In order to better understand these influences, the formative years of the six members of Nexus will be discussed in this chapter. My aim is not to provide thorough accounts of their lives, but instead to focus on some of the key events and experiences that helped shape these individuals, and in so doing, came to indirectly influence the ensemble itself.

Robin Engelman

The oldest member of Nexus, Robin Engelman, was born on 21 March 1937 in Baltimore, Maryland.¹ He was the youngest of three children, though his eldest sibling, Vivian, died when she was only fifteen months. His mother, Winifred Anne Robertson, came from a wealthy family in Nashville, Tennessee, where her father owned the largest independent insurance company in the state.² Engelman knows little of the history of his father, James Edward Engelman, other than he was educated at Staunton Military Academy, a distinguished military school in Virginia. His parents met at an Academy dance, and neither of them pursued college education.³

Engelman's family moved house frequently during his youth. During the Second World War, he spent extended periods with his mother and brother at his grandparents' home in Nashville. He observed that 'there is much about my early life of which I know nothing, and my surviving relatives are notoriously closed mouthed.'⁴ He also noted that there were anomalies in his childhood development, as despite beginning to speak quite late, by the age of nine or ten he was reading works by the novelist William Faulkner as well as the poet and short story writer Edgar Allan Poe. He was 'heavily influenced by the sound of Poe's words, and the feelings that they could evoke.'⁵ He nonetheless 'hated school from day one,' and failed both kindergarten and first grade due to lack of interest, which made him two years older than his classmates from the outset.⁶ He said that it took him a long time before he became interested in anything other than observing the world around him.⁷

When Engelman was fourteen, he suffered a major setback when he had an accident at a high school football pep rally on Halloween. Someone at the rally threw a five-gallon can of gasoline onto the bonfire and it burst into flames. The fire ran up Engelman's trousers

¹ Engelman was born five minutes after midnight on the first day of spring, and his mother nicknamed him 'Robin' after seeing a robin sitting on her windowsill that morning. As mentioned in the previous chapter, his official name is John Robertson Engelman. (Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002).

² Engelman's maternal grandfather was Edward Alva Robertson. (Engelman, Email to author, 27 January 2006).

³ Engelman, Email to author, 27 January 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004; Engelman, Email to author, 29 June 2006.

⁶ Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002; Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006.

⁷ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004; Engelman, Email to author, 29 June 2006.

severely burning his body. He remained in hospital for a year recovering from his injuries.⁸ He slowly began to walk again, and occupied himself by drawing pictures and copying illustrations from medical textbooks, thinking that one day he may become a surgical artist. On leaving hospital, he weighed only ninety pounds and was another year behind at school.⁹

Reflecting on his youth, Engelman noted that he 'certainly didn't have a privileged upbringing. I didn't have parents who were spending money on me, or sending me to this or that. It was really *me* finding things that I could escape *to*. And choir was one of those, and band was one of those, and percussion instruments was one of those.'¹⁰ As Engelman sought activities outside his home, he gradually became immersed in the music of his community. When questioned about his early musical experiences, he identified three defining moments that eventually led him to pursue music as a career.¹¹

The first was receiving a recording of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* from an uncle when he was about ten years old. The recording featured Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians, a popular group at that time.¹² The arrangement of the suite was unusual in that lyrics had been added to the music.¹³ Engelman said he memorized all the songs, and virtually wore the album out by playing it so often.¹⁴

The second was participating in the Christmas services held at his church in Baltimore. Engelman began singing as a soprano soloist in St Mark's Methodist Church choir when he was around eight or nine years old.¹⁵ He was particularly moved by the Christmas Eve services held at this church. Beginning at 10:00pm and finishing around midnight, he recalled the evening being devoted to 'singing and music making.'¹⁶ The church choirs, a brass quintet, string quartet, two harps, organ, a choir of about fifty song flutes (treble recorders), and the timpanist from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra participated in the event, which he described as 'unbelievable.'¹⁷ He later moved to an Episcopal church choir, and then on to a High Anglican church choir whose services were sung in Latin.¹⁸

The third defining moment was playing bass drum in the marching band at Westminster High School. When Engelman was eighteen and in his second last year of school, he saw an advertisement for a bass drum player in the school marching band. Even though he could not read music at the time, he applied for the position.¹⁹ During the audition, the band director, Joseph Chalker, gave him a beater and asked him to accompany a march playing whatever he

⁸ Engelman mentioned that his injury occurred before the treatment of burns became more sophisticated as a result of the high incident of napalm burns during the Korean War. He was therefore not immediately immersed in cold water to reduce the heat of the burn, as is the normal practice today. (Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002).

⁹ Engelman did not receive rehabilitation during his stay in hospital, as there was none at that time. (Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006).

¹⁰ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004; Engelman, Email to author, 29 June 2006.

¹¹ Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002.

¹² The group was also known as Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians.

¹³ Harry Simeone arranged the work with lyrics by Daisy Bernier, Frank Cunkle, Jay Johnson, Fred Waring, and Harry Simeone. See www.singers.com/jazz/vintage/waring.html for more information about the recording.

¹⁴ Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002.

¹⁵ According to Engelman, St. Mark's Methodist Church was located on the corner of Liberty Heights Avenue and Garrison Boulevard in Baltimore. (Engelman, Email to author, 27 January 2006).

¹⁶ Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002.

¹⁷ Ibid. The timpanist was Dr. William Sebastian Hart, with whom Engelman would later take five lessons.

¹⁸ According to Engelman, the Episcopal church was located across the street from St. Mark's Methodist Church, and the High Anglican church was in downtown Baltimore. (Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006).

¹⁹ Engelman had learnt everything by ear in the choir. (Engelman, Interview with author, 19 May 2002).

felt was appropriate. Engelman described the experience as a 'revelation, because I heard all the band in the bass drum. The whole band was in that drum. And I was playing tuba parts, and trombone parts, hitting the drum head in different places, just *naturally*.'²⁰ (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Engelman in his band uniform with the children of his band and orchestra director, Joseph Chalker, ca. 1956. Courtesy of Robin Engelman.

After joining the band, Engelman began teaching himself to read music and play the snare drum. In the summer of 1956, he signed up for six lessons at Peabody Conservatory of Music with Dr. William Sebastian Hart, timpanist of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.²¹ He was

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dr. William Sebastian Hart (1921-1989) was principal timpanist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra from 1939 to 1958. He was the first percussionist/timpanist to graduate from the Peabody Conservatory, and taught percussion and timpani there from 1939 to 1962. He was influential throughout the Baltimore region, and later went on to found the Gettysburg Symphony Orchestra. For more information, see www.bpointo.net/DrHartTribute.htm. Note that this website erroneously indicates that he was principal percussionist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Elizabeth Schaaf, Archivist and Curator at the Archives of the Peabody Institute of the John Hopkins University, confirmed that he was in fact the timpanist of that orchestra, and was never listed as principal. (Elizabeth Schaaf, Email to author, 17 April 2006).

uninspired by Hart's teaching, however, and discontinued after the fifth lesson.²² Engelman later joined the high school orchestra, conducted by Chalker, as well the Meyer's Meat Market band (a town band sponsored by a local meat market), and, for one summer, a Veterans of Foreign Wars Drum and Bugle Corps.²³ He also attended a few rehearsals of the York Symphony Orchestra in York, Pennsylvania, at the invitation of an itinerant trumpet teacher who taught at his school. The teacher played in the orchestra and gave him a ride from Westminster, where Engelman was living at that time. Engelman heard his first Beethoven symphony there and was inspired by the orchestra.²⁴

In the fall of 1957, Engelman moved to Ithaca, New York, to study music at Ithaca College. Chalker had graduated from Ithaca and recommended Engelman study there too.²⁵ Engelman auditioned for the Dean of the School of Music, playing a Podemski snare drum solo.²⁶ He initially began a degree in music education, but later switched to a double major in performance, studying percussion with Warren Benson and flute with Melvin Berman.²⁷ He also studied composition with Benson and choral conducting with Donald Craig.

Engelman had been playing percussion for about eighteen months by the time he began his degree at Ithaca. He had limited knowledge of percussion, little technique, and some fairly wide gaps in his general musical knowledge. Although he had gained performance experience and an appreciation of music through his involvement in the choirs, bands, and orchestras, his knowledge remained somewhat disparate, as he indicates below:

I knew all the Beethoven symphonies. I knew their key signatures, I knew what the key of each of the movements was in, I knew the instrumentation, I knew how the chords were structured. I could sing all the themes of the Beethoven symphonies, and I didn't have a *clue* where middle C on the piano was.²⁸

The contrast between Engelman's knowledge of the piano and Beethoven's symphonies reflects his musical path thus far. Engelman was largely a self-taught musician who had pursued musical opportunities of interest along the way. He had not received a systematic musical training through lessons, and was highly versed in some areas of music and less in others. He was determined, however, not to let any lack of knowledge get in his way. This determination was evident to Benson, who during an interview provided insight into Engelman's character and interest in music at that time:

²² Reflecting on his lessons with Hart, Engelman said, 'I signed up for a summer series of six lessons, but Hart turned me off rather than inspired me so I didn't go to the sixth and last lesson. . . . He taught me very little. I think he wanted only to use me as a vehicle to reflect his ego. . . . I saw him years later in the Baltimore Symphony and thought him a show off. Still, he was the only or most important game around and I took some lessons with him one summer.' (Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006).

²³ Engelman said that the Drum and Bugle Corps had a drum instructor, but he could not remember his name. (Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006).

²⁴ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004.

²⁵ Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006.

²⁶ Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000.

²⁷ In an interview with Rick Mattingly, Engelman gave the following reason for switching from an education to a performance degree: 'When I arrived at Ithaca College, I discovered that all freshmen entering the college were music education majors. I didn't know that prior to my arrival. That first semester I had to take oboe, flute, clarinet, and the obligatory piano. But by the end of the first semester, I discovered that there was an alternative to that. You could become a performance major and you didn't have to take any other instrument, except piano. I felt that getting rid of all those other courses was a perfect way of simplifying my life.' (Rick Mattingly, 'Nexus,' *Modern Percussionist*, 1 (3), 1985, p. 13).

Engelman had not studied flute before arriving at Ithaca; however, he pursued it beyond the first year because he enjoyed playing it and had made quick progress. (Engelman, Email to author, 23 February 2006).

²⁸ Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000; Engelman, Email to author, 29 June 2006.

He's not like everybody else. . . . He's always had this kind of penetrating itch he has to scratch, he's always curious. There's certain things that really drive him to find out the things that he's interested in.

. . . And when he came to study with me in nineteen fifty—what six, seven?—he was already that way. . . . I just took to him because he was about as independent as any student—well he was more independent I would say than any student I'd ever had. Not more talented—I'd had kids that were more advanced as players—but not kids who were as embedded in the idea of what's music about.

. . . There was kind of mystique there that he was determined to wallow in some way and find out about. And I think that's driven him all his life. . . . He's still that way. . . . Everything he does is kind of focused.²⁹

Engelman applied that focus immediately to his studies at Ithaca. He quickly sorted out his priorities and devoted most of his time to performing and practising percussion. His single goal was to leave the program with enough skills as a percussionist to secure an orchestral job upon graduation. In order to gain experience, he joined as many ensembles as possible during his first year, as he describes here:

I was playing in the Ithaca Chamber Orchestra, which was a semi-professional group. I was playing in the Cornell Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pulitzer Prize winner, Karel Husa, who used to come downtown and drive me up to the university. I was playing in the wind ensemble, the concert band, the percussion ensemble, the brass ensemble, the symphony orchestra. Every week I was playing in six or seven ensembles all over town.³⁰

Needless to say, with so many performance commitments, Engelman's academic studies suffered. In an attempt to reduce his academic workload, he transferred from the education program to a performance degree. This enabled him to drop some courses so he could concentrate on performance.³¹ He managed to forge a unique role for himself at Ithaca, as although he was failing academically, he became indispensable to the program as a percussionist.³² He was thus able to continue in the program and maintain his focus on performance.

Benson was essentially Engelman's first and only percussion teacher. As Benson mentioned above, when Engelman arrived at Ithaca, he had already formed his own idea of what music

²⁹ Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000.

³⁰ Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000; Engelman, Email to author, 29 June 2006. Engelman and Husa remain friends to this day.

³¹ Engelman explained his rationale for changing degrees in an interview with Mattingly: 'I was failing all my courses [laughs], and by changing into the performance course, I was doing away with all the courses I was failing. . . .

And I can remember very vividly realizing this. "If I could just get rid of the methods courses, then I would be left with just learning the repertoire." My interest at that time was pretty much exclusively symphonic music. So it wasn't entirely a decision that I made. It was also forced upon me. . . .' (Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 36).

³² Engelman explained his precarious role at Ithaca during an interview: 'Warren told me years later that they had regular faculty meetings and all these teachers—the new teachers who didn't know me—[would] come in and say, "This guy's an idiot. We should get rid of him." And all these other teachers [would say], "Oh no, we want to keep him. He keeps the percussion instruments in repair, he never misses a rehearsal, he knows all the music beforehand, he's perfect principal percussionist, every kid knows their part and is assigned [a part]. He stays".' (Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000).

was essentially about. For Engelman, discovery and expression took precedence over method and technique. Benson was both perceptive and secure enough to understand this, and tried to nurture Engelman's innate qualities rather than get in his way. Although Benson created a learning environment whereby creativity and freedom of expression were encouraged, he also attempted to instill discipline in his students' playing.

Benson felt that Engelman would benefit from practising studies, but Engelman had no interest in this type of music and confronted him over the issue during his third year.³³ Engelman was no longer willing to pursue a path that did not align with his view of music. He was interested in music itself rather than technical facility, a preference possibly developed as a result of his early musical experiences. Engelman had learnt from a relatively young age that people could contribute meaningfully to an ensemble, regardless of their technical skill. One example of this was when he sang in a church choir next to a boy who was tone deaf.³⁴ The boy could not contribute effectively to the melody, but his overall contribution was nonetheless valued, suggesting the choir director was more interested in the social function of the choir rather than the technical expertise of its members.

Another possible reason for Engelman's resistance to learning studies was that he had not acquired his musical knowledge through the conventional route of music instruction, and thus had never had a teacher who had imposed discipline on him from an early age.³⁵ His musical experience came from performing in community ensembles, rather than from practising alone in a room. Upon entering the program at Ithaca, Engelman continued in this vein by joining as many ensembles as possible, suggesting a tendency to learn on the job, so to speak, rather than seek perfection in a practice room.

Despite their differences on this aspect of his training, Benson opened many doors for Engelman as his percussion program at Ithaca was at the cutting edge at that time. Benson joined the faculty in 1953 and immediately began developing the percussion program.³⁶ He established a percussion ensemble, and as there was limited repertoire available in those days, he commissioned composers to write new works for it. He expanded the range of tonal possibilities for the ensemble by using unconventional instruments, such as milk bottles and hand clapping, in his compositions, and after gaining sponsorship from the Slingerland Drum Company, helped them design concert tom toms, which was a new concept at that time.³⁷ Benson organized a recording contract for the ensemble with Golden Crest Records, arranged

³³ Engelman, Interview with author, 9 August 1999.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004.

³⁶ During Benson's fourteen years at Ithaca College, he progressed from teaching percussion and music theory to Chair of the Department of Music History and Literature, and finally to Professor of Music and Composer-in-Residence. Before entering education, he was timpanist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra until an operation left him unable to quickly manoeuvre the timpani pedals. After fourteen months in hospital recovering from the operation, he switched focus to music theory and composition, gaining a bachelor's and master's degree in Music from the University of Michigan. He then taught in Greece for two years where he established a bilingual music curriculum at Anatolia College and the first coeducational choir in the country. After returning to the United States, he assumed the position of Director of Band and Orchestra at Mars College in North Carolina for one year prior to his appointment at Ithaca. He left Ithaca in 1967 to teach composition at the Eastman School of Music until his retirement in 1993. For more about Benson, see Alan D. Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*, Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.

³⁷ See Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*, pp. 39-40 for more details about Benson's role in designing these instruments.

television and radio appearances, scheduled many concerts, and took the ensemble on tour throughout the eastern states.³⁸ (See Figure 2)



Figure 2. Ithaca Percussion Ensemble conducted by Warren Benson ca. 1959.

Robin Engelman is second from the left holding a pair of cymbals. Note the matching bongos, congas, tom toms, snare drums, and bass drum made especially for the ensemble by Slingerland.

This photo was used in advertisements by Slingerland Drum Company in the late 1950s.

Courtesy of Robin Engelman.

Benson diligently rehearsed the ensemble and carefully choreographed their concerts so the students would develop a sense of how to present percussion to the public.³⁹ Percussion ensemble repertoire was limited in those days, and Benson did everything he could to give his students the opportunity to play a wide repertoire.⁴⁰ He also encouraged his students to compose music, thus generating music from within the ensemble, a characteristic which later became an integral part of Nexus' music making. This practice is clearly evident in a concert presented by Benson in 1959, as five of the eight works are generated from within the ensemble. (See Figure 3)

³⁸ For more details about Benson's work at Ithaca College, see Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*.

³⁹ An example of Benson's sense of choreography can be found in the programming of his work *Variations on a Handmade Theme*, originally written as an encore. The composition is for eight pairs of hands, enabling the students to play the piece without reorganizing equipment if the audience demanded an encore. (Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000). For further information about this work, see Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*, pp. 139-140. See the same (pp. 38-39) for Benson's description of how he choreographed concerts.

⁴⁰ Engelman said that a lot of the early percussion works, such as Cage's percussion ensemble pieces, were not available at that time as they had not yet been published. (Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000).

ITHACA COLLEGE
School of Music

Percussion Ensemble
WARREN BENSON, Conductor

PROGRAM

Fanfare *Robin Engelman*

Three Pieces for Percussion Quartet *Warren Benson*
Allegretto
Fughetta alla Siciliana
Scherzino

Afro-Fuga *John Alling*

March *Emil Raab*

INTERMISSION

Introduction and Fugue *Robert Buggert*

Sketch *Ronald Lo Presti*

Danse du Diable *Stravinsky—Engelman*
(from *L'Histoire du Soldat*)

Variations on a Handmade Theme *Warren Benson*

John Alling	Alfaster Johnson
Albert Ansuini	Henry Ketterer
Frederick Blood	Anthony Natali
Fred Drobin	John Russi
Robin Engelman	Paul Sauve

Rodney Derefinko, Piano

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1959
8:15 P.M.
ITHACA COLLEGE MUSIC HALL

Figure 3. Ithaca Percussion Ensemble concert program. Courtesy of Robin Engelman.

The concert received a favourable review by Robert Meikle, who provides some insight into the status of the percussion ensemble at that time:

During the past ten years in particular, a number of ensembles consisting purely of percussion instruments have come into being, and in this country alone between 50 and 60 such groups are in existence. Composers are never slow to take advantage of a new medium, and last night a group of players from Ithaca College gave the town an opportunity to hear some new music for Percussion Ensemble. . . .

Within the areas of sonority themselves, the subtle varieties of timbre are innumerable: thus in his *Scherzino* for Percussion Quartet, Warren Benson exploits the difference in sound of a cow-bell, a muted triangle and a milk bottle, and in the piece which ended

the programme he shows that even the different methods of clapping hands can be put to a musical use.

While the use of percussion alone has its disadvantages as well as its assets, then, the composer can at any rate make infinite use of the device for which percussion instruments were originally constructed—rhythm. John Alling employs a diversity of rhythmic patterns in his *Afro-Fuga*, and Robin Engelman's 'Histoire du Soldat' illustrates just how much of the 'Danse du Diable' is constructed out of ingeniously combined rhythms.⁴¹

The percussion ensemble gave Engelman an opportunity to play contemporary music as well as his own compositions. Engelman's first works were snare drum solos, which he dedicated to Joseph Chalker, and his girlfriend and later wife Eleanor Lawyer.⁴² His arrangement of the *Danse du Diable* from Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* was later recorded on the ensemble's Golden Crest Records album. Benson's liner notes for this album indicate that Engelman's arrangement for six percussionists was 'the first recorded example of a work for pitched ensemble being arranged for non-pitched ensemble.'⁴³ Benson adds that no attempt to 'simulate the original pitches of the ensemble lines' was made.⁴⁴ When asking Engelman about his intentions regarding this aspect of the arrangement, he replied that he was unaware that it had not been done before, and did not place great significance on it saying that he was simply exploring the possibilities at that time.⁴⁵ Benson encouraged Engelman to write to Stravinsky to gain permission to include the work on the recording, and Stravinsky replied favourably in a letter which remains in Engelman's files.⁴⁶

In addition to receiving a formal musical education from Ithaca College, Engelman was also drawn to the more unconventional side of music. One influential moment was in the 1950s when he saw John Cage present his philosophy of music on a television show called *What's My Line*. In this show, a blindfolded panel had to guess the identity of a mystery guest and their line of work. The panel was unsuccessful in identifying Cage and his work as a composer after he threw a number of household objects into a bathtub. Cage's explanatory statement of 'noise is music to me,' however, struck an immediate chord with Engelman who said that 'as a youngster, that impressed the hell out of me. That really communicated with me.'⁴⁷

After leaving Ithaca, Engelman joined the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra as principal percussionist in 1962. He held similar positions with the New Hampshire Music Festival Orchestra, Louisville Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Toronto Symphony, which he joined in 1968.⁴⁸ As Engelman moved around the United States and finally settled in Canada, he came into contact with other future members of Nexus and their teachers and mentors. The one he had closest contact with during the 1960s and early 1970s was John Wyre, who was principal timpanist in the Milwaukee

⁴¹ Robert Meikle, 'Ithaca College Percussion Ensemble: Warren Benson, conductor, College Music Hall,' n.d.

⁴² Engelman wrote his first snare drum solos in December 1958. (Engelman, Email to author, 21 August 2002).

⁴³ *Warren Benson Presents Percussion: With The Ithaca Percussion Ensemble*, Warren Benson, conductor, Golden Crest Records CR4016. Works on the album by John Alling, Vernon Alling, Warren Benson, Robert Buggert, John Engelman, and Terry Hulick. Note that Engelman is listed under his official name (John) rather than his nickname (Robin).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004.

⁴⁶ Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000.

⁴⁷ Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Symphony and the Toronto Symphony at the same time Engelman was principal percussionist.⁴⁹

John Wyre

John Wyre was born in Philadelphia in 1941. His mother was a nurse, and his father was a professional musician and music teacher who was quite influential in his early career. Wyre studied percussion during high school with Fred Hinger, then principal timpanist with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He also performed with the All-Philadelphia Senior High School Orchestra as timpanist where Michael Bookspan, percussionist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, was his tutor. Wyre became a professional drummer at the age of fifteen and joined the American Federation of Musicians' union the same year. After graduating from high school, Wyre had hoped to continue studying with Hinger at the Curtis Institute of Music, but as there were no vacancies for percussionists that year, he enrolled in the Eastman School of Music where he studied percussion with Hinger's teacher, William Street. Between 1959 and 1964, Wyre completed a Bachelor of Music degree and part of a master's degree at Eastman.⁵⁰

Wyre was exposed to non-Western music during his first year at Eastman when he was advised by his Big Brother to listen to a gamelan recording and attend a Ravi Shankar concert, where he heard tabla for the first time.⁵¹ In August 1962, Wyre was inspired by the musical traditions of Africa after Babatunde Olatunji's performance at the Arrangers Workshop concert in the Eastman Theater.⁵² This was the first time Wyre had heard an African musician perform.⁵³ Olatunji made a big impact on the audience, as Harvey Southgate's review of the concert attests:

As a summertime frolic, the Arrangers Holiday concert in the Eastman last night lived up to expectations and in some ways went a little beyond. The theater was almost filled and the audience was effusively enthusiastic. The combination of jazz, musical satire, broad humor, all topped off by Olatunji, phenomenal African drummer and his assistants, seemed to be precisely to the audience's tastes.

Olatunji, who came from New York City as special guest star of the show, had the crowd wildly applauding. Surrounded by African drums of various sizes and styles, he gave a remarkable demonstration of beating the instruments with bare hands to produce expressive rhythms and sounds. His two assistants were equally skilled.⁵⁴

Wyre's participation in the Eastman Philharmonia's historic tour of Russia, the Middle East, and Europe in the winter of 1961-62 opened his eyes to the culture of those regions.⁵⁵ The

⁴⁹ Engelman's and Wyre's paths crossed for the first time in 1965 when they were both members of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in Wisconsin. Wyre was principal timpanist in Milwaukee from 1965 to 1966. After leaving Milwaukee, Wyre assumed the same position in the Toronto Symphony in the fall of 1966.

⁵⁰ Kalman Cherry, 'John Wyre,' *Percussive Notes*, 34 (4), August 1996, pp. 18-19; John Wyre, *Touched by Sound: A Drummer's Journey*, Norland, Ontario: Buka Music, 2002, pp. 14, 19; Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

⁵¹ See Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, pp. 15, 87 for more details. The tabla player was Chatur Lal.

⁵² Cherry, 'John Wyre,' p. 19; Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 15. Michael Babatunde Olatunji was a Nigerian drummer who went to the United States to pursue a diplomatic career. The concert showcased the work of student arrangers who had participated in the Arrangers Workshop during the summer session at the Eastman School of Music.

⁵³ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Harvey Southgate, 'Concert romp scores,' *Democrat and Chronicle*, 3 August 1962, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 72.

Eastman Philharmonia toured for three months under the auspices of the U.S. State Department and gave performances in sixteen countries, including the Soviet Union, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal.⁵⁶ Wyre reflects on this tour in his book, *Touched by Sound*: 'I experienced first hand the love and genuine warmth of all the cultures I encountered. Making friends in every country, I felt the generosity of those who were poor in material assets but so rich in spirit. The wonderful sensitivity to and appreciation of the arts that is so much a part of every culture was a real inspiration. Three months of Real Life Experience made me a citizen of the world.'⁵⁷

Travelling at a time of heightened political tension, the Eastman Philharmonia musicians became *de facto* ambassadors for the United States. Dr. Howard Hanson, the director of the Eastman School of Music and conductor of the Eastman Philharmonic, noted the ambassadorial role the students assumed during the tour in his comments to the local press after arriving back in the United States: 'They were magnificent. I am proud to tell you how seriously they took their ambassadorial duties and that they discharged them extremely well. They established warm relations with other young people throughout the world.' In the same article, he noted that: 'Future wars, if they must come, will be fought by the young—by those who are now in high school and college. They have a greater stake in the peace of the world than their elders. As a consequence, they become superior ambassadors. They have a natural curiosity in the rest of the world and its people.' He also reflected that: 'Now, as I approach the end of my career, I am more convinced of the communicative powers of music than ever before in my life.'⁵⁸

It was during the Philharmonia's tour that Wyre began his lifelong association with bells after hearing a long string of bells swinging from a camel's neck in Lebanon. He described the effect of the bells hitting each other as a 'symphony of sound' and the experience triggered a 'serious collection of bells that . . . never stopped.'⁵⁹ In addition to collecting bells, Wyre also began collecting musical instruments from different cultures during the 1960s.⁶⁰

After leaving Eastman, Wyre pursued an orchestral career as principal timpanist in the Oklahoma City Orchestra from 1964 to 1965, the Milwaukee Symphony from 1965 to 1966, and the Toronto Symphony from 1966. He settled permanently in Canada in 1966. It was while working for the Toronto Symphony that both Wyre and Engelman developed a close friendship with Seiji Ozawa and Toru Takemitsu, two musicians who later figure prominently in Nexus' career.

After moving to Canada, Wyre and Engelman became involved in the Toronto new music scene.⁶¹ In 1970, they performed Benson's *Nara* with the Lyric Arts Trio at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake and at the Contemporary Music Festival in Osaka, Japan. The Music Festival was organized by Toru Takemitsu and was part of Expo '70. At the invitation of Seiji Ozawa, Wyre also performed at the festival as soloist with the Japan Philharmonic in the premiere of his composition *Bells*. This was Wyre's first venture into composition and it gave him the opportunity to bring his collection of musical instruments into an orchestral setting.

⁵⁶ Charles Riker, ed., *The Eastman School of Music: 1947-1962*, Rochester, New York: University of Rochester, 1963, pp. 31, 35-36.

⁵⁷ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ Anon, 'Dr. Hanson lauds Philharmonia as "magnificent" musical envoys,' *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 27 May 1962, p. 3B.

⁵⁹ Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

⁶⁰ Cherry, 'John Wyre,' p. 19; Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Engelman had suggested that Wyre compose a work for the instruments he was exploring at the time after Wyre reviewed the concerto repertoire and found no music of interest to play. Takemitsu enthusiastically supported the idea to write a new work, so Ozawa arranged the commission for *Bells* and later conducted the Canadian premiere of a revised version with the Toronto Symphony in February 1972.⁶²

Whilst on tour to Japan for Expo '70, Wyre and Engelman took the opportunity to travel through Asia and collect musical instruments. They visited Mindanao in the Philippines, and after being refused entry into Singapore due to their long hair and beards, continued their travels to Java, Bali, and Hong Kong.⁶³ They bought a variety of musical instruments en route and shipped them back to Toronto to add to their collections.⁶⁴

Wyre's fascination with bells was enhanced by his spiritual yearnings. After spending years exploring many Eastern philosophies and integrating them into his life, he found that bells helped him achieve his spiritual ideals. Wyre reflects on how bells became an important tool in his life:

I think that I've always been enchanted by bells. The more I pursued that and the more I walked down the path of life the more I found that bells were for me an amazing tool. Particularly the things like these—bell plates, the bowls that will ring for a couple of minutes. If you follow that sound it brings you to the moment. And for me that's what I've been trying to do in my life is to be more there. My biggest challenge was learning to pay attention—still is—and bells have helped me along that path more than any other percussion instrument.⁶⁵

Wyre filled his domain with a wide variety of bells, hanging long strings of them from the ceilings and specially designed racks. He carefully aligned them so that when swung like pendulums they knocked into each other creating a myriad of sounds. Upon this sonic background, Wyre often explored improvisation on other instruments in his collection and over the years developed a highly personal style of improvising.

Wyre's desire to live close to nature led to his purchase in 1972 of seventy-five acres in the township of Norland, Ontario, about two hours' drive northeast of Toronto.⁶⁶ He built an abode in the shape of a dome and reserved a large open space in it for his instruments. As the land was adjacent to crown land, his quiet environment was guaranteed for years to come. It is here that Wyre became acquainted with the sounds of nature and over the years these experiences influenced his music. The dome became a meeting place for many musicians and was a favourite hang out for the members of Nexus.

Wyre bought the land from the proceeds received after performing Toru Takemitsu's *Cassiopeia* in 1971 at Tanglewood, and again with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1972 (see Figure 4). Takemitsu wrote the piece for Stomu Yomash'ta, the virtuoso Japanese percussionist, who performed its premiere with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Ravinia Festival in 1971. Wyre, Engelman, Cahn, and Takemitsu attended the premiere and afterwards returned to Canada to hang out together for a few days. Benson joined them in

⁶² Michael Schulman, 'A soothing thing: Bells both realistic and mystical to percussionist,' *The Music Scene*, 272, July/August 1973, p. 8.

⁶³ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 74. For a detailed account of their travels see pp. 74-90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 80, 84, 89.

⁶⁵ Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

⁶⁶ Cherry, 'John Wyre,' p. 19.

Toronto where he got to know Takemitsu during this time.⁶⁷ About a week after the premiere, Wyre received a phone call from Ozawa asking him if he would consider performing the work at Tanglewood the following week as some difficulty had arisen with Yomash'ta's management. Wyre reluctantly agreed and Ozawa flew to Toronto to discuss the score. After creating his own part for the music and assembling as many instruments as possible, Wyre drove to Tanglewood and performed the work. Ozawa invited him to play *Cassiopeia* the following year with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Wyre dedicated the fees from these performances to the purchase of his land.⁶⁸

Wyre was greatly influenced by Takemitsu and describes him as 'one of the most profound mentors' in his life. He frequently says that Takemitsu turned him 'into an explorer, as opposed to being an authority,' after Takemitsu challenged his perception of music.⁶⁹ Wyre elaborated on this by saying that Takemitsu showed him through his example as a composer and as a human being that he did not know what music was. He said that prior to this experience, he would make judgements saying things like, 'that's not music.' He now questions whether anyone 'has it together enough to say what's music and what's not.'⁷⁰

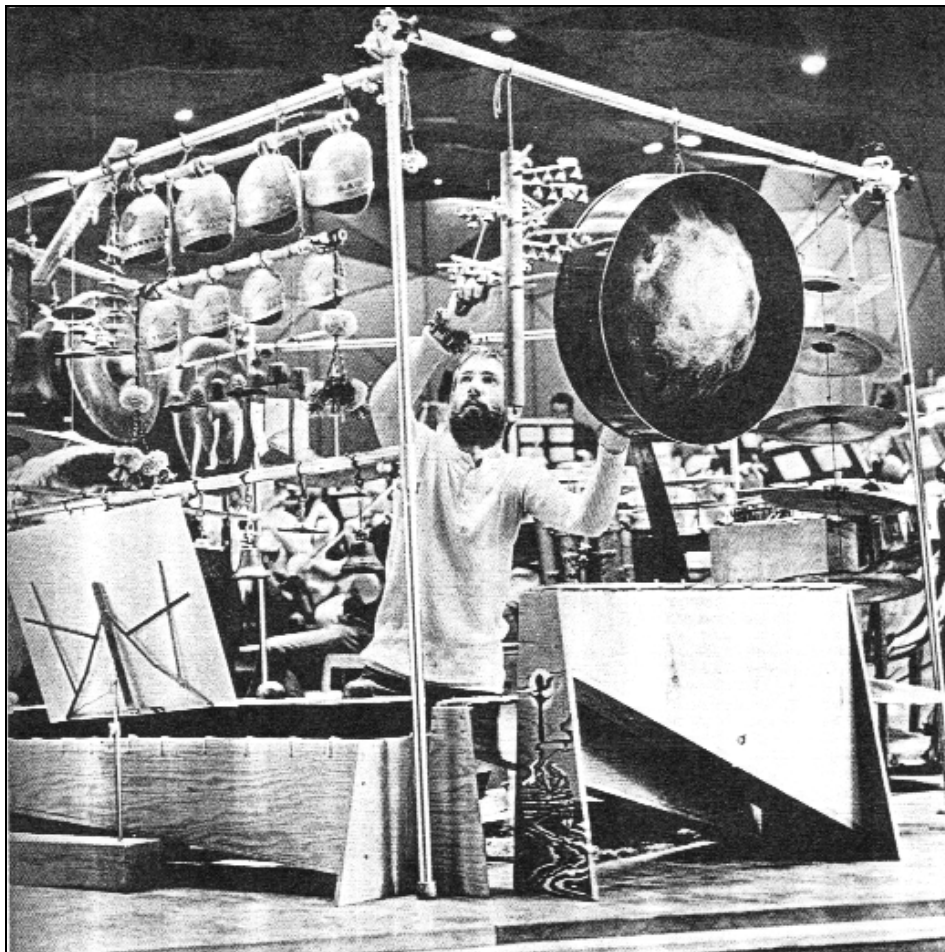


Figure 4. John Wyre performing Takemitsu's *Cassiopeia*.
Photo: Whitestone Photo. Courtesy of *The Music Scene*.

⁶⁷ Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000.

⁶⁸ Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Also see Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 38, and Dara Rowland, 'And the beat goes on: Percussionist John Wyre is making the language of drums internationally understood,' *The Music Scene*, September/October 1988, p. 9.

⁷⁰ Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 38.

Michael Craden

Michael Craden was born in Buffalo in 1941. He moved to Los Angeles in 1959 where he trained as a visual artist at the Chouinard Art Institute and befriended L.A. studio percussionist, Emil Richards.⁷¹ Although lacking any formal musical training, Craden studied music with Richards in exchange for teaching Richards painting. But as Richards commented: 'I didn't do too good with painting and he never wanted to take the time to get that involved with music because art was his primary thing.'⁷² Wyre observed, however, that 'Emil took him under his wing and got him into improvising, got him into playing some jazz, and turned him on to great musicians and new ideas.'⁷³

Richards and Craden's mutual interest in exploring the perimeters of music and art led to a rich and vibrant friendship. They explored improvisation together in various musical and theatrical contexts, took tabla lessons with Hari-Har Rao from New Delhi, and played in Harry Partch's ensemble. They also built microtonal instruments with Erv Wilson, a music theorist and instrument builder.⁷⁴ Their studies of American psychic, Edgar Cayce, prompted Craden's move to Toronto in 1967. According to Richards, Cayce had predicted that 'when the earth tilted on its axis, Toronto would become a subtropical climate and the cultural center of the world.'⁷⁵ Craden and his wife consequently drove to Canada and settled in Toronto.⁷⁶

Craden became actively engaged in the Toronto arts community working as a freelance percussionist, educator, composer, children's film writer, painter, and sculptor. On the advice of Richards, he visited Wyre one day as Wyre describes: 'Answering a knock on the door, I met Michael Craden. He introduced himself, brought greetings from Emil Richards in Hollywood, and we proceeded to my basement music room. . . . Michael and I began to improvise. . . . I was playing very softly, fading in and out of what Michael was doing, trying to listen and accompany him. Suddenly he stopped, turned to me and shouted, "Hey man! If you're going to play with me you've got to mean it!!!" One of the greatest performance lessons of my life.'⁷⁷

⁷¹ Emil Richards, 'Michael Craden remembered,' *Percussive Notes*, 34 (4), 1996, p. 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

⁷⁴ Richards, 'Michael Craden remembered,' pp. 12-13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁷⁷ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, pp. 25-26.



Figure 5. Michael Craden. Courtesy of Robin Engelman.

Craden formed his own ensemble in Toronto called I Ching, which performed for schools, clubs, and television shows. Wyre played in the ensemble from time to time and shared Craden's interest in improvising and collecting and building musical instruments. Craden's work in Los Angeles with Harry Partch was also of interest as Wyre was exploring Partch's music at the time. Wyre invited Craden to participate in the first Nexus concert in Kilbourn Hall in May 1971, but Craden was unavailable that day.⁷⁸ He eventually joined Nexus in

⁷⁸ Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

August 1972 during a two-week residency at the Shaw Festival's *Music Today '72* in Niagara-on-the-Lake.⁷⁹

Russell Hartenberger

Hartenberger was born in Oklahoma in 1944 and began learning percussion in 1956 with Alan Abel, then principal percussionist of the Oklahoma City Orchestra. Hartenberger studied percussion with Abel until 1959, when Abel left Oklahoma to join the Philadelphia Orchestra percussion section. Hartenberger continued his studies with Tom Gauger, who replaced Abel as principal, and then K. Dean Walker, percussionist with the orchestra. Before departing for Philadelphia, Abel organized a farewell concert at the Oklahoma City University featuring all his students and other musicians including his wife, a singer, and Hartenberger's mother, a pianist (see Figure 6).⁸⁰ This was Hartenberger's first experience of playing in a percussion ensemble.

During his high school years, Hartenberger composed several works for solo percussion and explored improvisation in a trio with two other percussionists at his school. Hartenberger says this trio was like 'a mini Nexus. We just kind of made up what we were doing. It wasn't totally free improvisation but we would just get in the band room and get a bunch of instruments together and jam until we came up with an idea. And then that would be the first part of our act. And then we would do some more until we came up with another idea, and just kind of piece it together until we had a composition so to speak.' Hartenberger also played regularly as an extra with the Oklahoma City Symphony during his final two years of high school.⁸¹



Figure 6. Alan Abel conducting his percussion ensemble rehearsal in preparation for his farewell concert in 1959. Russell Hartenberger is playing the marimba centre front and K. Dean Walker is first on the left. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association Archives.⁸²

⁷⁹ Cahn, 'NEXUS - On tour,' p. 44.

⁸⁰ Anon, 'Abel to offer final concert,' July 1959.

⁸¹ Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.

⁸² Anon, 'Abel to offer final concert,' July 1959.

Hartenberger moved to Philadelphia in 1962 to study percussion at the Curtis Institute of Music with Fred Hinger, principal timpanist with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Hartenberger continued informal lessons on the side with Abel and taught percussion with him at the Settlement Music School. Abel had founded two percussion ensembles at the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia, and Hartenberger taught the junior ensemble whilst Abel taught the senior. Hartenberger regularly attended the senior ensemble rehearsals to fill in for absentees and play additional parts. It is here that he met Bill Cahn who was a member of the ensemble. Hartenberger and Cahn played together in the senior ensemble for a few years before Cahn left Philadelphia to attend Eastman.⁸³ Cahn was a native of Philadelphia and had studied with Hinger for many years.

During Hartenberger's last year at Curtis, he was offered the principal percussion position in the newly-formed Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia, conducted by Anshel Brusilow. Just prior to signing the orchestral contract, however, the personnel manager enquired about his draft status and as it was 1A, which meant he could be drafted for the Vietnam War at any time, the job offer was withdrawn. Hartenberger consequently joined the United States Air Force Band in Washington, D.C., figuring that he was unlikely to secure any other orchestral position due to his draft status.⁸⁴

Upon joining the Air Force, Hartenberger initially performed in the ceremonial band, and later moved to the concert band after a percussion position became available. By coincidence, the conductor of the concert band, Colonel Arnold Gabriel, had conducted the Air Force Band in Sampson, New York, when Abel was a member in the early 1950s during the Korean War. Whilst in the Air Force, Hartenberger continued his studies with Abel, completing a part-time master's degree in performance at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He travelled to Philadelphia every couple of weeks to take lessons with Abel. Hartenberger also taught several undergraduate percussion students at Catholic University including John Rudolph, who is the current principal percussionist with the Toronto Symphony.⁸⁵

Hartenberger met Wyre for the first time in Washington, D.C., while waiting for the Air Force Band to begin a parade. Hartenberger knew of Wyre from his contacts in Oklahoma as Wyre had played principal timpani in the Oklahoma City Orchestra from 1964 to 1965, alongside K. Dean Walker, who was principal percussionist at the time. Wyre was also a native of Philadelphia and had studied with Hinger for years before going to Eastman.⁸⁶

Hartenberger left the Air Force Band in early 1970 after serving almost four years and began a Ph.D. in World Music at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, in the fall of that year. He had been offered the principal percussion position with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, but after his years of military service decided to move away from an orchestral career and explore new horizons. Hartenberger studied African, Indian, and Javanese music at Wesleyan. While studying at Wesleyan, he performed with the New Haven Symphony, playing first extra for the first year and then principal percussion for the following three years.⁸⁷ Towards the end of his first year at Wesleyan, he also began playing in Steve Reich's ensemble. Hartenberger and Reich were introduced to each other in the spring of 1971 by a student at Wesleyan, Richard Teitelbaum, as Hartenberger was interested in finding out about travelling to Ghana and Reich was looking for drummers for his new work *Drumming*. Reich

⁸³ Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

invited Hartenberger to play in his ensemble, and after rehearsals they talked about Reich's travels to Ghana the previous year. Hartenberger left for Ghana in May 1971 and stayed for approximately nine weeks. After experiencing some illness and failed connections with teachers in Ghana, Hartenberger decided to write his dissertation on the South Indian mrdangam instead.⁸⁸

Bill Cahn

Bill Cahn was born in Philadelphia in 1946. When he was nine years old, he joined a drumming group called Mr. Emore's drummers at the Edwin Forrest Elementary School. This group, consisting of about ten children, accompanied the singing of patriotic, folk, and popular songs at the daily school assembly. At the age of eleven, Cahn began learning to read music, and in his last year of elementary school joined the school band. In 1959 at the age of thirteen, Cahn joined the junior high school band at the Abraham Lincoln School and began drum studies with Joseph Hutlin. Cahn began studying with Fred Hinger, principal timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, at the age of fifteen.⁸⁹

Cahn met Hinger through his son, Bill, as they were both members of the All-Philadelphia Junior Band and Orchestra. Hinger would occasionally volunteer to coach the percussion section of the orchestra. During one of these sessions, Cahn almost passed out due to lack of food and air circulation in the room. Hinger was so concerned about Cahn that he offered him a percussion lesson at his house for free. At the end of the lesson, Hinger asked him if he would like to come back the following week, and this went on for four years until Cahn graduated from high school. Cahn's family could never have afforded Hinger's fee, which at that time was around US\$20 a lesson, but Hinger never asked for any payment. Many of Cahn's lessons were held at the Academy of Music, which enabled him to see the Philadelphia Orchestra rehearsals. Some of these lessons were devoted to the repertoire the orchestra was playing that day.⁹⁰

Cahn studied the French horn at the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. He played in Alan Abel's percussion ensemble at Settlement for a few years where he met Hartenberger, who was assisting Abel at Settlement at this time. They occasionally played together in the ensemble for concerts. Cahn began a Bachelor of Music degree at the Eastman School of Music in 1964 and the following year, Bob Becker joined the school. Cahn recalls meeting Becker for the first time under quite extraordinary circumstances:

In the fall of 1966, at the start of my second year at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, I and another classmate . . . were moving our percussion instruments back into our practice room. It was orientation week for the incoming freshman [sic] and classes had not yet started. While we were setting up and getting organized, we heard marimba playing coming from the adjacent practice room. We were hearing warm-up exercises played faster and more accurately than anything we had ever experienced, so we tiptoed over and knocked on the door. There in the room was Bob Becker, and we all introduced ourselves to each other. After a few minutes I and my classmate went back to our room and eventually we heard the marimba again, this time playing a piece . . . at lightning speed. We looked at each other in amazement and then, as my classmate grew red-faced, without warning he picked up a pair of his yellow rubber Musser marimba mallets, slammed them through the wallboard, left them

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Bill Cahn, Email to author, 23 January 2005.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

there and stomped out of the room. Shortly thereafter he dropped out of the Eastman School and left Rochester altogether.⁹¹

Cahn studied with William Street at Eastman and after Street's retirement in 1967, with his student, John H. Beck. Cahn played extra with the Rochester Philharmonic and was appointed its principal percussionist in 1968. The same year he married Ruth McLean, first extra section player with the orchestra.⁹²

Bob Becker

Bob Becker was born in 1947 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. His first instrument was the xylophone, which he saw at his uncle's house. He soon moved on to marimba, and at the age of seven, Becker began studying with James Betz, who taught him marimba, snare drum, piano, and music theory. Betz played many instruments, including organ, piano, accordion, and percussion. According to Becker, he was also an improviser, arranger, and great sightreader.⁹³ Becker continued his studies with Betz until he was eighteen, playing in his marimba and small chamber ensembles.

Becker began a Bachelor of Music degree at Eastman in September 1965. He initially studied percussion with William Street, then after Street's retirement, with John H. Beck. During this time, he performed in various ensembles with Cahn, including the Eastman Philharmonia, Symphony Orchestra, Wind Ensemble, Percussion Ensemble, Marimba Ensemble, and Musica Nova (see Figure 7). They also played as extras with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra.

After Becker completed his Eastman degree in 1969, he secured a position as percussionist with the United States Marine Band in Washington, D.C. His initial excitement in joining the band gradually turned to disillusionment.⁹⁴ He was somewhat relieved when he was discharged from the band on medical grounds after six months of service.⁹⁵ He was then free to pursue his education and was no longer subject to the Vietnam War draft regulations. Upon leaving the band in January 1970, Becker returned home to Allentown, Pennsylvania. After a couple of months, he went back to Rochester, where he stayed with Bill and Ruth Cahn. He began a master's degree at Eastman in the fall, and it was around this time that Becker and Cahn actively began collecting and making percussion instruments.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ruth McLean was appointed second percussionist in 1970. (William L. Cahn, 'Rochester's classic percussion: A short history of the percussion section of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra,' *Percussive Notes*, 30 (5), 1992, p. 71).

⁹³ Becker, Interview with author, 13 March 2001.

⁹⁴ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 7. Eastman Marimba Ensemble in 1967.

From left to right: Harrison Powley, Robert Becker, Douglas Shear, Ruth McLean, William Cahn, Timothy Ferchen, and Larry Wilson. Courtesy of Ruth T. Watanabe Special Collections, Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music.⁹⁷

Becker and Cahn gathered musical instruments by scouring antique and second-hand stores in the Rochester region.⁹⁸ Many of the instruments collected were brought back to the United States as souvenirs by returning soldiers.⁹⁹ They also designed some instruments along the lines of Harry Partch's creations, including an orange capitonus which resembled a marimba with resonators made from orange-capped blueprint tubes.¹⁰⁰ They experimented with hanging instruments from racks to make them accessible and gradually became acquainted with improvisation.¹⁰¹ During this period of experimentation, Becker often took recordings of their improvisations to his composition lessons with Benson. Benson offered constructive criticism on the improvisations and helped broaden their musical outlook by introducing a wide range of music and composers. He also provided confirmation that what they were doing was of value.¹⁰²

After completing his master's degree at Eastman, Becker joined Hartenberger at Wesleyan in the fall of 1971 to do a Ph.D. in World Music. Becker studied Javanese, African, and Indian music at Wesleyan and chose to focus his research on the North Indian tabla. Becker later joined Hartenberger in Steve Reich's ensemble, along with Tim Ferchen, another Eastman

⁹⁷ Ursula Kingsbury, ed., *Score*, Rochester, New York: Eastman School of Music, 1967, p. 89. Note that Becker and Cahn are listed under their official names, Robert and William, respectively.

⁹⁸ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁹⁹ Joan Rizzo, 'NEXUS,' *Upstate New York*, 2 May 1971, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29; Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

¹⁰¹ Joan Rizzo, 'NEXUS,' p. 30; Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

¹⁰² Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

graduate. Hartenberger and Becker also played together in the Paul Winter Consort whilst at Wesleyan, and Cahn played on occasion as well.

Entwined paths

By tracing some of the major events of their lives and their development as musicians, we can see that long before the members of Nexus performed together in May 1971 at Kilbourn Hall, they were gradually getting to know each other in various musical settings. Living in the same cities in the United States, studying with the same teachers, and playing in the same orchestras and ensembles, their paths continually intersected and overlapped. By the end of the 1960s, three of the members had moved from the United States to develop their careers in Toronto, and in the early 1970s, Hartenberger and Becker followed. Hartenberger took over Wyre's position as percussion teacher at the University of Toronto, and Becker assumed Engelman's role as percussion teacher at the University of York in Toronto. Although Cahn remained in Rochester, he was only a four-hour drive away.

Long before forming Nexus, the members had been experimenting with improvisation. Becker was exposed to improvisation in his formative years through his study with James Betz. Hartenberger formed what he called a 'mini Nexus' with two of his high school friends. This group was engaged in improvisation, as were Becker and Cahn. Craden also explored improvisation with Emil Richards, and later he and Wyre improvised together in *I Ching*. Engelman was also engaged in improvisation during the 1960s, and taught improvisation classes at York University in the early 1970s.

Another important factor in the years leading up to the formation of Nexus was the members' openness to exploring different musical traditions. Wyre's participation in the Eastman Philharmonia's three-month tour of Russia, the Middle East, and Europe during the Cold War in the early 1960s gave him a unique opportunity to witness the communicative powers of music. This tour opened Wyre's eyes to many musical traditions of the world. His travels through Asia with Engelman some years later gave them both an opportunity to add to their instrument collections. This had a domino effect on Becker and Cahn, who also became actively engaged in collecting non-Western instruments. Craden's connection with Harry Partch also inspired the future members of Nexus to build their own instruments. Hartenberger's study with Indian, West African, and Indonesian musicians at Wesleyan further encouraged their interest in and expanded their knowledge of world music. Given the social, political, and musical climates of the day, when many musicians were turning their back on orchestral careers in favour of more egalitarian ways of making music, one can see that the seeds were sown for something new.