

## Chapter 3

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### Coming Together

As discussed in the previous chapter, the members of Nexus were continually crossing paths with each other, yet leading disparate lives. There were two events that ultimately changed this, essentially paving the way for them to come together as the ensemble Nexus. The first occurred in the summer of 1968, when five of them participated in the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont. It was here that they formed a strong musical bond, which was expressed in an impromptu session held after one of the rehearsals. This bond was consolidated three years later at the Eastman School of Music when four of them improvised a concert in Kilbourn Hall.<sup>1</sup>

These two events are prominent in the historical narrative of Nexus, and are often placed side-by-side with little discussion of what happened in between. It is common in history to jump from one event to another in an attempt to create a cohesive narrative out of the past. Rarely does life unfold that way, however, and it is one of the dangers of reconstructing significant events in the present day.<sup>2</sup> As historian W. Stull Holt once noted, history is more akin to 'a damn dim candle over a damn dark abyss';<sup>3</sup> some things are illuminated, whereas others are forever hidden in the shadows.

During the course of my research, I found the abyss surrounding Nexus to be so large that it has been difficult to provide anything more than a glimpse of the history of the ensemble and its members. Robin Engelman once noted during an interview: 'It's interesting, when under certain time constraints, what stories pop out. . . . A million things happen, but certain things come up.'<sup>4</sup> It is within this context that we may view the two frequently-cited events that occurred at Marlboro and Kilbourn Hall, which are two defining moments in the formation of the group. Not all accounts are entirely accurate, though, and I wish to shed some light on one of these here.

In his recent bio-bibliography of Warren Benson, Alan Wagner states the following:

In May 1971, sensing a certain rapport between these players, Benson invited the Toronto duo of Robin Engelman and John Wyre and his two composition students, Bob Becker and William Cahn, to join him at the Eastman School of Music for a concert of percussion improvisation. These percussionists had played together once before in 1968 at the Marlboro Music Festival where they had performed Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. On Saturday, 22 May 1971, on a stage filled with non-Western percussion instruments,

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<sup>1</sup> Craden participated in neither event, while Hartenberger was not able to perform in the Kilbourn Hall concert on 22 May 1971 as he was travelling to Ghana that evening.

<sup>2</sup> See Scott De Veaux's article about jazz historiography, which outlines the dangers of presenting jazz as an easily comprehended narrative: Scott De Veaux, 'Constructing the jazz tradition: Jazz historiography,' *Black American Literature Forum*, 25 (3), Literature of Jazz Issue, 1991, pp. 525-560.

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Professor W. Stull Holt, in Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Historian as Detective*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Engelman, Interview with author, 7 August 2000.

these performers found a kindred spirit in the midst of an incredible performance on the stage of Kilbourn Hall in the Eastman School of Music.<sup>5</sup>

If taken at face value, this is a fairly innocent account. Given the fact that the focus of Wagner's book is on Benson rather than Nexus, it certainly does no harm. However, is it true that they had only 'played together once before' at the Marlboro Music Festival where they had performed Stravinsky's *Les Noces*? It is true in so far as that was the only time that these four musicians had been physically on stage together during a performance, but does not music extend beyond the stage into the social arena of everyday life? During the course of the following discussion, I will suggest that their 'kindred spirit' was ignited long before.

### *The Marlboro Music Festival*

It was during the summer of 1968 that Becker, Cahn, Engelman, Hartenberger, and Wyre came together as participants in the Marlboro Music Festival in Marlboro, Vermont. This annual summer festival was founded in 1951 with the vision of creating 'a community of artists who would come together as a large musical family to exchange ideas and explore the vast chamber music literature.'<sup>6</sup> Marlboro provided the perfect setting for the formation of a new ensemble, and the Guarneri, Cleveland, and Vermeer String Quartets all trace their roots to summers there.<sup>7</sup> Nexus also traces its origins to Marlboro, where in the summer of 1968, five of its members established an enduring musical bond.

The occasion most often cited by the members of Nexus as being instrumental in the formation of this bond occurred after one of the rehearsals for Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, which was performed at the festival on 17 August 1968 (see Figure 8).<sup>8</sup> Cahn and Wyre provide three versions of this memorable occasion.

Cahn describes the nature of this impromptu session in an article in 1987:

After the rehearsal we were putting our instruments away in the storage room at the back of the concert shed. John had brought the [Japanese] bells along, [which he had recently bought at an antique store], and we were storing everything in that room which became crammed with percussion instruments. I got itchy and started playing the xylophone excerpt from *PORGY AND BESS*, and in about 2 seconds, John, Robin and Bob were playing along in unison on whatever instruments happened to be closest; drums, timpani, cymbals, *and* Japanese temple-bells. We laughed uncontrollably,

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<sup>5</sup> Warren Benson in Alan D. Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*, Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005, p. 62. Wagner's information is derived from a telephone conversation with Benson on 27 May 2004, and two articles: Lauren Vogel Weiss, 'Nexus,' *Percussive Notes*, 37 (6), 1999, p. 19; and Michael Udow, 'An interview with Warren Benson,' *Percussive Notes*, 27 (2), 1989, pp. 44-47 (see pp. 45-46 for Benson's comments on the Kilbourn Hall concert). Vogel Weiss' article gives one of the best accounts of the members' entwined paths prior to the formation of Nexus. Note that Cahn was not a composition student of Benson, but rather accompanied Becker to his composition lessons with Benson, who would then provide feedback on recordings of Becker and Cahn's recent improvisations.

<sup>6</sup> Marlboro Music School and Festival, *Marlboro Music 1951-1991*, Marlboro, Vermont: Marlboro Music School, [ca. 1992]. The Marlboro Music School and Festival was founded by Adolf Busch, his brother Herman, son-in-law Rudolf Serkin, and colleagues Marcel, Louis, and Blanche Moysé.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. For an account of the role Marlboro played in the formation of the Guarneri String Quartet, see Arnold Steinhardt, *Indivisible by Four: A String Quartet in Pursuit of Harmony*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998, pp. 71-80.

<sup>8</sup> Hartenberger did not perform in *Les Noces*, playing instead with Cahn and Wyre in Fred Lerdahl's *Wake* on 14 August 1971.

almost to the point of exhaustion, but we continued to wander aimlessly through a myriad of orchestra excerpts and bizarre variations.<sup>9</sup>

Another version from Cahn appears in 2005:

After one of the Stravinsky morning rehearsals, with all of the percussion instruments removed from the stage and arranged back in the storage room, we just started playing around, having fun and experimenting. We amused ourselves by challenging each other to play orchestra excerpts and soon we were playfully distorting them in any imaginative way possible. John's temple bells came into play for a moment in one of the distortions, the fast and tricky xylophone passage from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Of course, the temple bell pitches were all wrong because the intonation of the bells fell somewhere in between the notes of the chromatic keyboard scale, all of which made for a great outpouring of fun and laughter.<sup>10</sup>

Wyre described this same event in 2002:

At Marlboro in 1968 we did a performance of *Les Noces* by Stravinsky. At the end of the first rehearsal, on stage in the empty hall, I found myself hanging out with Bill Cahn, Bob Becker, Robin Engelman and Russell Hartenberger. We were all young percussionists at the time, and in the process of joking around each of us approached the xylophone and played our versions of the xylophone part from *Porgy and Bess*, one of the most difficult excerpts in the orchestral xylophone repertoire. Bob "Dr. Wizard" Becker walked up to the xylophone after the rest of us had finished our renditions and played the thing in octaves! It was quite clear who the virtuoso was.<sup>11</sup>

Cahn's description of this event paints a picture of a group of orchestrally-trained percussionists gently venturing beyond the limits of the orchestral repertoire by accompanying a well-known xylophone excerpt with unconventional instruments. With Wyre's inclusion of Japanese temple bells and other instruments, the musical boundaries of countless excerpts were joyfully stretched. Wyre's portrayal of this event makes no mention of his own temple bells or other instruments, instead focusing on Becker's virtuosic playing.<sup>12</sup> One can assume that by this time his temple bells had become one of many non-Western instruments in his collection and thus did not deserve special mention.

The common factor between Cahn's and Wyre's versions is the playful nature of the occasion. It is apparent that no one was taking it seriously and much joy and laughter were shared. In fact, free from the constraints of the formal rehearsal, this event could be interpreted as an expression of the spirit of carnival. In his discussion of the history of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin writes: 'It was precisely the one-sided character of official seriousness which led to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of man, for laughter.'<sup>13</sup> Carnival is a rebellion against the repression of authority. It is in fact a potent articulation of the dialogic in which multiple, but individually distinct, voices come together, interact, and create. For the members of Nexus, this coming together was a moment in which they could

<sup>9</sup> William L. Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' *Percussioner International*, 2 (1), 1987, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> William L. Cahn, *Creative Music Making*, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> John Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, Norland, Ontario: Buka Music, 2002, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Wyre includes Hartenberger in this impromptu session whereas Cahn does not. On verifying this discrepancy with Hartenberger, he said that he did not attend any of the Stravinsky rehearsals so probably was not at this session. He said, however, that he participated in other improvisation sessions with them at Marlboro. (Hartenberger, Email to author, 27 June 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1968, p. 75.

express, through experimentation and improvisation, all the many dialogic influences from their unique histories, leading to a spontaneous creation of music. The most revealing insight gained from them, though, is that adding Japanese bells to the music seemed natural for Wyre, whereas it was something completely new for Cahn.

1968  
MARLBORO MUSIC FESTIVAL  
Saturday, August 17 at 8:30 P. M.

P R O G R A M

Quartet in Eb Major, K. 171 (1773) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
(1756-1791)  
Adagio - Allegro assai  
Menuetto  
Andante  
Allegro assai

Hiroko Yajima, violin  
Felix Galimir, violin  
Samuel Rhodes, viola  
Fortunato Arico, cello

Concerto in D Major, Opus 21 (1891) Ernest Chausson  
(1855-1899)  
Décidé - Calme  
Sicilienne: Pas vite  
Grave - Un peu plus vite  
Très animé

Ruth Laredo, piano Jaime Laredo, violin  
Michael Tree, violin  
Hidetaro Suzuki, violin  
Nobuko Imai, viola  
Robert Sylvester, cello

INTERMISSION

Les Noces (1923) Igor Stravinsky  
(b. 1882)  
The Bride's Chamber  
At the Bridegroom's  
The Bride's Departure  
The Wedding Feast

Benita Valente, soprano Ruth Laredo, piano  
Betty Allen, mezzo soprano Richard Goode, piano  
Theodore Paul Anderson, tenor Laura De Fusco, piano  
Ara Berberian, bass Walter Ponce, piano  
Thomas Paul, basso profundo

Robert Becker, percussion  
Paul Berns, percussion  
William Cahn, percussion  
Paul Caston, percussion  
Robin Engelman, percussion  
John Wyre, percussion

The Marlboro Festival Chorus  
Conducted by Leon Kirchner

Pianos courtesy of Steinway and Sons Columbia Records

Next Festival Concert Sunday, August 18 at 3:00 P. M.

The artists participating in these concerts donate their  
services for the benefit of the Marlboro Fellowship Fund

Figure 8. Program of concert featuring Stravinsky's *Les Noces* at the Marlboro Music Festival.

Courtesy of William L. Cahn.

Earlier that week, Cahn had accompanied Wyre on his search for musical instruments in antique stores. Cahn later wrote about this experience:

I was never interested in antiques, and it seemed a little strange to me that John wanted to spend time this way, but it was a good opportunity to get out and enjoy the Vermont

countryside, so I went along for the ride. We stopped at a shop outside of Brattleboro, and there John found a set of several hanging Japanese temple-bells. I had never seen bells like this before. Without hesitation John purchased the bells, and I became enamored with their sound. I thought to myself that it would be great to show them to Robin, Bob, Russ, and Paul Caston when we returned to Marlboro later that day.<sup>14</sup>

From this anecdote, it is evident that Wyre was already versed in collecting instruments of this nature, as he showed no hesitation in purchasing something that to Cahn was completely new. Cahn also portrays his enthusiasm for sharing this discovery with Engelman, Becker, Hartenberger, and Wyre's student, Paul Caston. This reaching out into the unknown and sharing of personal discoveries is at the very heart of Nexus. Wyre opened a new door for Cahn at Marlboro, and upon returning to Rochester, he too began collecting non-Western musical instruments.<sup>15</sup> Even though they all went their separate ways at the end of the festival as Cahn describes below, they had experienced a bond which would eventually lead them together again:

After the [Stravinsky] concert we would each go our separate ways. John Wyre and Robin Engelman would return to Toronto to begin the symphony season. It was to be Robin's first year in Canada. Bob Becker and I would return to Rochester, Bob to enter his senior year at Eastman, and I to marry Ruth McLean and begin my first season with the Rochester Philharmonic. Russel [sic] Hartenberger, having performed on another program, had already departed for Washington to rejoin the Air Force Band.<sup>16</sup>

### *Percussion duo, Nexus*

In 1970, Becker and Cahn began avidly searching antique stores to expand their instrument collections. At that time, Cahn was in his third season as principal percussionist in the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and Becker, after finishing his bachelor's degree the year before and spending six months in the United States Marine Band, had returned to Rochester to pursue a master's degree at Eastman. After gathering a sizeable collection, Becker and Cahn decided to formalize their musical explorations by forming a percussion duo which they named Nexus.

They chose the name of the ensemble after discovering the word in Harry Partch's book *Genesis of a Music*.<sup>17</sup> Becker explains how this came about:

We were listening to a lot of Harry Partch's music . . . and we were trying to simulate some of those instruments, although not his tuning system. And discovered that he had written a book, so got the book and read through the first half of it really quickly—it was really great, his whole philosophy of music and stuff—and hit the second half of the book which is this quagmire of mathematical acoustics. I tried but I don't think Bill nor I got very far with that but we did discover this term 'nexus'. He was talking about a numerary nexus and how the ratios link up. And I never understood all of that but that was one of the words I had to look up and saw the definition of a connection or a tie

<sup>14</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Becker and Hartenberger said that Wyre opened up new doors for them as well as they had not been exposed to instruments like this before. (Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999; Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949.

among the members of a group. And I thought that was a terrific name for an ensemble.<sup>18</sup>

Cahn comments further on the choice of name: 'We had earlier agreed on the name, NEXUS following a lengthy and gut-bustingly funny discussion about Harry Partch and imaginary music in a restaurant near the Eastman School. . . . The word had a sound that we liked, and a meaning that was loose enough to relate to just about anything.'<sup>19</sup>

Becker and Cahn made a brochure for their newly-formed duo (see Figure 9) and began publicizing their group.<sup>20</sup> They received an invitation to improvise on a thirty-minute television program, *Gap's Generation*, hosted by Gap Mangione in Rochester. The program featured a long improvisation by the duo and was aired prior to the Kilbourn Hall concert in May 1971.<sup>21</sup>

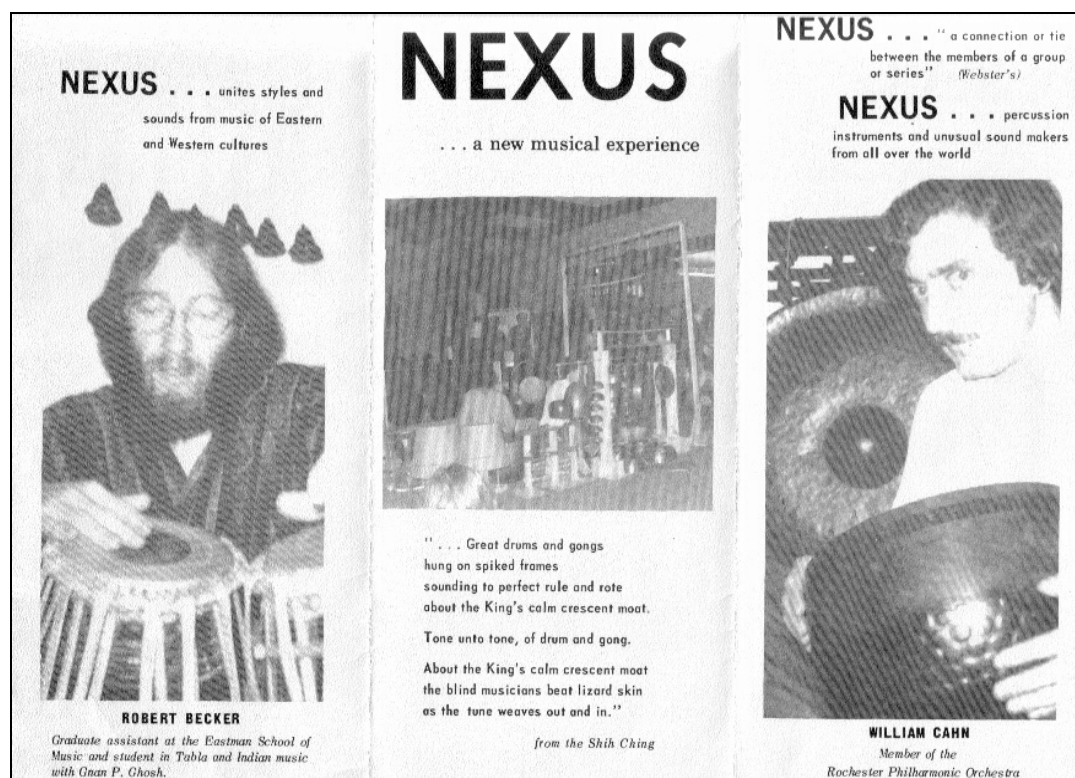


Figure 9. Middle section of brochure for the percussion duo, Nexus. Courtesy of Bob Becker.

They were also featured in an *Upstate New York* article in May of the same year. The article includes numerous photographs of their instruments and provides an insight into their philosophy of music at that time. Defining music as 'the organization of time through the use of sound,' Becker reflects: 'I think we've both become sensitized to the point that everything around in life is really music. I can hear almost every sound as music.'<sup>22</sup> He continues by saying: 'I've always been fascinated by the theory that there are two kinds of music—audible and what they called "music of the spheres" in the Middle Ages. "Music of the spheres" is almost like the idea of radio today. There are always radio waves in the air but unless you

<sup>18</sup> Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' pp. 42-43.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Rizzo, 'NEXUS,' *Upstate New York*, 2 May 1971, p. 29.

have a receiver you're not aware of it. In other words, there's music in the air all the time and you must have to learn to become tuned into it.<sup>23</sup>

Becker and Cahn became finely attuned to sound through improvisation. Gone were the demands of meeting composers' and conductors' expectations, and with the absence of the printed page came the freedom to listen attentively to the sound of their instruments and to each other. By amassing a large and diverse musical instrument collection, they were able to explore not only the sounds of their own culture, but also that of many cultures around the world. They were equally open to embrace different styles of music and regarded rock, jazz, and classical as 'simply different forms of expression.' Their objective of 'trying to unite sounds and cultures and different kinds of music' formed the basis of their philosophy of music and their approach to Nexus.<sup>24</sup>

Becker and Cahn's musical explorations had an immediate impact on local percussionists in Rochester. John Beck, Professor of Percussion at Eastman and principal timpanist with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, explains this impact on the Rochester percussion scene and his own teaching in an article published in the fall of 1971:

NEXUS . . . . . 'a connection or tie between the members of a group or series' (Webster's). Perhaps this is a word unfamiliar to most of us; but in Rochester, New York, it is widely used and represents a new concept in percussion performance. Gongs, bells, flower pots, tablas, porcelain pans, tubophones and a homemade xylophone represent the main body of instruments in the NEXUS percussion group. Two men sit before their array of instruments and improvise on each other's ideas. It is improvisation at a high musical level — how quickly the atmosphere can be changed from wild frenzy to tranquil serenity. How can a collection of hanging gongs, bells, pieces of metal and all sorts of drums actually create all that music? They listen to one another and build or create music spontaneously.

William Cahn and Robert Becker . . . have literally searched every antique shop in western New York state, New York City, Chicago and Toronto for their instruments — a temple gong here, a camel bell there, and a rare Balinese gong somewhere else. These are the instruments many percussionists have collected to hang in their studio or den at home. Now these instruments are being used to make music. . . .

The NEXUS percussion group is doing a great service for percussionists of the future. They are establishing an interest in this free form of music and consequently are establishing a precedent for percussionists to follow. We as teachers must be aware of the new trends in percussion and prepare our students for it. In a sense we must set aside, without ignoring them completely, some of the traditions of the past and expand our teaching to include sessions of improvisation.<sup>25</sup>

Rochester percussionists may have been indebted to Becker and Cahn for introducing a new medium of expression and for making music with instruments that had been silenced on the walls of collectors, but likewise, Becker and Cahn were also indebted to others who inspired them to explore this new musical direction. Harry Partch's influence and Benson's support have already been noted. Engelman and Wyre's contribution must also be acknowledged, as both had been collecting instruments for some time and were involved in improvisation.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 32; Also see Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Rizzo, 'NEXUS,' p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> John H. Beck, 'Membranophones and idiophones: NEXUS,' *NACWPI Journal*, Fall 1971, p. 6.

Becker and Cahn had visited Engelman and Wyre in Toronto, and had spent time improvising in their homes there. This made quite an impression on Becker and Cahn, who often cite Wyre in particular as a major influence on their exploration in this area.<sup>26</sup>

### *Kilbourn Hall concert*

On 22 May 1971, Becker, Cahn, Engelman, and Wyre came together again to improvise a concert organized by Benson in Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music. Benson, who had left Ithaca College in 1967 to teach composition at Eastman, is credited with bringing these four together for their first concert. Benson was friends with some of the members of Nexus as he had taught Becker composition at Eastman and Engelman percussion and composition at Ithaca College. The idea of bringing them all together for a concert came to him during a Lyric Arts Trio rehearsal in 1970 at St. Mark's Church in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Benson was rehearsing his new work *Nara* with Engelman and Wyre when he had the idea: "Hey! Bob and Bill are back there [in Rochester] and why don't I ask them if they want to play together, just . . . improvise or something?" And I did, and they said yes.<sup>27</sup>

On returning to Rochester, Benson booked Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music for a Saturday evening performance the following May. He also made arrangements for a performance at his Unitarian church the morning after the Eastman concert so the players could enjoy two consecutive engagements.<sup>28</sup> The Kilbourn Hall concert was entitled *Sculptured Sound* and the Unitarian church service *Music of the Spheres*. Publicity for the events describes the extensive collection of musical instruments to be played by Wyre and Engelman from the Toronto Symphony, and Becker and Cahn from the percussion duo, Nexus (see Figures 10 and 11).<sup>29</sup>

Benson showed great insight by bringing these four musicians together to explore improvisation on their collection of mostly non-Western percussion instruments. He also demonstrated that he was willing to take the risk of supporting this endeavour by booking the hall of a major music school for their performance. On the afternoon of the concert, Benson helped Becker, Cahn, Engelman, and Wyre set up hundreds of their instruments on the Kilbourn Hall stage where, without rehearsal, they faced the audience.<sup>30</sup> Benson reflects on the audience's reaction to the Kilbourn Hall concert:

The first piece lasted maybe forty-five minutes. And then we took intermission. . . . I had good PR and so the place was pretty full. And the people were all over me in the corridor: 'You know, these guys, I mean how long have they been together? I've never heard such transitions in my life.' On and on and on, and I just evaded all those questions. I mean, I wasn't going to tell anybody: 'Since eight o'clock, aren't they great?' [laughs] Because they hadn't played a note together before, except, you know, I think they played something maybe at Marlboro once, but as a separate unit they hadn't done anything.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000. The Lyric Arts Trio was a Toronto-based ensemble founded by flutist Robert Aitken and included Aitken's wife, Marion Ross, on piano, and Mary Morrison, voice.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Engelman is listed here as John Engleman.

<sup>30</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 43; Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000. See also Udow, 'An interview with Warren Benson,' pp. 45-47.

The Kilbourn Hall performance was the first formal collaboration for these four musicians, and although they had known each other for years, they were venturing into the unknown by filling the stage with their instruments and improvising a concert. Cahn reflects on this: 'The four of us had loosely experimented with improvisation in the security and privacy of our own homes, but this was to be the first time that we would all perform together in front of an audience. It seemed to each of us to be entirely natural to undertake to improvise a complete concert, and this manifested itself in our being armed with two full truckloads of instruments and not a single word of justification.'<sup>32</sup>

If we compare this comment to Cahn's recollection of Marlboro where he experienced Japanese temple bells for the first time, we can see the tremendous growth that has occurred in the intervening years. This is evident in terms of improvisation, which no longer is based on orchestral excerpts but rather constitutes an improvised dialogue between the musicians, and ownership of a large collection of non-Western musical instruments. Photographs of the event show how the four musicians are surrounded by instruments of various kinds hanging from racks or resting on the floor (see Figures 12 and 13). They are dressed in similar clothing with beads hanging around their necks, and are completely immersed in their music making.

Benson composed a poem to commemorate their coming together that weekend.<sup>33</sup> In a sense, it celebrates the diversity of the instruments and individuality of the performers, and highlights the dialogic nature of their performance. The poem's emphasis is on searching, finding, exploring, and responding, all attributes that were to become defining characteristics of the ensemble Nexus.

. . . instruments from all the world  
 musicians from two countries  
     and four private universes  
 coming together  
     to celebrate being together

joining together to search for  
     individual meaning  
 making music, an act of searching  
 responding to another in answer to  
     one's self

finding beyond reasoning . . . and  
     very far inside

sculpting sounds from silence

. . . exploring inner space.

The concert received a favourable review by Theodore Price in the *Democrat and Chronicle* the following day. Price concluded that it was not only a 'highly stimulating and innovative evening' but also the 'most meditative, contemplative evening of music all season.'<sup>34</sup> The live recording of the concert, preserved in the Eastman Audio Archive at the Sibley Music

<sup>32</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> Benson in Wagner, *A Bio-Bibliography of Composer Warren Benson*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore Price, 'International art, meditative music,' *Democrat & Chronicle*, 23 May 1971, p. 5B.

Library, reveals the rich musical dialogue that occurred between the performers that night.<sup>35</sup> As Price states in his review: 'An idea, a comment would be made, as if one player wished to initiate musical conversation. Then another would respond, often molding a chip of the original block of sound. Gradually the players, in joint, extemporaneous colloquy, let the piece take its own shape.'<sup>36</sup>

THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

NEWS FROM THE **Eastman School of Music**  
**50th Anniversary Festival**

May 11, 1971

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**"SCULPTURED SOUND"**  
**IN KILBOURN MAY 22**

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The Composition Department of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music will present a special concert entitled "Sculptured Sound" on Saturday, May 22, at 8:15 p.m. in Kilbourn Hall.

The unique concert program will include the performance of original, extemporaneous music, emitted from a multitude of exotic instruments situated on stage -- instruments which include gongs, pots, cymbals, bells, and drums from all over the world.

Featured performers for the evening will include John Wyre and John Engleman, both of whom are members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and the local two-man ensemble named NEXUS. The two musicians who comprise NEXUS are Robert Becker, a graduate assistant at the Eastman School, and William Cahn, member of the Rochester Philharmonic.

The Saturday night concert is open to the public without charge. More information is available by contacting the Eastman School Concert Office at 275-3037.

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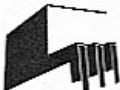
Figure 10. Press release for 22 May 1971 performance in Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music. Courtesy of William L. Cahn.

<sup>35</sup> A reel-to-reel tape recording of the first Nexus concert on 22 May 1971 is located in the Eastman Audio Archives, Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester (Call numbers AM 1091, AM 1092, AM 1093, and AM 1094).

<sup>36</sup> Price, 'International art, meditative music,' p. 5B.

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Guest Editor	THE ROCHESTER UNITARIAN	May 18, 1971
Elizabeth Trow		Vol. 24, No. 4

*10:30 Family Service*  
 SUNDAY, MAY 23  
 10:30 a.m. Adult Worship Service and Church School  
 11:30 a.m. Activity Period

Adult Service: MUSIC OF THE SPHERES, Richard S. Gilbert, speaking  
 (An experience in sound and silence from the East)

"...Great drums and gongs  
 hung on spiked frames  
 sounding to perfect rule and rote  
 about the King's calm crescent moat.

Tone unto tone, of drum and gong.

About the King's calm crescent moat  
 the blind musicians beat lizard skin  
 as the tune weaves out and in."

from the Shih Ching

Sunday we have an unusual opportunity for a rare experience. Warren Benson of the Eastman School of Music has arranged for us to experience the unique musical talents of four young men (two from the Toronto Symphony and two from the Rochester Philharmonic --THE NEXUS) who specialize in percussion music with particular emphasis on the East. They have assembled an incredible collection of musical instruments and will share their music and thoughts with us during the family and the adult celebrations and will be available to talk about their music during the Activity Period. Interspersed with their music, I will be reading selected poetry to heighten an experience of inward vision. THE NEXUS was featured in "Upstate New York" on May 2, an article that appears on our bulletin board. I urge you to take advantage of this opportunity. rsg

Figure 11. Publicity for 23 May 1971 performance at the First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York. Courtesy of William L. Cahn.

The success of the Kilbourn Hall concert was repeated at the Unitarian church the following morning and the seed was sown for a new chamber ensemble which thrived on improvised music. It would be some time, though, before the group adopted the name 'Nexus' and Russell Hartenberger and Michael Craden joined its ranks. But as can be seen from the first concert, a connection already existed between the players, a bond that dated back many years as their lives had been entwined by various musical ensembles, institutions, teachers, and events.

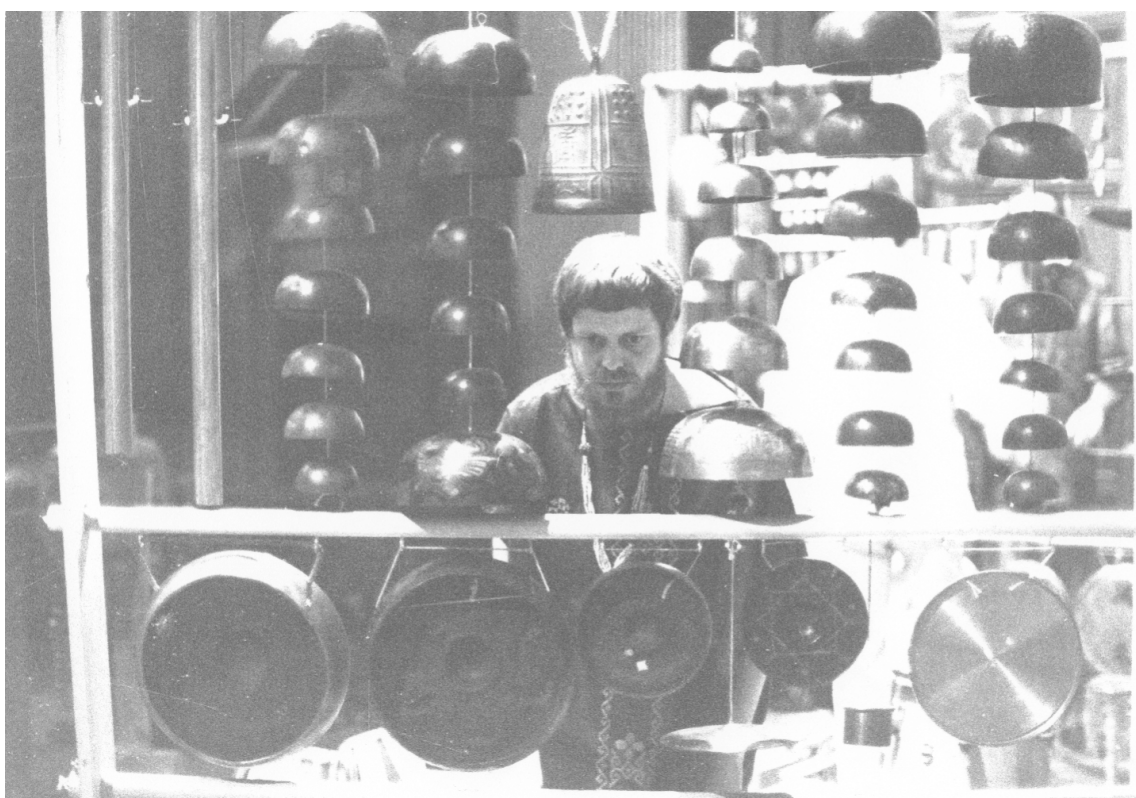


Figure 12. John Wyre (top) and Robin Engelman (bottom) in Kilbourn Hall for the 22 May 1971 concert. Courtesy of Warren Benson.



Figure 13. Bob Becker (top), Warren Benson (bottom left), and Bill Cahn (bottom right) in Kilbourn Hall for the 22 May 1971 concert. Courtesy of Warren Benson.

## Nexus

Craden and Hartenberger joined the ensemble in 1972. Becker observed that 'in those days the group just sort of happened.' He continues by saying that 'the next thing I knew Michael was at our next concert and was sort of part of the group.'<sup>37</sup> Cahn reflects on Craden's joining the group for the first time:

. . . [W]e were to be joined for these concerts by Michael Craden, whom I had only [recently] met at John's house. . . . I had heard Michael improvise with a group called, I CHING in Toronto, and virtually everything he had played had been an aesthetic challenge to my ear. He was a self-taught musician in marked contrast to my formal conservatory training, and his approach to everything was one-hundred and eighty degrees away from mine, from the technique of his stroke to his audacious and arrogant style. . . . I was also aware that I *had* to listen to him . . . that there was something irresistible in his playing that was pulling me in.

Our final concert [at the Shaw Festival] was on the 13th of August at St. Mark's Church, and by that time our improvisations were flying, and Michael had totally fried my brains with the uniqueness of his approach to music. . . . I noticed that the faces in the audience were riveted on Michael. They were listening to and watching him with intensity *and enjoying it!* There was a beauty in that perception which clarified my thoughts, and enabled me to begin to enjoy it too. The sudden awareness of the power of his communication helped me to cross over a barrier that had prevented me from grasping the challenges of his self-taught musicianship. He had changed my definition of music, and though I realized that I still couldn't really define what 'music was' [sic], I knew that my definition was somehow broader than it had been.<sup>38</sup>

Hartenberger also performed with the ensemble for the first time during the Shaw Festival.<sup>39</sup> Hartenberger's initial impact on the group was much milder than Craden's, though, as he shared similar musical aesthetics and background to the other members of Nexus.

By 1972, the group had finally settled on the name 'Nexus,' as Wyre explains:

We didn't choose that name until 1972 when we sat down here after I built this dome one afternoon and tried to come up with a name that we all agreed on. And we couldn't agree on anything. And ultimately the only thing we could agree on was 'Nexus', so that became the name of the group. But it wasn't an extension of what Bill and Bob had been doing, it was just the name that we chose. . . .

When we researched the basic Latin roots of the word, it was very meaningful—link, connection, bond. There's so many ways that music links us together, links us with our audience, it's a connection to the universe. There's so many things that were relevant that made sense. Harry Partch was an inspiration for all of us. The fact that he used the word brought it to our attention. But how he used it, for me, and how he used a lot of

<sup>37</sup> Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Cahn, 'NEXUS – On tour,' p. 44. Cahn's original version (sent to the author) has quotation marks around 'music' rather than 'music was' in the second paragraph. It appears an error occurred during the process of publication.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* Becker had invited Hartenberger to perform in the Kilbourn Hall concert in May 1971, but he was not available that evening as he was travelling to Ghana to study African music. (Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000).

things for me is a great mystery. . . . So I didn't get 'nexus' as a meaningful word from Harry Partch, but he brought it to my attention like he did to Bill and Bob.<sup>40</sup>

The name 'Nexus' was chosen by an ensemble that had grown out of friendship, musical empathy, and a fascination for exploring improvisation and sound. The ensemble provided a medium for the members to explore music in a free and unrestricted environment, away from the expectations of the musical establishment, the rules and regulations of the military, and the limitations of being relegated to the back of an orchestra. Embracing the sounds of different cultures through amassing a collection of musical instruments from all over the world enabled the members of Nexus to free themselves from Western musical expectations. A door had opened to another worldview whereby percussion was an integral and vital part of music. Exploring the sounds of these instruments through improvisation gave them the opportunity to create a new dialogue between themselves and with an audience. Through improvisation, they found a collective voice, a voice which gave them the freedom to be themselves. The members of Nexus embraced these new opportunities to explore music and sound.

### *Conclusion*

This discussion of some of the early collaborations among the members of Nexus shows that it is misleading to claim, as Wagner does, that before their concert in Kilbourn Hall, the members of Nexus had only performed together once at Marlboro. The improvisations at Marlboro and Kilbourn Hall are significant in that they mark the defining moments of the beginning of a group—the initial bonding at Marlboro, and the consolidation of this bond in a public space at the Eastman School of Music. However, much social and musical interaction had occurred in the intervening years to the point where they shared a number of characteristics: they had all acquired sizeable collections of non-Western musical instruments; they all felt comfortable improvising on these instruments; they even had a similar taste in clothes. Essentially, they had moved from being disparate individuals to being a group of people who were connected on many different levels, and who could express this connection in the form of musical dialogues with each other—listening, responding, and collaborating. At this stage, they were still finding and articulating their voice, or rather their distinct yet concordant voices. It was the originality and brilliance of this heteroglossic assemblage that Benson recognized, and which led him to risk presenting them on the stage of an elite music school. Thirty-one years later, Benson tried to articulate the newness, the non-traditional spirit of Nexus' inaugural concert in Kilbourn Hall:

It's very difficult to convey in print how *strikingly* different this concert was! *All* improvised. *Very* unwestern! Percussion heretofore was so orchestral or military in solo or perc[ussion] ensemble material. *This* was *neither*, as I knew it would be, knowing 3 of them intimately—John Wyre not 'til later. I did *everything but* play that first concert in Kilbourn and the next morning in my church.<sup>41</sup> (Benson's emphases)

This concert marks the centre point of our paradox about tradition. This is the point where Nexus embarked on a new path and began to create a new tradition in chamber music. Yet through the members' links to the past—to each other, to Rochester, to the Eastman School of Music—it remained under the wings of the old.

<sup>40</sup> Wyre, Interview with author, 3 August 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Benson, Letter to author, Summer 2002.