

ALAN ABEL 85TH BIRTHDAY CONCERT

85 YEARS “YOUNG” AND GOING STRONG

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LAUREN VOGEL WEISS

When a professional concert series—such as the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society (PCMS), whose performers this season include pianist Emanuel Ax, soprano Dawn Upshaw, and the Juilliard [String] Quartet—presents a program featuring an afternoon of percussion music, percussionists all over the world can smile in acknowledgement that the instrument—make that instruments!—are being accepted in the world of chamber music. Add in PAS Hall of Fame percussion ensemble Nexus and the percussion section of the world-renowned Philadelphia Orchestra and it was a *very* special occasion. This concert celebrating the 85th birthday of percussion legend and PAS Hall of Fame member Alan Abel was a “once-in-a-lifetime” event!

The concept for this special concert began almost three years ago. Don Liuzzi, Principal Timpanist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, had played for PCMS several times since he joined the orchestra in 1989. When asked to plan a concert celebrating his 25 years with the orchestra, his first thought was, “What better way to celebrate percussion in Philadelphia than with Alan Abel?”

Liuzzi studied with Abel while earning his Master of Music degree from Temple University. “Nearly one



These 12 percussionists performed on the Alan Abel 85th Birthday Concert in Philadelphia on November 16, 2014: (L–R) Russell Hartenberger, Pablo Batista, Rolando Morales-Matos, Bill Cahn, Bob Becker, Alan Abel, Phil O’Banion, Don Liuzzi, Angela Zator Nelson, Chris Deviney, Garry Kvistad, and Tony Orlando. *Photo courtesy of Chris Deviney.*



Chris Deviney (left) and Don Liuzzi (right) presented Alan Abel with a special cymbal during intermission

third of all professional orchestral percussionists in the United States

have been influenced by Alan Abel, either directly or as students of his

students,” Liuzzi estimated. The concert also served as a fundraising effort for the Alan Abel Percussion Scholarship Fund, which supports future generations of percussionists at the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University. “Several of Alan’s former students, including me and Chris Deviney [Principal Percussionist with the Philadelphia Orchestra], started this scholarship a few years ago with Alan’s help and leadership. This concert had a big impact, and we’re close to passing the \$50,000 threshold.

“Once we decided to celebrate Alan, I had to choose a program,” Liuzzi continued. “Around this same time, I was contacted by Bob Becker about playing timpani in some of his chamber pieces, along with the other members of the [Philadelphia Orchestra] section. I was also thinking about some pieces by Maurice Wright.” Wright, the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Music Composition at Temple, had written “Movement in Time” for Liuzzi, a piece he recorded on an album of the same name [Equilibrium Recordings] and dedicated to the memory of his first mentor, Charles Owen.

“Wright had also written an octet for percussion,” added Liuzzi, “and I thought, ‘What if we got Nexus and the whole Philadelphia section to play with Alan conducting?’ The idea just grew from there.”

Thanks to a residency at the Curtis Institute of Music, where Nexus—Bob Becker, Bill Cahn, Russell Hartenberger, and Garry Kvistad—did several master classes as well as a performance of Steve Reich’s “Drumming” and “Music for Pieces



Phil O'Banion conducting “Cadence” by Russell Hartenberger



Alan Abel playing bass drum in Bob Becker’s “Mudra

of Wood” on Nov. 14, 2014, all the parts of the musical puzzle had come together.

“Our rehearsals were *fun!*” Liuzzi remembered with a smile. “I was grateful that everything went so well. It was an honor to play chamber music with my colleagues in the Philly Orchestra and with Nexus.”

So, on Sunday, Nov. 16, 2014, in the Perelman Theater of Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center, a near-capacity

audience of over 600 people celebrated Alan Abel’s 85th birthday with a concert of percussion music. [In reality, it was closer to Abel’s 86th birthday on Dec. 6, but who’s counting?!

The program opened with Liuzzi and Philadelphia Orchestra first violinist Hirono Oka performing Wright’s “Grand Duo.” The second piece, “Day and Night” by Rolando Morales-Matos, featured the composer on Latin

percussion and Liuzzi on timpani and djembe.

The next piece, Becker's "Preludes: No. 1 (Praise the Voice) and No. 2 (Escape the Pattern)" featured the Philadelphia Orchestra percussion section—Christopher Deviney on marimba, Liuzzi on timpani, Angela Zator Nelson on vibraphone, and Anthony Orlando on glockenspiel—along with Oka (violin), Lisa-Beth Lambert (violin), Che-Hung Chen (viola), Yumi Kendall (cello), and pianist Natalie Zhu, all under the direction of Phillip O'Banion.

"The performance of 'Preludes' in Philadelphia was the first time I heard a performance of one of my compositions sound exactly as I heard it in my mind when I wrote it," Becker shared after the concert.

"As I listened to Don, Angie, Tony, and Chris perform in Bob's piece, I was happily reminded that there *is* a Philadelphia Orchestra sound," added Bill Cahn. "It's the sound I remember from hearing the orchestra many times during my high school days in Philadelphia in the 1960s—full, resonant, and round—accomplished by a wonderful sense of touch on *all* of the percussion instruments."

Following intermission, it was time for another member of Nexus to serve as the composer: Russell Hartenberger wrote "Cadence" for the Temple University Percussion Ensemble, under the direction of Phillip O'Banion, and dedicated to Alan Abel. The performers included the four Philadelphia Orchestra percussionists along with Nexus. I have known the Abels since I was eleven," Hartenberger elaborated. "They



Alan Abel (right) playing the bass drum/drum duet with Bob Becker (left) in "Mudra"



Alan Abel conducting Maurice Wright's "Octet"

were like a second set of parents to me. The street beats I used in this piece were composed by Mr. Abel for our high school percussion section. I thought it would be an appropriate tribute to include them.

"Mudra" showcased Becker as soloist and composer, joined by the other members of Nexus, along with Deviney and the honoree himself, Alan Abel. "Even though I had never played this part before, I had a wonderful time playing the bass drum/drum duet with Bob," Abel said. "I didn't know until the first rehearsal that Bob was playing on a one-

headed drum, so I ended up playing on my one-headed 'half a bass drum' that Bill Reamer built for me to fit into my music studio." Abel uses the 8 x 36 inch drum to train students how to play various bass drum repertoire found in auditions and concerts. "It looks like a gong drum, which is used a lot in Europe, especially Britain, where they tend to tune the heads pretty tight," explained Abel. "It's a different sound over there. But I try to keep my drum in the normal bass drum range."

The smiles on the faces of the performers playing with Abel were

evident to everyone in the audience. “What could be better than playing that drum duet in ‘Mudra’ with Alan Abel, the god of the bass drum?” Becker exclaimed after the concert. “It was a fantasy that finally came true!”

The final piece on the program brought Nexus and the Philly percussionists back to the stage for Wright’s “Octet,” this time under the baton of Abel. Although dominated by keyboard percussion, other instruments included two sets of timpani, harmonicas, and balloons!

“I really enjoyed conducting that group,” said Abel. “There were so many sixteenth notes that it would have been very easy for them to get off, so I had to really nail it down for them with my beat; none of this Ormandy ‘delayed beat’ stuff! It had to be right on the money. It was fun trying to lay that out so they could play more easily. I also tried to get into the spirit of the music, and when there was a crescendo, show it in my animation. I was just amazed at how well all these people played and how special the concert was.”

The concert concluded with an encore, “Little Rhumba”—a trio devoted to bongos—by Morales-Matos. The composer was joined by the eight other percussionists, plus Abel, O’Banion, and special guest Pablo Batista on congas. While the other percussionists played bongos and took turns soloing, Abel followed the popular *Saturday Night Live* mantra of “more cowbell!” “I brought a big cowbell just to play on the beat, almost like a metronome,” Abel explained. “Then when it was time for me to do my solo, I used



Alan Abel conducting Maurice Wright’s “Octet,” when the instrumentation called for balloons!

a small cowbell where I was able to create different timbre changes with my left hand, by muffling and unmuffling, in addition to all the various rhythmic ones that I did with my right. It was really a lot of fun.”

The audience fulfilled the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society’s mission of creating a dialogue between composers, performers, and listeners through music. There was truly a “magical connection” in the hall between the attendees, most of whom were *not* percussionists, just music lovers, and the percussionists on stage.

Following the concert, most of the performers, along with many of Abel’s family and friends, and even some former students from as far away as Japan, celebrated this special occasion with a dinner at a nearby restaurant. “None of this would be possible without my wonderful wife’s support,” Abel said emphatically. He was referring not only to the amazing afternoon of music everyone had just shared in Philadelphia, but

also to over six decades of music-making that he has spent with listeners and performers alike. And with many upcoming concerts this spring—from Mahler’s Third in Houston to the Naples Percussion Summit to rejoining his old orchestra in Philadelphia for a week in both February and March—Alan Abel promises to continue making music.

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