

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF
AUSTRALIA

Report by Nick Parnell - 2011 Churchill Fellow

The Dame Roma Mitchell Churchill Fellowship

*To investigate the development of classical vibraphone performance in the USA,
Europe and UK.*

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Signed by Nick Parnell

Dated: 21/3/12

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INTRODUCTION

In September and October of 2011, I had the privilege of travelling to the USA, Europe and the UK to investigate the development of classical vibraphone performance. The study enabled me to observe the latest musical, technical and instrument construction trends and developments. I achieved this through lessons & meetings with some of the world's leading percussionists including Ed Saindon and Emmanuel Sejourne. I visited a selection of the world's leading music institutions such as the *Berklee School of Music* (Boston) and attended many performances and workshops by ensembles including the *London Symphony Orchestra*.

I would firstly like to express my gratitude to the Churchill Fellowship Trust and acknowledge the wonderful support and generosity of the late Dame Roma, who has made this particular fellowship possible. I also wish to thank the many people who were generous in sharing their time, skills and expertise with me during my fellowship. Thank you.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description: To investigate the development of classical vibraphone performance in the USA, Europe and UK.

Project Overview and Highlights

During the course of my fellowship, I travelled to the USA, UK and Europe and met with world leaders in vibraphone performance. It was fascinating to observe the different schools of playing that have emerged in different parts of the world.

One of most innovative performers I met was Ed Saindon from the *Berklee College of Music* in Boston, USA. Ed has developed a style and technical approach to the instrument such that I did not encounter anywhere else. Everything, from the way he manipulates his mallets to the sound he strives for, was quite unique. Ed was generous in sharing many dampening techniques he uses to achieve his musical goals in this area.

Other highlights included working with Emmanuel Sejourne in France on his *Concerto for Vibraphone and Orchestra*, and attending the *London Symphony Orchestra's* open rehearsal and lecture program on world renowned composer Steve Reich.

One of major conclusions I drew from the project, is that there is an opportunity for classical percussionists to develop and improve vibraphone performance and education practices not only in Australia, but around the world. This can be achieved by classical players adopting many of the techniques and practices used by jazz vibraphonists such as Ed Saindon and Gary Burton.

Many of the techniques & ideas I learnt will be disseminated in workshops and private tuition at both a school and tertiary level. These ideas will be implemented in my recordings, performances and tours across Australia.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Chicago – USA

Ken Sieloff – Musser Instrument Factory

New York – USA

New York Philharmonic

Gary Burton – Gary Burton New Quartet

Eric Beach – So Percussion

Christos Rafalides - Manhattan Vibes

Michael Lipsey - Talujon Percussion & Queens College of Music

Gamelan Music Project - Indonesian Embassy

Boston – USA

Ed Saindon – Berklee College of Music

Dave Samuels and Caribbean Jazz Project - Berklee College of Music

Gary Burton New Quartet - Berklee College of Music

Strasbourg – France

Emmanuel Sejourne - Conservatoire Cité de la Musique

Berlin – Germany

Evelyn Glennie – International Percussion Soloist

London – UK

David Hockings – Royal College of Music

London Symphony Orchestra

BBC Symphony Orchestra

Colin Currie – International Percussion Soloist

Adrian Spillet - Guildhall School of Music & Drama

Christopher Baron - Lion King Musical

Amy Dickson – International Saxophone Soloist

Genevieve Wilkins – Ensemble Bash

Richard Benjafield - Guildhall School of Music & Drama

REPORT

In many ways, my trip confirmed my suspicions in regard to the standard of classical vibraphone performance in the world today. Put simply, the performance practices amongst classical vibraphonists & percussionists are not as developed as they are amongst jazz vibraphonists. There are simple and understandable reasons for this. Firstly, when a student trains as a classical percussionist they are required to master a number of different instruments including timpani, snare drum, marimba and multiple-percussion. Often students who train in the jazz idiom spend most of their time and energy focusing solely on the vibraphone. This allows them to develop a more in-depth understanding of how to achieve the best results with the instrument. Secondly, there is a lack of repertoire in the classical idiom for vibraphone. Therefore, many classical percussionists tend to focus more on solo marimba or orchestral performance. The results of this are two distinct schools of playing – the first used primarily by jazz vibraphonists and the second used by classical vibraphonists. These are discussed in this paper.

While this trend is as I suspected, it has been beneficial to study how and why they have occurred, and consider what direction vibraphone performance should head in the future. I absorbed a variety of information from everyone I encountered during the course of the fellowship, all of which has contributed to my knowledge & understanding of vibraphone performance. It is worth noting that I also learnt a tremendous amount about percussion performance and teaching more generally. This information was extremely beneficial and aspects of it are included in this report.

Chicago

The first visit on my trip was to the *Musser* instrument factory in Chicago. I was met by Ken Sieloff, chief engineer of the plant. *Musser* is one of the world leaders in percussion instrument manufacturing. This particular plant produced primarily *mallet percussion* instruments including marimbas and vibraphones. I received a tour of plant and was able to observe how the instruments are constructed, what materials are used and the very complicated process of tuning bars. I was impressed by the

attention to detail that went into the construction process. For example, when marimba bars are tuned, the duration of the resonance of each individual bar is carefully measured to ensure that each descending note sustains a little longer than the previous. This results in their marimbas having a perfectly balanced sound across the entire keyboard.

One of the most interesting developments that Musser was working on at the time of my visit, which has now been released, was the construction of a new 3 octave student model marimba. This instrument does not contain resonators and therefore is easy to transport and more affordable for students. The width of the bars is consistent with their professional models, which means when a student upgrades they do not have to adapt to playing a completely different size instrument. The development of this model will be beneficial for vibraphone, marimba and xylophone education in Australia. The cost of mallet percussion instruments has always been problematic for schools and students alike, thus preventing growth in percussion performance at this level. This instrument, and others similar to it made by other percussion manufacturers, will help learning the vibraphone, marimba or xylophone a more affordable option.



Picture Above: Ken Sieloff (left) and Nick Parnell (right) at the *Musser* Factory, Chicago, USA.

New York

The New York music scene is incredibly diverse and vibrant. This was made evident in talking to many percussionists about their work and hearing of the variety of musical activities they are involved in. One of the leading NY jazz vibraphonists that I was able to spend time with was Christos Rafalides from *Manhattan Vibes*. I attended several of Christos' performances and talked to him extensively about his work. Christos' performance style is dynamic and very musical. He is careful not to over-use the depression of the vibraphone's pedal which can result in too much ring. As I later learnt, Christos had learnt from Ed Saindon at the *Berklee College of Music* and therefore had adopted many of Ed's approaches to the instrument. I will discuss these in more detail later in the report as they form an important part of my research.

One of the other aspects of Christos' performance that I hadn't seen before was the use of an amplification device that attached to the vibraphone frame beneath the bars. I observed this in the context of a big-band performance and I was impressed with the sound it produced. This is a device that could be used to make the vibes an instrument that could be used in more musical situations where it is difficult to produce the volume required to be heard, such as rock bands.

While in New York, I met percussionist Michael Lipsey from *Talujon Percussion* and who also is Head of Percussion at the *Queens College of Music*. Michael was very generous with his time and knowledge. I joined him at some of his rehearsals and teaching where I was able to talk to him not only about his work but the NY music scene in general. One remark he made in particular stayed with me. To paraphrase Michael he said, "New York is the only place in the world where you can specialise in a particular area of percussion performance and survive". What this said to me is that if you do not live in NY, you need to be multi-skilled and able to play in a variety of musical settings to make a career. This thought was echoed by a number of other percussionists I met on my trip, particularly in the UK. As I reflected on this, I concluded that as a general rule this is extremely good advice for Australian percussionists given our country's relatively small population and somewhat limited work opportunities.

The highlight of New York was seeing world famous vibraphonist Gary Burton live in concert at the *Blue Note* jazz club. While I've seen Gary perform a number of times, I always learn something new from watching him. His approach to the instrument is one of most convincing I've ever encountered. Gary's technique and power enables him to strike the bars strongly. When this approach is combined with the type of mallets he uses (medium hardness), it produces a beautiful sound which is appealing to the listener. He has a masterful control and understanding of pedal and dampening techniques which results in excellent phrasing and expression.

Gary's model of playing (for the purposes of this report I'll call it the *jazz vibes style*) is very different to how I observed many classical vibraphonists approach the instrument. However, Burton's school of playing has undoubtedly been validated over the years by his ongoing success and respect he has gained from jazz and classical musicians alike. This *jazz vibes style* has been emulated in some manner by most leading jazz vibraphonists in the world today.



Photo Above: Gary Burton - Live at *Blue Note*, New York, USA.

Boston

By far the most interesting time in my trip was at the *Berklee College of Music* in Boston with vibraphonist Ed Saindon. While Ed was a student of Gary Burton, he has gone on to develop his own unique approach to playing the instrument. He is now considered one of the world's leading vibraphone educators.

Ed has firstly developed a way of manipulating the mallets which is based on using minimal effort. The two inner mallets (No. 2 & 3) are held between the index finger and thumb and are played in a similar fashion to that of a drum stick. The mallet falls onto the bars and then is allowed to rebound just as a drum stick would as it strikes a drum. Ed grips the outer mallets (No. 1 & 4) very loosely, allowing a similar motion to occur. I was impressed by the power he was able to produce through this method. He uses a medium-soft mallet which produces a full and pleasing tone even when the bars are struck with a degree of force. The other noticeable advantage is the relaxed style and absence of any tension in his body, which contributes to a good sound and will undoubtedly prolong his playing career.

I was also was impressed with Ed's approach to mallet and pedal dampening. Firstly, he is very particular in controlling the resonance of the vibraphone. He often uses little to no depression of the pedal at all. Secondly, he effectively utilises mallet and hand dampening techniques, and has developed control of these more than most other players. The end result is that he is able to manage the resonance of the vibraphone extremely effectively, facilitating a far greater level of expression and more phrasing possibilities. Some examples of his dampening techniques are available through the *Percussive Arts Society* website (www.pas.org).

I was encouraged by seeing Ed's approach, as it is in many ways similar to what I have been striving for in my own playing. The fact that someone of Ed's calibre aims for this type of sound, reinforced my own belief that my approach to the instrument was correct.



Photo above: Ed Saindon (left) with Nick Parnell (right) at the *Berklee College of Music* in Boston, USA.

While Ed is primarily a jazz musician and educator, he also plays and teaches his students a number of classical compositions. The main purpose of these is to develop the student's ability to control the articulation of individual notes while having the pedal fully depressed. The repertoire includes a variety of Baroque works by J. S. Bach which were originally intended for flute, lute or keyboard. These compositions present a variety of musical problems which require the performer to use different technical approaches to produce a satisfying musical result. These works and others similar to them are excellent vehicles to develop one's vibraphone skills. Given that there is a lack of classical repertoire that exists for the vibraphonist, these types of compositions are ideal. Another useful resource he uses is Dave Friedman's *Vibraphone Technique - Dampening and Pedaling*, which again helps the student to develop their technique.

France

In Strasbourg, France, I met with percussionist and composer Emmanuel Sejourne. Emmanuel has written one of the few vibraphone concertos in the world today: *Concerto for Vibraphone and Orchestra*. This is a composition which I learnt a year earlier, so I was delighted to be able to spend time working on it with him. I performed the piece while Emmanuel played the orchestral reduction part on the piano. We then worked through particular ways in which he wanted his concerto to sound. For example, when bowing the vibraphone, he cautions not to take too much time with the outer sections. His bowing technique was also much quicker than mine and sounded better. I have since adopted this approach. Emmanuel explained while the music in the first movement must “float”, the phrases should always land on the beat. In the second movement, he has particular pedaling preferences which were not marked on the score. These created variety and gave certain sections extra rhythmic drive. This approach was a clever use of the pedal.

It is always a helpful experience working with the composer of a work to gain a greater understanding of how they intended their music to sound. The time spent with Emmanuel will enable me to produce performances of this work which are more stylistically correct than what I would have otherwise done.



Picture Above: Nick Parnell (left) & Emmanuel Sejourne (right) – Strasbourg, France.

London

I was exposed to quite a different musical experience in London than that which I experienced in the USA. The events I attended and people I met had much more of a focus on classical percussion, rather than jazz. The rich tradition of classical music which permeates the UK has a noticeable effect on the direction in the music conservatoriums and performers' outlooks.

I attended a number of lectures and performances presented by the *London Symphony Orchestra*. One of the most interesting was a series devoted to the music of world renowned composer Steve Reich. Reich is well known for his use of percussion and I have performed much of his music before, making the series particularly relevant to me. For example, it was a delight to watch Steve Reich and Neil Percy (principal percussionist of the *London Symphony Orchestra*) perform *Clapping Music*, a work which I have performed countless times.

Another performance I attended was presented by percussionists from the *London Symphony Orchestra* and students from the *Royal Academy of Music*, which included Reich's *Variations for Vibes, Piano and Strings*. It was an enjoyable performance. I noticed the way which the vibraphone was played was very different from what I observed in the USA. This style (let's call it the *orchestral vibes style*) is characterised by the use of hard mallets, minimal use of mallet or hand dampening and the pedal fully depressed for much of the time. The end result sounded very different to how I imagined it would if it were played in a *jazz vibes style*.

This *orchestral vibes style* was prevalent in almost every performance I saw in the UK. It is also prevalent in most orchestral or classical chamber music performances in Australia. Part of the reason behind this approach is that hard mallets project sound and when the pedal is fully depressed it produces volume, which helps the instrument be heard over the many other surrounding instruments. The downside of this approach is that tone quality is often compromised. Excessive ringing of the notes occur which is not particularly pleasing to the ear. It can also detract from the clarity of phrases.

Berlin

I also made an unscheduled trip to Berlin to see world-famous Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie perform a new percussion concerto. In her performance, she too played the vibraphone in the *orchestral vibes style*. Again it was a very different approach to how the vibraphonists I encountered in the USA play.

London

What is evident is that the way the vibraphone is taught and played in both the USA and UK is very much dictated by tradition. In America, vibraphone traditions were born from its use in jazz music and have continued to develop. In the UK, vibraphone performance practices seemed to have evolved from its use in orchestral music and played by percussionists who are required to perform on many percussion instruments.

However, in saying this, some music education institutions are beginning to incorporate vibraphone teachers who have a background in jazz into their programs. This is the case at the *Royal College of Music* where David Hockings holds the post of Head of Percussion. David has Jazz vibist Anthony Kerr teach specific aspects of vibraphone performance to classical percussion students.

I believe this approach to education is a wise one for a couple of reasons: Firstly, given that most jazz vibraphonists have a more in-depth understanding of the instrument than the general classical percussionist (due to the fact they have focused on the vibraphone solely rather than dividing their attention between many percussion instruments), a more refined performance practice will be taught. In the future, this will no doubt result in vibraphonists who are able to approach the instrument idiomatically. They will be able to implement the most suitable techniques and approaches depending on the musical situation to achieve a musically convincing outcome. Presently in Australia, the practice of having specialist teachers for individual percussion instruments is rarely used.

While in London, I met with many other percussionists including Adrian Spillet (Guildhall School of Music & Drama), Christopher Baron (percussionist from the Lion King), Genevieve Wilkins (Ensemble Bash) and Richard Benjafield (Guildhall School of Music & Drama). All of these musicians have spent time, or still are, very successful free-lance percussionists. The one thing in they had in common is they don't say no to work offers. In London, there was very much an attitude of say yes to the work offer first, then work out how to do it. This is reflective of the competitive nature of the music scene there. This attitude was also evident in my discussions with David Hockings from the *Royal Academy of Music*. His aim of the percussion course is to make students employable. So he trains them to be a "jack of all trades". This approach certainly works to help make percussionists employable and is an attitude we need to adopt more here in Australia.

The downside of this approach is, while not impossible, it is very difficult to become exceptional at one or more of the percussion instruments. This is a factor in why there is a difference in the standard of jazz vibraphone players and classical percussionists who play the vibraphone amongst other instruments.

Another aspect of my time London which I benefited from, was all the terrific non-percussion performances I attended. I attended many concerts at *Wigmore Hall*, the *Barbican Centre* and the *Southbank Centre* – all of which were incredibly inspiring. I gained a deeper understanding of the stylistic subtleties of many composers' music including J. S. Bach, F. Chopin and S. Reich. As a musician, one of the best ways to learn is to see great performers in action. Spending time in London gave me this opportunity and it has made me a better musician.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

It is my opinion that, generally speaking, jazz vibraphonists have a more developed understanding than classical percussionists of how to approach the instrument in a convincing manner. This presents an opportunity for the classical percussion community.

Classical percussionists and teachers should learn and adopt many of the techniques and approaches developed by jazz vibraphonists such as Ed Saindon and Gary Burton. The choice of mallets, hand and finger dampening, use of dead-strokes and pedaling techniques are all areas which require greater thought and study by the classical community. We should also use this information to develop our own approach that suits the unique musical situations that classical musicians encounter.

These developments would result in far better musical outcomes in classical vibraphone performance than are currently been achieved. This shift in direction needs to begin at a school and university level. Therefore, it is important that percussion teachers understand these techniques and are able to teach them. If they are not, it would be beneficial for the head of a percussion department to bring in an expert in this field for a period of time to disseminate this information as is been done at the *Royal College of Music*. This is an approach which Australian universities in particular should adopt. Once teachers are adequately equipped, a new generation of classical vibraphonists will gradually emerge and raise the over-all standard of performance.

Resources including classical compositions by J. S Bach and D. Friedman's *Vibraphone Technique - Dampening and Pedaling* would be beneficial tools of study for students in percussion departments across Australia.

I will continue to work in education from a school through to a university level to share the specifics of well developed vibraphone performance practices, through workshops and private instrumental lessons. As a percussion community in

Australia, we need to raise our expectations of what are acceptable vibraphone practices to be more consistent with the level of teaching and performance that is occurring in places such as New York and Boston.

I will continue to perform in venues across Australia and record albums, which will demonstrate to the wider public how musical and compelling a vibraphone can sound when played well. I will implement the new techniques and ideas I have encountered on my trip and will continue to strive for a higher level of performance.