

# Creston, Milhaud and Kurka:

## An Examination of the Marimba Concerti

By Kathleen Kastner

**W**HEN ONE EXAMINES THE concerto repertoire for an instrument such as the piano or the violin, even a cursory glance reveals dozens of compositions spanning hundreds of years. The marimba concerto, however, is a rare phenomenon with the short history of only 54 years. This article will briefly examine the first three marimba concerti, the circumstances surrounding their composition and performance aspects that point to the emergence and evolution of early marimba technique.

### CRESTON

The first major work composed for the marimba was the *Concertino, Op. 21*, written by Paul Creston in 1940. This concerto was commissioned by Miss Frederique Petrides, who was at that time the director of the 30-member all-girl Orchestrette Classique in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances of the commission also involved Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne, who was timpanist for Petrides' orchestra and a skilled marimbist as well. Stuber had studied with Clair Omar Musser in Chicago and George Hamilton Green in New York and was the soloist for the premiere performance of Creston's *Concertino* on April 29, 1940 in New York's Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.

Paul Creston, born in 1906, studied piano and organ but had no training in theory or composition. The *Concertino*, his only work for marimba, is in three movements in a fast-slow-fast format. The rhythmic nature of the outside movements is reminiscent of the early ragtime xylophone style of George Hamilton Green, in that its motion is propulsive, utilizing syncopation, dotted rhythms, accents and double stops. The feature that distinguishes Creston's two-mallet outside movements from its xylophone counterpart is the character of the harmonies, which is less predictable than the tonal xylophone style. The slow and lyrical second movement is scored for four mallets except for the middle cadenza-like section, which requires only two mallets. The harmonic vocabulary consists pri-

marily of major and minor seventh chords, often in close position.

Vida Chenoweth recounts a conversation with Creston in which he described his approach to marimba technique. She explained, "He went to the piano and whatever he could do with four fingers or the pointer fingers of either hand became the technique he used for the marimba."<sup>2</sup> This approach would certainly explain the predominance of the close voicings in the second movement. It would also affirm the relatively limited tessitura of individual sections in the outside movements, as well as the gradual movement up and down the varied registers of the instrument, as opposed to the use of wide leaps that are found in later works written for marimba.

The overall impact of Creston's work was two-fold. The commission and subsequent performance of this first marimba concerto brought with it the dubious characterization of the instrument as a "novelty," particularly in the context of the traditional classical concert season. While generally complimentary of Creston's composition, critics described the premiere as, "an interesting experiment," "the novelty of the evening" and "at first blush might read like a manifestation of the silly season." (See illustrations 1 and 2 for reviews of the premiere.) This description, perhaps partially a result of the xylophone's novelty ragtime roots, followed the marimba for two decades as performers and composers struggled to win recognition for this newcomer to the concert hall.

The other aspect of Creston's influence is substantiated by the continuing popularity and success of the *Concertino*. The work is fundamental in the teaching repertoire of the marimba and is performed more than any other concerto for the instrument. Creston's opus, therefore, is not only the first of its genre, but it has become one of the most significant as well.

### MILHAUD

The second concerto composed for the marimba includes a vibraphone and was writ-

Illustration 1. *Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1940

#### Orchestrette Classique Gives Its Final Concert

*Concertino* by Creston is Feature of Program

A stimulating and enjoyable concert was given last night at the Carnegie Chamber Music Hall by the Orchestrette Classique, in its final event of the season. This group of thirty players, under the skilled direction of Frederique Petrides, has done much to advance the cause of women instrumentalists. There are men in the orchestra—woodwind and horn players. But the roster is primarily feminine.

Last night's program included Beethoven's overture to "The Creatures of Prometheus," well played by the ensemble, and John Barbirolli's concerto for oboe and strings on themes of Pergolesi. The Barbirolli work, an agreeable trifle, enlisted the services of Lois Wann as oboe soloist. She played capably, but mechanical difficulties with a double reed prevent her from equaling her own past performances here.

Seven short Rumanian dances by Béla Bartók, scored for small orchestra, followed the oboe concerto. They proved to be incisive music, sparing of structure and generally successful. Of particular interest were the "Buciumesha" section, with incidental soli by Hinda Bamett, the orchestra's concertmaster, and the first "Maruntel," which employed the old Balkan device of shifting three-four and two-four time.

Mozart's D major serenade and Haydn's "Clock" symphony were further works on a generous and well made program. But the novelty of the evening was the first performance of a concertino for marimba and orchestra by Paul Creston. This composition, commissioned by Miss Petrides, had been awaited as an interesting experiment. Actually, Mr. Creston surpassed expectations and produced a sturdy composition of inherent musical interest. The darting technique which is natural to the marimba carried the instrument through the sprightly first and last movements; while a haunting vibrato, often produced by clusters of mallets, brought color and atmosphere to the second division. Ruth Stuber, the soloist, played brilliantly, and she was expertly accompanied by Miss Petrides's Orchestrette Classique. —R. L.

ten by Darius Milhaud in 1947. *Concerto, Op. 278 for Marimba and Vibraphone* (one performer) was commissioned by Jack Connor and had its premiere with Connor as soloist and Vladimir Golschmann conducting the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on February 12, 1949. In 1952, Milhaud revised the work for solo piano and orchestra and renamed it *Suite Concertante, Op. 278B*. Comparison of both scores reveals the original marimba/vibraphone score essentially intact as the right-hand piano part; the remainder of the solo piano part is derived from newly composed left-hand material, added octaves and expanded or re-voiced chords.

Concerning the circumstance of the commission, Connor selected Milhaud because he liked the composer's music and knew that he had previously written individual concerti for percussion, harmonica and clarinet, and he believed Milhaud would be receptive to the idea of writing a work for marimba. In response to Connor's written request, Milhaud replied that "he didn't think that the marimba would be well-received in a concerto or other performing context."<sup>3</sup> Connor persisted and eventually traveled to Mills College in Oakland, California, where Milhaud was teaching. Connor played both the marimba and vibraphone for Milhaud, performing Bach, some jazz and other examples that Milhaud requested. After hearing Connor play, Milhaud agreed to write the work for him, the result of which was the *Concerto*. Connor described the style as being "a sort of French version of Latin jazz," which was, in Connor's view, a distillation of what he had played for the composer at Mills College.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding performance practice issues, Milhaud was quite specific about timbral variances, indicating precise mallet types in 14 different places in the three-movement work.<sup>5</sup> Midway through the first movement, Milhaud calls for a five-measure passage (ms. 54-59) to be played with the hands (without mallets). Connor admits to ignoring this indication when he performed it, as the sound did not project adequately.<sup>6</sup> In two separate places in the third movement, Milhaud calls for the marimbist to play briefly with the base end of the mallet shaft, creating an echo

## CONCERT OFFERED BY ORCHESTRETTE

Concertino for Marimba and  
Orchestra Featured at the  
Carnegie Chamber Hall

RUTH STUBER IS SOLOIST

Creston Composition Dedicated  
to Frederique Petrides,  
Conductor of Program

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

A concertino for marimba and orchestra—at first bluish, that might read like a manifestation of the silly season. But don't laugh; it wasn't. Such a work by the American composer Paul Creston had its first performance last night at the concert of the Orchestrette Classique, directed by Miss Frederique Petrides, at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall. The soloist was Miss Ruth Stuber, who is a tympanist in the orchestra.

The program stated flatly that this concertino "is the only work ever written for this instrument in serious form." Until some musicologist produces evidence to the contrary, the claim will be considered justified. It may not be the last work, because Mr. Creston made it an effective vehicle for his ideas and because Miss Stuber played it with skill as well as art.

effect. The precision of Milhaud's indications demonstrate his willingness to explore new sounds. Credit can also be given to Connor, as he undoubtedly used a variety of mallets in communicating the potential of the marimba and vibraphone to Milhaud.

Another aspect of performance technique that must be mentioned is this writer's overwhelming sense of the strong pianistic influence that Milhaud must have brought to the compositional process of this piece. This is evident in the consistent double-stave scoring throughout the work. In the majority of instances, the use of double staves is clearly unnecessary, illustrated by the numerous close position chords or double stops that could be more

### Composition Is Discussed

The marimba has its limitations as a solo instrument, but Mr. Creston wrote well within them. He is, moreover, a composer with ideas and invention. Of the three movements—marked "Vigorous," "Calm" and "Lively"—the first seemed the freshest and most original in thematic material. All three are worked out with technical assurance, with the marimba player receiving ample opportunity to display virtuosity. Mr. Creston writes with rhythmic bite and variety and, occasionally, with a delightful lyrical strain.

Miss Stuber, looking trim and chic in a fluffy yellow gown, was agreeable to behold as well as to hear. She made light of the concertino's difficulties. She managed a delicately graded tone, and she knew how to sustain a broad phrase and how to skip up and down the length of the marimba with grace and speed. The work was thoroughly prepared. Miss Petrides and her players joined with Miss Stuber in a smartly turned out interpretation. Mr. Creston was on hand to acknowledge the applause.

### Bartók Work Played

Miss Petrides, who has built her chamber orchestra into a well-drilled, responsive ensemble, has made a habit of live programs. Last night she offered Beethoven's "Men of Prometheus" Overture, Op. 43; John Barbirolli's skillful Concerto for Oboe and Strings on Themes of Pergolesi, with Lois Wann as the oboist; Béla Bartók's Rumanian Folk Dances for Small Orchestra, Mozart's Serenade in D and Haydn's Symphony in D, known as the "Clock" symphony.

The Bartók dances have a lusty vitality. The seven movements are short and incisive and have a peasant like earthiness. The Orchestrette, which is almost all female, may have looked polite and even demure, but the playing was appropriately gusty.

easily read on one staff. Also, except for 20 measures, the entire solo part utilizes the same clef in both the right and left hand.<sup>7</sup>

With respect to the impact of the *Concerto*, it is important to acknowledge Milhaud as the first major 20th century composer to contribute to the limited repertoire of the marimba. However, despite his established reputation and prolific output, the critics in attendance at the premiere chronicled the event as "a generous measure of novelty" and described the composition as "charming though slight."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, neither educators nor performers have provided Milhaud's opus with the exposure and popularity achieved by other marimba compositions.

Orchestra of America  
Gives Second Program

Orchestra of America, Richard Korn, conductor. Vida Chenoweth, marimbist. Carnegie Hall, Nov. 11:

"In Memoriam: . . . . . Douglas Moore  
Fantasy, "A Victory  
Ball" . . . . . Ernest Schelling  
Symphony No. 3 . . . . . Charles Wuorinen  
(First Performance)  
Concerto for Marimba and  
Orchestra . . . . . Robert Kurka  
(First Performance)  
"In Memoriam: the Colored  
Soldiers who Died for  
Democracy" . . . . . William Grant Still  
"Chant 1942" . . . . . Paul Creston

This appropriate "Veterans' Day" program, chosen by Mr. Korn for the Orchestra of America's second concert in a series of five devoted to the performance of neglected works by American composers, was even more rewarding in the listening than it promised on paper. Since the orchestra's debut concert last month, Mr. Korn has welded his forces into a unified and cohesive whole.

The new Wuorinen Symphony is a block-buster of a piece—its opening chordal blast all but blew the roof off the building. The 21 year old composer, I gather, is one of today's "angry young men". If he makes the orchestra sound at times like the bloated "mammoth" organs that were once so popular, his symphony is written from an original and arresting angle. Composed in the summer of 1959, it is built on a pitch sequence and a chord progression. Divided into two parts separated by a pause, the same thematic material is used in each with different treatment. The first is a set of variations, and the second a modified rondo. The work ends quietly with a coda that is based on a "fragmentary quote from a piece by Josquin des Près written in memory of his teacher Okeghem". Sombre in mood, it made a fitting memorial piece for the occasion.

The Kurka Concerto for Marimba, the other new work, provided the leavening lightness needed to allay the general sombre mood of the eve-

ning. Written in 1956 for Vida Chenoweth, the concerto exploits the instrument's fascinating tonal and rhythmic possibilities to the full. Exotic colors, haunting melodic bits, jazzy rhythms and acid harmonies are interwoven into a score that fairly scintillates. It also makes virtuosic demands on the soloist and Miss Chenoweth, moving back and forth with the ease and grace of a ballet dancer while manipulating with uncanny skill one, two, three and four mallets at a time, as the occasion demanded, gave the work a superb premiere. Miss Chenoweth has not only circumvented the instrument's limitations, she has raised the marimba to concert hall status, and in doing so has also placed herself in the front rank of young American concert artists.

The Moore, Still and Creston works impressed one as sincere and often moving outpourings of men who were inspired by idealism no less than the horrors of war. Neither of them attempted to capture the sardonic cynicism engendered by war itself, as Ernest Schelling did in his "A Victory Ball". This may be only a period piece, but it is unique of its kind. Schelling's Fantasy is not only a compelling nightmare of a score, but it builds up to a terrifying climax in which the gay waltz tune of the whirling victors is embellished with the most mocking of martial trumpetings and drummings, as the spirits of the dead soldiers enter to join in the madcap revels. If any work deserves a place on a Memorial Day, or Veterans' Day program, this is it. —R. K.

he arranged to have the composer and marimbist meet. As a result, Kurka agreed to write for the marimba. Before beginning composition of the *Concerto*, Kurka spent several sessions observing Chenoweth's practice. She recalls him saying, "Just go through as many pieces of music as you can. I just want to watch and listen." After she finished, his primary comment was that he didn't realize the marimba was such a visual instrument.<sup>9</sup>

Kurka composed the first two movements as a unit and gave them to Chenoweth so she could begin working on them. She recounts, "I told him I was having a dreadful time covering that amount of territory at that speed. I remember how very pleased he was that I was having such a struggle, especially with the double notes that crossed hand-over-hand and then back-and-forth, bass to treble. He enjoyed that; the more visual it was, the better he liked it." Because of the extreme difficulty, he offered to make changes, but Chenoweth replied, "It is terribly hard, but it isn't impossible."<sup>10</sup>

For anyone who has performed the *Concerto*, or had the opportunity to see a live performance of the work, the visual aspect is clearly evident. Wide, abrupt leaps require extreme physical agility and control, which is further complicated by the fast tempi. Some marimbists, in their attempt to simplify these types of difficulties, have suggested that the player use four mallets instead of two in the first movement to minimize the disjunct motion.<sup>11</sup> While this is indeed possible, the composer's concern for the visual effect should be a strong influence in any technical decision. Kurka's delight with the visual aspects of the marimba is also evident in the slow second movement, where the four-voice chords are very widely spaced, resulting in strenuous reaches for each hand, as well as between the hands. The effect of this wide spacing is not only to challenge the physical grace of the player, but to create a unique timbral color formerly unexplored in the solo literature.

Without minimizing Kurka's compositional talent, it is this writer's viewpoint that Vida Chenoweth's influence was extremely significant, in that her diligent pursuit of every detail of the score in spite

**KURKA**

The style and demands of the third concerto under consideration differ tremendously with what has been previously discussed. In 1956 Robert Kurka completed his *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra* and dedicated it to Vida Chenoweth, who premiered the work on November 11, 1959 in Carnegie Hall with the Orchestra of America under the direction of Richard Korn.

Kurka, born in 1921, studied composition briefly with Otto Luening and Darius

Milhaud, but was primarily self-taught. The circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Concerto* focus on marimbist Vida Chenoweth and her efforts to persuade composers to write new works for the instrument. She remembers reading an article that appeared in *Life* magazine in May of 1956 that summarized the careers of the nine most promising young composers in the United States. That list included Robert Kurka. Chenoweth's New York manager was a friend of Kurka and

## Concerto For Marimba Has Premiere Here

### ORCHESTRA OF AMERICA

**CARNEGIE HALL**  
 Conductor, Richard Korn; soloist, Vida Chenoweth, marimba player. The program  
 Fantasy for Orchestra, "A Victory Ball," Ernest Schelling  
 Concert for Marimba and Orchestra (first performance) ..... Robert Kurka  
 Symphony No. 3 (first performance). Charles Wuorinen  
 In Memoriam ..... Douglas Moore  
 In Memoriam: The Colored Soldiers who Died for Democracy ..... William Grant Still  
 Chant of 1943 ..... Paul Creston

By Jay S. Harrison

Concertos for Marimba are no more often encountered than pterodactyls in Times Square, but one of them turned up last night at a Carnegie Hall concert presented by the Orchestra of America under the direction of Richard Korn. The work, composed by the late Robert Kurka, was given its world premiere with Vida Chenoweth as soloist, and the piece, quite frankly, provided the only breeze in an evening that was otherwise mighty stuffy.

The marimba—for those so grossly miseducated as to have no knowledge on the subject—is an instrument of the xylophone family which is hit by mallets of wood, felt or wool. Tubular resonators, attached to the underbelly of the "keyboard," amplify the sound of each struck slab, the color variety thus available to the performer being far greater than one might imagine. Depending on the mallets used and the skill of the player, the marimba has a timbre span ranging from a gentle and luminous tap-pop to a sound not unlike that created by whacking two milk bottles together. In any case, the instrument is an exotic one and hearing the lengthy piece written for it is, as I have said, something of an occasion.

To his credit, Mr. Kurka located innumerable means of displaying the marimba at its best, and his concerto is everywhere lively and zestful. It is mostly diatonic, filled with smart and leaping tunes, and it exploits the agility of its soloists to the utmost. Fortunately, Miss Chenoweth is a real-life virtuoso who, no matter what the demands made on her, missed not a note and managed, further, to wring every possible shade of sonority from the wooden keys laid out before her. There was exhausting bravura to her work and genuine musicality as well. It was a star performance and a bewitching one—no question of that.

The other new work of the evening, Charles Wuorinen's Symphony No. 3, is a hulking blockbuster of a piece that is rather more pretentious than it is successful. It is over-scored, lousy with rhythm and its aggressive chunks of harmony are effective on first hearing and diminish in vitality in direct proportion to the number of their repetitions. But what is most seriously wrong with the work is that it clamors for attention and thereupon rewards it with nothing more than dense orchestral onslaughts. Still, Mr. Wuorinen is young and at twenty-one cannot be expected to have learned that the composition of symphonies requires more than the ordering of noisy, disparate elements. Indeed, there were flashes in work that told of a volatile imagination and a keen ear for texture. Doubtless, in time, these gifts will ripen and develop.

The playing of the Orchestra of America, which is largely a pick-up group, was quite first-rate and Mr. Korn had vigor to his beat and authority to his interpretations. On the whole, the program, which was given in observance of Veterans' Day, was rather soggy and spiritless, but the renditions themselves were in no part to blame for this.

of its excessive difficulty contributed to a final result that pushed marimba repertoire and performance technique into a new realm. This is supported by several critics who indicate that Chenoweth had little problem executing any aspect of the work, and furthermore, she did not have to compromise to achieve her artistry. (See illustrations 3 and 4) This perspective provides an answer to those who characterize Kurka's work as "unmarimbistic...notes that do not fit into the common sticking procedures...the marimbist could possibly leave out or drop a few notes...to achieve...flow or balance."<sup>12</sup> As one reviewer summarized, "The score makes virtuosic demands on the soloist and Miss Chenoweth...with uncanny skill...gave the work a superb premiere."<sup>13</sup>

One other observation should be noted with regard to the status of the marimba. Critical accounts of the premiere include the phrases "add to unusual concertos" and "concertos for the marimbas are no more often encountered than pterodactyls in Times Square." (See illustrations 4 and 5) These statements prolong the notion of the instrument as a novelty; however, also evident in these reviews is a sense of increasing respect as the *Concerto* is favorably compared to the other works on the program. Admittedly, this tribute is probably due more to Kurka and Chenoweth than to the marimba itself, but it marks the beginning of a new era for the marimba.

### END NOTES

1. Shirley Hixson, "An Interview with Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne," *Percussive Notes*, Fall, 1975, p. 22.
2. Interview with Vida Chenoweth, October, 1987.
3. Ron Fink, "An Interview with Jack Connor, Marimba Virtuoso," *Percussive Notes*, Winter, 1978, p. 26.
4. Ibid.
5. Specific mallet types include (English translation): linen thread mallets, medium rubber mallets, hard rubber mallets, yarn mallets, with hands (without mallets) and with base end of mallets.
6. Ron Fink, p. 26.
7. The following measures utilize both

## Music: Unusual Concerto

Kurka's Work for Marimba Performed on Program by Orchestra of America

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

ADD to unusual concertos: one for marimba and orchestra. It was played last night in Carnegie Hall by a personable young lady named Vida Chenoweth; it had been composed by the late Robert Kurka; it was receiving its first performance, and it was programmed by Richard Korn, who was leading the Orchestra of America in its second concert devoted to American music.

The 1935 edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians cautiously describes the marimba as "a curious instrument (said to possess great musical capabilities) in use in the southern part of Mexico \* \* \* a large table-like frame, five, or six feet in length, on legs, supports a graduated series of strips of hard and seasoned wood."

As played by Miss Chenoweth, the instrument decidedly does possess musical possibilities. Kurka's concerto is tuneful and attractive—a bit haphazard in style perhaps, what with jazz elements, diatonic harmony, a first movement featured by wide-ranging skips that had nothing in common with the other movements—and Miss Chenoweth succeeded in making music out of it, not indulging in a stunt.

She also is quite a showman, one who gracefully poses before the instrument, who hammers away prettily

and who has the balance of a ballet dancer. Apparently she is an expert virtuoso: no false notes were detected, her rhythm was superb, her confidence epochal.

The other first performance of the evening was Charles Wuorinen's Third Symphony, a work that shows a decided advance over his Second. It sounds more mature; and if it lacks melodic personality, at least it has control and is the product of a good technician. It is dissonant although tonal, abounding in complicated rhythms and reveling in a juiced-up orchestration.

Also on the program were Douglas Moore's "In Memoriam," Ernest Schelling's "A Victory Ball," William Grant Still's "In Memoriam" and Paul Creston's "Chant of 1942." (The evening was listed as a "Veterans Day Program.")

The Schelling was especially interesting. A generation ago it was fairly popular, but within recent years it has dropped from the repertory. There is good reason for its disappearance; it is a thoroughly second-rate piece. But it was rather nostalgic to hear; and if nothing else it served to throw some light on the listening habits of a previous era—which, after all, is what Mr. Korn's series is all about.

Mr. Korn led his orchestra with clarity, and his players produced a mellow tone. It would appear that they have got over the rigors of the opening concert.

bass and treble clef: in the second movement, measures 58-60, 98-99 and 139-142; in the third movement, measures 21-24, 27, 89-92, 95 and 103.

8. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 13, 1949.
9. Interview with Vida Chenoweth.
10. *Ibid.*
11. David Eyler, "Robert Kurka's Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra," *Percussionist*, Fall, 1979, p. 25.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Musical America*, December 1, 1959, p. 37. PN



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