By Gary France

John Beck is a name that needs no introduction. He is a percussion living legend. His name is synonymous with percussion living legends. As a composer, Beck has appeared with the Eastman Percussion Ensemble (1962-2006), in a tour of America with the Aviation Concerto as a percussion soloist (1977), and has participated in numerous guest conducting and percussion clinics in the United States and Europe.


Among the honors Beck has received include being named a Phi Epsilon Muionian of the Year (1976); the Monroe County School Music Association Award (1996); Eastman’s Eisenhower Award (1997); and the American Academy of Arts and Culture’s Greater Rochester Award for contributions to the arts (1999). He was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 1996.

The Percussive Arts Society presented him with an Outstanding Service Award (2002). At Eastman’s 2003 Commencement, he was awarded the Edwin Peck Curtis Award for excellence in undergraduate teaching. The Commission Project presented him with the Jo Award for outstanding service to music education in 2004. Since retirement in 2008, he has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award from the New York State School Music Association (2008), the Percussionist of the Year Award from the New England School of Percussion, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Percussive Arts Society (2008).

“Percussion Matters: The Life at the Eastman School of Music,” (2011) chronicles the history of percussion at the Eastman School of Music as well as providing autobiographical information about one of the world’s greatest percussion educators, and industry icon. John Beck (J.B.) provides us with a fascinating snapshot of his early years while he was mentored by William Street, stories about his contemporary’s and his students, most all who also became pioneers in percussion performance practice throughout the USA and internationally. The eight chapters and 28 illustrations share insights into the thoughts and beliefs of a career that spanned a lifetime that included performing, teaching, the administration of a university percussion program and providing inspirational leadership to the Percussive Arts Society.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this insightful book and would like to share with you a few of the quotations from students that, for me, provided a snapshot into the soul of one of the world’s most famous percussion departments where the combination of like-minded passionate students, under the mentorship of a personal professional, can result in synergy—“where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts—.”

... George Clinton is the Godfather of Funk. James Brown is the Godfather of Soul, and John Beck is, hands-down, the Godfather of Percussion...”

... he was always there to listen to me play no matter what kind of music I was playing..."

... you personally saw the potential in each student and let him or her explore for themselves, without judgment, winning them of the essentials of good playing..."

... allowed us to be ourselves as a person and as a percussionist, which is why his legacy of students is a vast spectrum of diverse musicians..."

... As Bill Street would have said, “It’s about the drum and the answer, don’t you think? As JB took over the percussion department, the excellent Eastman focus on orchestral percussion and the importance of “doing it all well” continued and grew, as did our percussion ensemble experiences. Great music, great teaching and now the great network of Eastman percussion collegiates..."

I recently caught up with John Beck and had the opportunity to ask a few questions.

I have really enjoyed your release of The Complete Works of William Street. I find the exercises both fun and challenging! Can you shed some light on the prescribed tempos, some are quite easy in the stratosphere. Was Bill Street able to play at these tempos or were they a guide or life-time goal to strive for?

Bill Street would write exercises and solos for us to play in our lessons. He never wrote a book. Harrion Powley and I thought it would be a nice tribute to William S. to have this material and put it in a book. Harrion and I searched our libraries and the between us of found the material he had written. Did we play the exercises at the temps suggested? Probably not! Bill Street did have a sense of tempo and let us know when the piece was done. Of course there had to be a big drum solo ending. Of course there had to be a big drum solo ending. This also gave me a concerto to play when I do clinics.

“Concerto for Drum set and Percussion Ensemble was written because I...”

John Beck’s recently published book Overture for Percussion was because I needed a piece for the beginning of a percussion ensemble concert. I wanted to write a piece that reflected all the potential of the percussion instruments – melody and rhythm and also start the concert in the same manner as an overture does for an opera.

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Concerts for Drum Set and Percussion Ensemble was always on my mind as I felt the drum set could be showcased in a percussion ensemble setting. I wanted to write a piece that had Jazz influence in the beginning, a slow atmospherical middle section and then a fast twinkle style ending. I wanted something to say in this area. I also put interested in writing for solo timpani because I was not that impressed with what was being written. Rudimental drumming was also an interest and I have several solos in that area.

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like the Concerto for Drum Set, had been on my mind so I set out to compose a concerto for timpans. I wanted to show the melodic potential of the instrument, the dramatic potential and the potential for the player to improvise upon a given set of notes. The first and last sections are written in a strict note-wise manner but the middle section is written in a special type of notation with only suggested tempos and markings. Various mallets are used as well as hands and snare drum sticks. This all takes place in the ensemble improvises on a given set of rhythmic patterns. This also gives me a concerto to play when I do clinics.

Jazz Variants was written to show the potential of the percussion ensemble in various styles of music – Rock, Jazz and Show. Since percussion instruments are used in all styles of music this ensemble illustrates that potential. Besides it is fun to play. I have written solos for snare drum, timpani and multiple percussion and one piece for marimba. I enjoy writing for percussion. One thing I always have in mind when writing is that it must be musical, have some educational value, incorporate some improvisation if appropriate, and be fun to play for both the player and the audience.

I remember being present, as a student, at the very first Percussive Arts Society International Convention in 1976, which you hosted at the Eastman School of Music. For me, this career inspiring moment cemented my passion for PAS as an organization. During your tenure as President of the Percussive Arts Society you did much to reach out to our international chapters. Is there a message that you would like to send to young percussionists through out the world about the Percussive Arts Society?

The past presidents having been involved in all aspects of the Percussive Arts Society over many years have the insight into concerns of the society from the membership, administration, Hall of Fame recommendations, to the involvement with the Percussion Industry. They also remain on the Board of Directors to give their input. Their collective knowledge assures that future matters are handled appropriately, and be fun to play.

The PAS Rhythm! Discovery Center in Indianapolis, U.S.A. also encompasses these values. In 2012, USA Today identified our interactive museum as “one of the top 10 places in the nation for hands-on music making.” We are proud to offer experiences to immediately connect with people and educators to drum enthusiasts and the curious public. As percussionists, we have a unique opportunity to immediately connect with people through our instruments and music. We are excited about the potential for outreach and scholarship that the Discovery Center provides and thank all those members who have donated instruments, music, historical artifacts, and their time to Rhythm!

The future is exciting for PAS with new leadership and new ideas. I look forward to working with our international partners and the new Executive Committee team to continue to make PAS a leader among music service organizations as we promote percussion education, research, performance and appreciation throughout the world.

PAS values highly DRUMscene / PERCUSscene magazine’s outstanding commitment to our industry and I am proud to celebrate our shared dreams. I also applaud the efforts of Chapter President Gary Francz and the PAS leadership team to promote percussion education and performance in Australia. Join PAS, subscribe to PERCUSscene, get involved with your PAS Australia Chapter state representatives, attend one of Australia’s five National Days of Percussion and make plans to come to the biggest Drums and Percussion event in the world, PASIC 2014. Connect to the almost eight thousand like-minded people who are passionate to share their dreams and experiences about drums and percussion.

Endnotes: