



AUSTRALIAN PERCUSSION ICON SERIES

# COLIN PIPER

By Gary France

Colin Piper began his musical studies with piano lessons at the age of six. He attended the Sydney Conservatorium High School and subsequently studied piano and percussion at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music. He joined the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 1968, having graduated from the ABC's National Training Orchestra scheme.

He was a founding member of the Sydney-based percussion ensemble Synergy, which has toured extensively throughout Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, including performances at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (1990), International Percussion Convention (Taipei, 1996) and Expo 2000 (Hannover). Synergy has performed at several Adelaide

Festivals, and with the Sydney Dance Company in Sydney, Brisbane, Taipei and Tokyo. He stepped aside from Synergy in 2006 and retired as Chair of its board, a position he held for 10 years.

At the 1976 Adelaide Festival he participated in performances of Hans Werner Henze's *El Cimarron*, in the presence of the composer, and also took part in performances with Luciano Berio in 1975, and with Olivier Messiaen during the composer's 1988 tour to Australia.

Colin Piper also maintains a career as a conductor, working extensively with community and youth orchestras and

regularly conducting SSO education concerts.

He has conducted most of the major state orchestras, the Sydney University Symphony Orchestra, Barrier Reef Orchestra and the Sydney Opera House Orchestra, as well as conducting a studio orchestra in recording sessions with Australian group INXS in 1991.

He was the coordinator of the Australian National Academy of Music's first percussion program in 1998 and was a member of the first National Score Reading Panel, the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts Music Committee (1999 and 1994), and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Board (1996 to 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Can you please tell me about your early musical years? How did you become interested in percussion? What educational resources were available? Who were your early mentors/teachers etc.?

I started learning piano at age 6 from the St Joseph's Nuns, Summer Hill. FORTUNATELY, Dagmar Roberts, my AMEB examiner when I was in 6th class, asked what my plans were...I said I hoped... HOPED...to get into the Sydney Conservatorium High School. She asked which piano teacher... we had no idea...She rang my parents with an introduction to Nancy Salas, that changed my life I'd say. After High School I entered the Diploma

Course on piano and needed 2nd instrument so I chose Timpani with Alard Maling. Don't know why I chose that really, it appealed I guess. I was required to be part of the Con Orchestra immediately (thrown in the deep end; there was no one else!) LOVED playing in the Orchestra and really learned on the job in the student orchestra. Richard Miller was there as well, so we shared some terrific times. Alard was a superb musician, but in Sydney in 1965, there was not any real percussion School, unlike in Adelaide where Richard Smith was starting to turn out the Askill generation. I think I am right in saying that back then, it was only in Adelaide that one could do a major in percussion, certainly it was

well into the 70/80s that it became possible at the Sydney Conservatorium. Nancy Salas; I really owe my career to her, I was a good pianist, but I think eventually she turned me into a better musician. Of course, I only realised that many years later and hence, my comment at the very beginning, Dagmar Robert's introduction to Nancy when I was 12, probably changed my life. So true, I met Dagmar a few times late in her life, and she said she always followed my career...I was very moved by that. I should add that when you use the word mentor I'd like to add people (I only include percussionists, but there were many other musicians as well) who have inspired me to be better: Michael Askill,





Rebecca Lagos but especially Ian Cleworth; I rate him as the finest musician/percussionist I have ever come across. When he became Principal in 1986, he inspired us all I think, and NOT ONLY THE PERCUSSION SECTION!

How did you become interested in classical music? Were you also interested in the popular music of the day? rock etc.?

Dad was a part time musician, so I grew up (in the 50s) with lots of big band records, Benny Goodman was one of Dad's favourites. I was never really exposed to "Classical" music until I was at the Con High School. The SSO School's concerts in 1960-1 were the first orchestral concerts I ever heard. Yes, I listened to plenty of pop music in the era (saw the Beatles and 'Stones in the mid 60s). Family friend in Orange had large LP collection, so on visits I used to listen to lots of them, also a mate in my class's father had a large collection, so from him I heard all the great pianists; Schnabel, Bacchaus, Kempff etc etc., I got to hear the repertoire that way, as well as buying and starting my own collection of records... about 1962...with Mum and Dad's support of course!

How did you secure your position with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra?

I auditioned successfully for the ABC Training Orchestra in 1968 and spent most of the time in the SSO as a casual and then on contract from September that year. Permanent appointment letter came in March 1970; I had to audition again then, but my official date of joining is/was Sep '68

What instruments did you play in the percussion section? Was there a group that you eventually settled into?

Always liked the SOUND! Exploring sounds, making them relevant to the repertoire being performed... same instrument, different repertoire, different sound needed. Lou Tutschka, Principal when I joined was great that way, he made lovely sounds on the instruments, his best playing days were behind him on the early 70s though, but he was a great mentor. I have never had the blinding technique of an Askill/Cleworth etc. but I think I was able to make up for that in many musical ways.

It is widely known that you are quite an accomplished conductor. How did you become interested in conducting and where did you train? I was involved with Sydney Youth Orchestra as a

percussion tutor from the beginning (mid 70s); Joy Lee wanted to form a "Parents Orchestra" in 1981 and asked if I'd take it. I said no for 6 months, eventually gave in and did it. Loved it, it seemed to work and I learned a lot! I had done a lot of Percussion Ensemble conducting, and of course had seen and experienced a lot in the SSO: Peter Seymour, SYO founder and head of Music at Sydney Grammar where I was teaching was really helpful; we used to talk about conducting in the staff room a lot, so if I had to pick someone out, it was he who was a mentor in some way. Mackerras gave me some good advice as well, he said "NEVER knock back a chance to work with living breathing people", or words to that effect. So, my conducting 'career' has been one of serendipity! I have never gone out seeking gigs, but so many have come my way and I always remember Mackerras' words!

Congratulations on your recent retirement from the SSO, can you please tell me what were the highlight performances, conductors, concerts etc. during your illustrious career?

Greatest musical memory was the tour (with ACO) with Olivier Messiaen and his wife Yvonne Loriod; they came in 1988. A couple of those photos have pride of place in my music room. Conductors; Kurt Sanderling, Charles Dutoit, Lorin Maazel, Arvid Jansons and Maris Jansons stand out when they came as guests, van Otterloo when he was our chief, DeWart did a lot for the SSO, though he

was a difficult personality. Ashkenazy probably the finest musician ever to stand in front of the SSO in my time, but certainly not in any way the best conductor; sometimes it was terrifying, but some of the music-making was unforgettable.

What musical activities are you involved post SSO? The Ku-ring-gai Philharmonic Orchestra concert last year and again this year (they liked me last year so invited me back); Synergy's 40th anniversary last year (nice they wheeled me out for that). Did a bit of conducting for SYO, am the patron of Lane Cove Youth Orchestra. Having been a performer at a high level for so many years, I get great pleasure going to concerts and listening and WATCHING all the new generation, SSO or SYNERGY concerts as well. I am not really missing the playing in a way, it doesn't get any easier you know! I see the people pretty regularly which is good, and many of them are and will always be lifelong friends, but in retirement I have also opened up, and had TIME to open up, a whole new area of my life, my interest in cars, maritime stuff and so on.

What advice can you give to emerging artists and students who are embarking on a career in music? Stick with it; never say no to anything;

(Endnotes)

1 <http://www.sydneyssymphony.com/about-us/meet-the-musicians/percussion-timpani/percussion/colin-piper.aspx>



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