

REBECCA LAGOS

Rebecca Lagos began her musical studies on the piano and later studied percussion with Richard Miller. She gained her Bachelor's degree from Indiana University, Bloomington, under the tutelage of George Gaber, and on her return to Australia she worked with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra as Acting Principal Timpani, before taking up the position of Principal Timpani with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. In 1987 she was appointed to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as a member of the percussion section.

That same year, she joined Sydney-based percussion ensemble Synergy. Over the next decade she worked with musicians including Trilok Gurtu, Evelyn Glennie, Dave Samuels, David Jones, Mike Nock, and Kazue Sawai. Synergy has premiered and recorded works by numerous Australian composers, and has toured Australia, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region (including performances at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, where they gave a private performance for Toru Takemitsu of his percussion trio, Rain Tree). She has toured Australia and the Asia-Pacific region with Synergy and the Sydney Dance Company for their Synergy With Synergy collaboration. The group has also recorded concertos for percussion ensemble by Carl Vine and Toru Takemitsu with the SSO. Rebecca Lagos has performed with the Seymour Group, Sydney Alpha Ensemble, Australia Ensemble, TaikOz and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, (including a performance of Messiaen's From the Canyons to the Stars, in the presence of the composer). In 2006, she performed with the SSO in the world premiere of Nigel Westlake's percussion concerto, When the Clock Strikes Me, and was subsequently awarded the prize for Best Performance of an Australian Composition at the APRA 2007 Classical Music Awards. She is also the resident cimbalom player for the SSO. Rebecca Lagos was appointed to the position of Principal Percussion with the SSO in 2006¹.

By Gary France



Congratulations on your inspirational career with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Can you please tell me about your preparation journey for this awesome job.

When I started on percussion in Canberra there was very little formal teaching available. I joined the Training Orchestra (the junior branch of the Canberra Youth Orchestra) when I was 10 years old and there was a lady called Peg Mantle who looked after all the percussion in that organisation. She gave me a few basic tips on how to hold the sticks correctly and how to strike the instruments (e.g. play up off the drum, not into it; how to bounce the sticks for a double stroke roll on the snare drum and the "glancing blow" on the bass drum!). Before long I was playing in the Canberra Youth Orchestra and by the time I was 13 I was playing in the Canberra Symphony Orchestra. I was still playing the piano (my first instrument) and I enjoyed singing in the Canberra Children's Choir and playing in recorder ensembles. I even played the bassoon for a couple of years! The Canberra School of Music offered me a scholarship to study percussion but at that time (mid 70's) there was no percussion lecturer, so I turned up every week for lessons with the French Horn teacher who would set me a few pages from the Goldenberg book to learn. I was pretty much making it up as I went along for a while there.

In those days, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra toured to Canberra regularly so I took the opportunity to have a lesson with Rick Miller and Michael Askill from the SSO and Barry Quinn from the MSO while they were in Canberra. This led me to travel to Sydney to have formal lessons with Rick Miller whenever I could. Around this time I also went to a couple of National Music Camps and played one season with AYO which was a marvellous opportunity to meet and learn from other players around the country. When I was applying for Tertiary Studies I was still unsure of my career path so I auditioned for the Queensland Conservatorium and the Queensland University on Piano. I sent an audition tape to the Manhattan School of Music (on Percussion) and applied to the School of Music of Indiana University, Bloomington. By sheer coincidence, the head of IU's Jazz department, David Baker was visiting the Sydney Conservatorium. It was arranged for me to go to Sydney and play my audition for IU live for Mr Baker. When I turned up for the audition, David surprised me by bringing along jazz drummer Ed Soph as his assistant, so the heart rate immediately went up! They taped the audition to take back to George Gaber, percussion teacher at IU. Then it was entirely up to fate...if I got the International Fellowship from the Australia Council, I would go to the US to study percussion; if I didn't, I would go to Queensland and study Piano. Needless to say, the Australia Council Fellowship came through and I ended up at Bloomington Indiana.

Before I left for the US I had a brief stint playing Principal percussion in the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra and I would like to thank Michael Askill for recommending a very green 18 year old for the gig! Michael really kick-started my orchestral career with this recommendation.

My time at Bloomington Indiana was wonderful. A huge music department meant there were enough students to form three symphony orchestras, three jazz big bands, a Modern Music Ensemble, a percussion ensemble and plenty of opportunities to get together in your own groups. George Gaber was the professor of percussion at that time and he was a tough teacher in some ways but at the same time he loved to tell his students a story about jazz great Peter Erskine. It's best quoted from Peter Erskine directly.....

"The date was 1966, and the place was Morehead, Kentucky where a summer band camp was being held. The faculty consisted of many IU professors as well as principle (sic) players from several of the top U.S. symphonies. Mr. Gaber gave me a private lesson that I'll never forget.

With my parents in attendance (I had just turned 12) and with Mr. Gaber sensing my performance anxiety, placed a piece of music on the stand in front of the snare drum where I was standing ... he went back to his desk, puffed on his cigar, and then instructed me to play the music in front of me ... only, I was to play everything incorrectly. "If I hear you play any of those notes right, I'll come over there and hit you with this drumstick!"

"Excuse me? I don't ..."

"You heard me. Play the piece, but I don't want to hear any of it played correctly."

And so I played the snare drum piece upside-down and inside-out and just plain wrong; every note of it.

He smiled, and then asked me to walk over to the window in the studio and look outside and tell him what I saw ...

"Are the clouds still up in the sky?" he asked.

"Uh ... yeah."

"And the sun is still shining, the trees are all standing, and it seems that the earth is still spinning?"

"Uh huh ..."

*"Okay ... come back now." He puffed on his cigar with satisfaction and then looked me right in the eye, saying "Peter, you played that piece as badly as it could ever be played; I can't begin to count how many mistakes you made. And what happened? Nothing happened. *source George Gaber remembered <http://info.music.indiana.edu/web/page/normal/6985.html>*

Another wonderful thing about studying in Bloomington, was being able to see so many great artists perform as they came through Bloomington on their tours. Among others, I saw live performances from Ella Fitzgerald, Sonny Rollins, Gary Burton, Frank Zappa, the Los Angeles Symphony without even leaving town.

During your career you have occupied numerous positions in Australian orchestras. Can you please describe the role of the Principal Percussionist in the orchestra? Is it different than being a rank and file member? What do you do to prepare for the numerous programs you prepare each year etc. How do you find time to practice and prepare? Do you have a regular routine?

When I came back from the US, I was Acting Principal Timpanist in the WASO for a few months

before being appointed Timpanist with TSO in 1984. Then in 1987 I joined the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as Tutti Percussionist. This was my dream job..... something I had wished for since the days of watching the SSO in Canberra when I was a kid. I was also invited to join Michael Askill, Colin Piper and Ian Cleworth in Synergy that year so, as far as I was concerned, things couldn't be better! For the next 10 years the orchestra and Synergy were perfect foils for each other in my life. As the entire percussion section of the SSO was in Synergy then, the chance to hone our chamber music skills definitely helped us as symphonic section players. We stayed as a section for around 18 years and I feel very lucky to have had that time with such great musicians and wonderful people. Over time my job in the SSO morphed into Assistant Principal Timpanist/Tutti Percussion. Along with my usual percussion duties I played all the second Timpani parts and other programmes on timpani when our Principal (Rick Miller) took respite. In 2006 I auditioned and won the position of Principal Percussion. I have to say that I never thought I would ever do another audition once I had joined the SSO so it was a very interesting experience having to prepare an audition two decades after the last one!

The biggest difference in my job now as Principal Percussion is the administrative part of the job. Apart from advising the SSO management about the booking of casual players, I need to liaise with the production team to make sure the appropriate instruments are there for each concert. Sometimes this can mean sourcing and hiring or buying instruments the orchestra doesn't own. Also, many hours can be spent sorting out parts for players and occasionally creating extra parts if a score is particularly poorly laid out. Sometimes I think I should have an office in the corner of the SSO music Library as I'm there so frequently. Of course, the other part of the job is playing most of the "hot seat" parts, although having such a great section I'm able to spread the load from time to time. My preparation for the various programmes is directly proportionate to the difficulty of the part. In other words, I don't have much of a routine.

Can you please describe some of your most exciting performances during your profession, movie soundtracks, concertos etc. Especially the process you go through when preparing a world premiere such as Nigel Westlake's concerto "When the Clock Strikes Me".

Performance highlights..... wow, hard to narrow it down! There were many great concerts with Synergy including a pretty special tour to Paris, where we met Xenakis. Another Synergy tour took us to Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival where we gave a private performance of "RainTree" for Toru Takemitsu.....quite possibly the best we have ever played that work! I also have great memories of collaborations with wonderful artists such as Dave Samuels and Trilok Gurtu. The Sydney Dance Company season of "Synergy with Synergy" was a special time. A rare opportunity to repeat a performance over 20 times and it was great working with the dancers. Another highlight for me was



playing Stravinsky's "Les Noces" with the Prokovsky Ensemble. The piano parts were realised on automatic Player pianos and this legendary Russian troupe danced as they sang with the most fantastic authenticity.....a truly unique version of the piece. Lately I have had the opportunity to play with Synergy again as a guest and I particularly enjoyed playing a performance of Steve Reich's "Drumming" in its entirety for Synergy's 40th Anniversary..... what a blast! Another very special memory for me was playing Messiaen's "From the Canyons to the Stars" in the presence of the composer with the ACO in 1988. My part called for a Geophone which we couldn't find in Sydney so Olivier Messiaen offered to bring his own personal instrument for me to play. He carried it as hand luggage on the plane and gave it to me to practise on. It felt slightly surreal having this instrument in its little vinyl case, complete with Messiaen's handwritten name and address on the luggage tag, in my possession!

With the Sydney Symphony Orchestra there have been many highlights, too many to mention them all. Here's a few that spring to mind :- a concert in the Town Hall of an all Lutoslawski programme conducted by the great man himself; memorable performances of Tristan And Isolde, Mahler's Symphony #2 with then Chief conductor

Stuart Challender; two different performance of Takmitsu's 'From Me Flows What you Call Time'; concert performances of Wagner's "Ring"; the complete Peer Gynt with Vladimir Ashkenazy at the helm; an extremely emotional performance of Nigel Westlake's "Missa Solis" and more recently a chance to play and record Nigel Westlake's collaboration with Lior, "Compassion". I notice a lot of these highlights seem to revolve around playing music with the composer present. I consider that such a great privilege...I have so much admiration for these creative souls.

The SSO also includes "Commercial" concerts in its regular season. Backing such fabulous musicians as Ray Charles, Gary Burton, Chick Corea and Sting was a great thrill. I didn't intend this to be such an exercise in name-dropping, but it is a fact that getting to listen to - and perform with all these great musicians is a huge perk of the job. There were other interesting moments such as the time the SSO percussion and piccolo section played some fife and drum music to open the New York Stock Exchange while we were on tour in 1988; being a part of the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics in 2000, standing right next to the famous Olympic Cauldron as it made its ascent; performing with Joan Sutherland in the United Nations Headquarters

in New York. Then there is playing the Cimbalom, taiko (in the very earliest days of Taiko... before they became the mega group of today), plucking amplified cactus, getting to throw a tray of crockery on the ground (in Ligeti's "Grand Macabre"), having to get to grips with steel drums, the musical saw and the Theramin..... all of which makes my life ever interesting.

I have only ever prepared and performed one Percussion Concerto, Nigel Westlake's "When the Clock Strikes Me". It was commissioned by the SSO and it feels pretty special having a brand new work composed with you in mind. It was great to be in close contact with Nigel right from the beginning of that commission. My only request to him was that the set up be manageable enough to fit in my studio at home. My kids were quite young then and I couldn't imagine having to rent out a separate studio somewhere. I needed to be able to drop in and out of my practise quickly and easily! It was quite fascinating seeing how the piece evolved and changed. Nigel would send me little snippets of the work as he was composing them to see how workable it was. Some of the original ideas went completely out the window. I tried not to suggest musical changes, just practical ones as I really wanted Nigel to write what he wanted. The advantage of living in the same city meant I could play through parts of the work for Nigel in person so he could hear how they sounded and maybe tweak it a bit. There was no piano reduction of the orchestral part but a MIDI version was available for me to play along with and it helped enormously. It was quite a long process.....it took me over 6 months to learn the piece.

As you hold a leadership positions in the Symphony Orchestra, can you please list, from your viewpoint, the essential tools that developing and early career musician must have in their virtual "Career/Life" toolbox?

It sounds so obvious, but listening is an essential 'tool'. Listening can teach you so much, from stylistic decisions and sound concepts, to good ensemble. Once you have technical proficiency in your instrument it becomes far more important how you use those skills in the context of music making with others. Flexibility is also important. Occasionally in the orchestra you will have to be prepared to change the way you play something in order to fit with a conductor's interpretation of a work, whether you agree with it or not!

As it is often impossible to narrow this answer, what are your top two favourite percussion instruments?

Yes, impossible..... I do love the tabla but not much call for that in my line of work.

Do you have an all time favourite musician that you listen to when driving in the car, traveling alone etc. ?

I tend to rotate a few favourite albums from Stevie Wonder, Lior, Herbie Hancock, Joni Mitchell and Sting.

(Endnotes)

1 <http://www.sydneysymphony.com/about-us/meet-the-musicians/percussion-timpani/percussion/rebecca-lagos.aspx>