

Ian Finkel

The Xylomaster

BY NANCY ZELTSMAN

Nancy Zeltsman: *How does the world's busiest xylophonist stay busy? Can you briefly describe the range of xylophone gigs you do?*

Ian Finkel: Briefly? No. In the old days, I did every kind of job there is. I've played swing, bop, free jazz, all the different Latin bags, funk—I love James Brown—R&B, Yiddish theater music, Klezmir, I played in a concert band where I did all the piccolo parts for Sousa marches, Viennese waltzes, club date dance music of every shape and form, shows, jingles, record dates, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, ethnic—now they call them world music—Irish, Swedish, Romanian, anything. I performed hundreds of violin concerti from Vivaldi to Tchaikovsky and beyond. I was the xylophonist at Madison Square Garden for years, did all the Ice Shows, etc. I did film dates of all kinds and paid my dues at numerous contemporary chamber music concerts. Oh yeah, I also played with the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Sorry for the partial list.

I prided myself on the fact that I played one instrument, but I could play any kind of music, in any kind of band, in the right mode, with the correct feel. Of course, nowadays, I basi-

cally do only gigs where I am the featured soloist; for example, I do my act with pop orchestras, or concerts with my guys, etc., anywhere and everywhere.

Zeltsman: *What captivates you about the xylophone as a solo instrument?*

Finkel: It's hard to say what it is about the xylophone that does it for me. Why does one musician choose the tenor sax and another choose the alto? It's more than likely undefinable. However, I love the xylophone. Maybe it's the fact that I can play fast on it, or scream on it, or I just hear my music in that high range. Probably I chose the xylophone because I can speak my music on it.

Zeltsman: *Why do you think more people are not drawn to the xylophone as a solo instrument?*

Finkel: Fear. You can't woof around or ooze around on it. You've got to stand and deliver big time. If you're a bad sight-reader, you're dead. It's a killer to read on. Also, there is a very small repertoire of original stuff for it. If you're classically-minded, you've got to play violin concertos. If you want to blow jazz, you have to spend a greater portion of your life just trying to get a decent legato, which on other mallet instruments is an easier task. Also, there aren't many soloists to set the example for the new players. In universities, they turn out marimba players like a salmon run in Alaska. Anyway, if you're a xylophonist, you have to create your own gigs. Basically, no band has a xylo chair.

Zeltsman: *You were an extremely important teacher for me and a major influence on my deciding to specialize on one instrument. What do you regard as the virtues of specializing on one instrument as opposed to being a well-rounded percussionist?*

Finkel: Not to sound like I'm putting down percussion players, but here's the thing: Real specialists on any instrument have to dedicate themselves to slavery. I enjoy practicing the xylophone. I practice at least five hours a day and have been doing that for thirty years. If you're a percussionist, there's no way that you can do five hours on the mallets, another five on timps, and another five on snare, toys, Latin, etc. You can't be Gary Burton, Ian Finkel, Louis Bellson, etc., all at the same time. You can't get that good. There are many percussionists who play excellent mallets but they're not soloists.

Anyway, for me, I don't want to count four hundred bars rest and then hit one note on a triangle, after which some dopey conductor says that he prefers a different triangle. When you're a soloist, they never tell you what brand of instrument or what kind of mallet to use. Can you imagine someone wanting to be a well-rounded brass player? He prac-



tices trumpet, French horn, trombone and tuba. Oh, please! I pity reed doublers.

Zeltsman: *You come from a very interesting, creative family. Would you tell us about them and how they influenced the directions your career has taken?*

Finkel: Everyone in my family is a musician, actor, entertainer, writer, etc. I had to audition to become a Finkel. My father is an award-winning actor. Though he didn't push me in music he gave me a deep devotion to excellence in performance. To my dad, the theater or concert hall is a holy place and must be treated as such. Both my brother Elliot—a great pianist—and I follow in our father's footsteps in his love of art and audience. That's the way I go.

Zeltsman: *I'm looking forward to your performance with Jonathan Haas and The Prisoners of Swing at PASIC '99. What are your favorite things about this band?*

Finkel: I love this band for many reasons. First of all, it shows that the timpani can hold its own in jazz. It proves my point that any instrument can swing if you pay your dues. And that's what Jon Haas has done. I wrote all the charts so, naturally, I enjoy musically directing the course of the music. Also, everyone in the band goes way back with me—some over twenty-five years!—and each member is like a blood relative. Anyway, there's not a bar's rest for the xylophone. PN

COLUMBUS *Jazz* ORCHESTRA

legends of the drumset

18 swinging pieces of big band jazz!



October 27-31, 1999 during PASIC
Southern Theatre
Columbus, Ohio

featuring
Louie Bellson, Dave Weckl, and Harold Jones
with the Columbus Jazz Orchestra



For more information, call
614.294.5200

The Amsterdam Percussion Group uses Iñaki Sebastian Mallets

Excellent in music Performance




Richard Jansen
Herman Rickers
Lamerus Fernando
Jose Vicente
Gustavo Jimenez

IÑAKI SEBASTIÁN
MALLETS

C/ Okandolaga 40 Casa Aranzazu 20115 Astigarraga Gipuzkoa, SPAIN Tel: + 34 943 33 12 41 Fax: + 34 948 14 27 18 <http://www.cin.es/mallets/> E-mail: mallets@cin.es