From ‘Novelty’ Instrument to Concert Hall Status: Solo Marimba in America, 1940-1960

By today’s standards, the marimba is well received and respected as a solo concert instrument. Major orchestras across the country have performed and recorded works featuring marimba in great numbers over the last half century. It flourishes in percussion ensemble literature, and is well received in mixed chamber ensemble. Furthermore, mostly all instrumental music publishers include solo works for it in their catalogues, and both high school and university percussion programs across the country use marimba as one of their primary teaching instruments. Less than one hundred years ago, however, the thought of including the thought of marimba performing a solo with the same level of respect and appreciation as established western instruments was virtually unheard of. The first half of the twentieth century saw most American audiences associating the marimba with “exotic” or “novelty” styles, dooming it to an existence solely in vaudeville shows, ethnic ensembles, and marimba bands.

Despite this, the marimba rose above these flippant beginnings to enjoy the widespread success that it continues to grow from today. With less than one hundred years separating the instrument from being ostracized by the performers and audiences of the concert hall to being accepted and appreciated by them, one wonders what contributed to this rapid change. Though achieved in a short period of time, the process has been quick but gradual, with numerous innovators, innovations, and key moments that helped propel the instrument forward. There was, however, a “starting point” so to speak; a period of time when the first legitimate concert marimbists and marimba composers began to promote and perform on the instrument. I believe that the years between 1940 and 1960 mark the period when the marimba broke from novelty status and
began its half century’s long climb to respectability. To understand what the marimba has become requires comprehending the role that the key marimbists and events of 1940-1960 played, how these changed the public’s perception of marimba, and established modern performance practice and pedagogy.

I have selected the years 1940 and 1960 as the dates surrounding key events in the development of the concert marimba. I feel that these two time periods “bookend” this chapter in the instrument’s history. The first date is the premiere of Paul Creston’s *Concertino for Marimba*, which was debuted in April 1940 (Kite 50). This piece was “the first major work composed for marimba”, and represents one of the instruments most significant initial breaks from novelty status (Kastner, “Creston”. 83). Furthermore, 1942 marks the beginning of Clair Omar Musser’s tenure at Northwestern University and the beginning of the formal training of concert marimbists at the University level (Gerhardt 7).

The years around 1960 are significant, as they mark an era of important marimba concerts and premieres. In 1962, Vida Chenoweth, whom Kathleen Kastner touts as the “first concert marimbist…who was responsible for raising the level of solo marimba playing to concert hall status,” made her Carnegie Hall debut (Kastner, “Emergence” 71). This was the first concert at Carnegie Hall to primarily feature original works for unaccompanied marimba (Kite 52). Furthermore, 1959 marks the premiere of the Robert Kurka’s *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*, which Kastner touts as “the beginning of a new era for marimba” (“Examination” 86). While 1940 marks the beginnings of this era, 1960 marks the first time the instrument saw consistent success by a virtuosic and recognizable performer on a highly visible stage. What is equally as important as these
two clusters of events are those that occurred in between. The following will discuss the numerous central figures, composers, and pieces that helped define this twenty year period as the “birth of the concert marimba,” as well as its early maturation.

The first section of this paper will deal with the public’s perceptions of marimba prior to 1940. Specifically, I will discuss what role the marimba had in American musical life during the first part of the century, and how this effected the expectations and opinions of audiences leading up to 1940. The second section of the paper will examine the influence of two key individuals and three significant pieces that I feel overwhelmingly best represent both the innovations and changes in sentiment throughout the time period. More specifically, I will discuss the careers of Clair Omar Musser and Vida Chenoweth and their individual contributions to concert marimba playing. I will also examine the three “major” concertos written at the time: Creston’s *Concertino for Marimba* (Op. 21), Darius Milhaud’s *Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone* (Op. 278), and Robert Kurka’s “*Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra.*” None of these individuals or works can be granted sole responsibility, or even primary responsibility for the development of the concert marimba in this era. It was their collective influence that defined this twenty year period as a starting point from which other composers and marimbists would build on for the next fifty years.
The Marimba in America Prior to 1940

The early part of the twentieth century saw a lack of appreciation for the marimba as a medium of original musical expression on par with established instruments that had dominated the concert hall for centuries. This does not mean, however, that the marimba was not a part of musical life in America during this time period. On the contrary, there was a great deal of marimba performance happening between 1900 and 1940, much of which enjoyed widespread appeal. Until 1940, however, none of this music was considered to be of the same caliber and sophistication as music of the concert hall. The majority of marimba playing happening in the early half of the twentieth century can generally be divided into three categories: music of Central American touring ensembles, which first exposed United States audiences to the instrument, vaudeville acts that primarily exposed the flashy showmanship possible with the instrument, and the American marimba bands of the 1930s that proved to be more a spectacle than an attempt to legitimize the instrument. Though these very different genres of marimba playing brought the instrument widespread appeal throughout America, this exposure fueled the perception that it was a novelty instrument and its use should be reserved exclusively for such purposes.

The Marimbas of Central America

The migration of the marimba to Central America and then to North America has an extensive history dating back over four hundred years. Though the exact date of its first appearance is unknown, the first basic marimbas were brought to Central America
by African slaves during the sixteenth century (England 90). The first documented appearance of marimba in the region, dated to November 5th 1680, is an account by a Spanish balladeer named “Nuñez” in which he describes music played for a ceremony at the dedication of the Cathedral of Santiago de los Caballeros in Antigua (Chenoweth 74). The account states that music at the dedication was played by “military drums, kettledrums, bugles, trumpets, marimbas, and other instruments which the Indians use” (Chenoweth 74). Over the next few hundred years, the marimba was adopted by the Central Americans and developed into a widely played solo and ensemble instrument, performing primarily traditional and ethnic music. The part of Central America where the instrument flourished the most was in Guatemala, where it “was an integral part of Guatemalan culture” (Eyler, Marimba Bands 33). While there has been an abundance of scholarly work on the development of marimba in Guatemala, most notably Vida Chenoweth’s incredibly thorough book, *The Marimbas of Guatemala*, what is most important to this paper is its role in the migration of the instrument to America.

Throughout the final years of the 19th century, professional Guatemalan marimba bands began to rise in prominence. Groups of marimbists began performing “at every occasion from religious ceremonies to secular dances, public celebrations, and festivities” (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 29). It was not uncommon for families to establish marimba bands to tour/perform and this became an established model for marimba ensembles (Eyler 29). Realizing the marketability and appeal of the instrument, Sebastián Hurtado, patriarch of the widely popular Hurtado Brothers Marimba Band of Guatemala, organized an American tour of his marimba band beginning in 1908 (Kastner, “Emergence” 10). The tour began in New Orleans, and though it was slated to last only six months, the
“band’s enthusiastic reception by the American public extended their stay to almost five years” (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 34).

After seeing the success of the Hurtado brothers, other marimba bands from Guatemala began to tour the United States and the rest of the world with great success. In addition to widespread touring, record companies became interested in recording and selling marimba music (Kastner, Emergence 10). Marimba bands played a very active role in the recording industry throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Though widely popular and highly entertaining, the touring marimba bands of this era were suited towards vaudeville audiences. Central American marimba ensembles would program almost exclusively works for that were either native to Central America or ensemble arrangements of well-known western art music. For example, the first marimba band recording in America, made in 1915, features the Hurtado brothers performing traditional Guatemalan music, as well as transcriptions of von Suppe’s “Pique Dame” and “Poet and Peasant” overtures (Smith, “Development” 27).

As a result, the marimba began to take on a very specific role in musical life in America. A 1920 press bill promoting of Signor Friscoe’s Guatemalan Marimba ensemble provides an example:

One of this season’s headline vaudeville attractions is Signor Friscoe and his Guatemalan Ensemble. It is also one of the most expensively staged and highest salaried acts in the business. Every drummer and xylophonist in the land knows what a wonderful artist Friscoe is (Eyler, Marimba Bands 59).

Two items in this description provide insight into American sentiments towards marimba. First, by 1920, within 8 years of its “official” arrival in the United States, the marimba is being linked to vaudeville, a type of entertainment considered very separate
and very different from the art music performed in the concert hall. Furthermore, with its description of the groups’ performance’s as “expensively staged and highest salaried acts,” one sees the beginnings of marimba promotion as more a spectacle than an exhibition of “serious” music. Furthermore, a Columbia Records jacket from the 1930s describes a Hurtado Brothers Marimba Band recording as “restful, charming, and fascinating,” more a description of a novelty work than a serious piece of music (Eyler, Marimba Bands 58). A critic for a 1947 *New York Times* review of a traditional Guatemalan marimba band even wrote:

> …He played an instrument he has designed himself, and he achieved astonishing feats of virtuosity, crossing hands, intertwining four sticks with which the marimba is played and the achievement of varying sound effects. To watch Mr. Hurtado’s skillful deployment over the instrument was as fascinating as observing a trick acrobat (qtd. in Smith 30).

The reviewer focuses almost entirely on the novelty and “gimmicks” of the performance, and barely addresses the quality of music presented. This shows interest in marimba more as an attraction and novelty than as a serious instrument. Furthermore, the review exemplifies American’s attitude towards marimba at this time. While it was accepted as a means of musical expression that could be performed at a virtuosic level, the general public associated the instrument exclusively with novelty styles.

Essentially, the influence of the Guatemalan marimba band was twofold: first, it asserted the marimba’s role as an exotic novelty instrument. It was frequently linked with vaudeville, which presented a variety of entertainment styles/genres derived from a variety of both western and non-western cultures. Seeing ensembles of Central Americans playing traditional music began to ingrain the concept of marimba as spectacle into the minds of the American public, a perception that would later be
solidified by American marimba bands of the 1930s. Second, early Guatemalan bands established the tradition of playing transcriptions of western art music. While this may be seen as a step towards legitimatization by some, one must also realize that the marimba became “typecast” into this role. In the view of the public, marimba was meant to recreate music originally written for other instruments, not perform music created for its own right. Playing the music of Wagner, Mendelssohn, or Debussy became the standard for the instrument. It wasn’t until the 1940s that this stereotype began to break.

**The Marimba and Xylophone of Vaudeville**

The marimba of the early twentieth century was also linked closely with vaudeville, a connection furthering distancing the instrument from legitimatization in the concert hall. While the marimba enjoyed a long history in this genre in its own right, its obvious similarities to xylophone, also used extensively in vaudeville, further contributed to its association with this style. The early part of the century saw much confusion over the difference between marimba and xylophone (a confusion that still exists in the minds of many people today). In fact, some of the first American marimbas produced were not marimbas at all, but rather “marimba-xylophones” whose lower register was tuned like a marimba and upper register like a xylophone (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 79). Essentially, both the marimba’s association with xylophone, as well as its own extensive vaudeville history should be considered equally when examining America’s perception of marimba as a “vaudeville instrument”.

The period immediately following World War I saw a great increase in vaudeville popularity. The xylophone, already established in a wide variety of musical settings
including orchestral, ragtime, and jazz, arose as a natural choice. According to Marielta Huron:

In the olden days the xylophone used to be the sensation with band and vaudeville performers. Often, dressed up like ‘Mrs. Astor’s horse’, iridescent spangles and red velvet lambrequins, it provided an instrument upon which the player was expected to go through all kinds of acrobatic contortions, especially when he played his ‘chef d’oeuvre’, the William Tell Overture, with breathtaking accelerandos, and arrived at the finale like a foaming race horse. Some even danced while playing the xylophone (Huron 305).

This unique combination of musical expression and gimmicky showmanship allowed the xylophone to thrive in the vaudeville world. Naturally, the public loved the xylophone more for this spectacle than for its expressive qualities. According to Clair Omar Musser, “the colorful showmanship of the performer…and the gymnastic effects of the dexterous player” were the main attraction (Musser 251). While the marimbas association to xylophone contributed to the “stigma of its association with vaudeville” (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 73), Americans began trying their own luck with marimba bands mimicking the Guatemalan ensembles.

American Marimba Bands of the 1930s

Between 1910 and 1918, shortly after the Hurtado brothers U.S. debut, the Deagan Company in Chicago, Illinois began manufacturing the first American marimbas (Peters 153). Inspired by Guatemalan ensembles that had begun touring the United States, American musicians and entertainers began to form their own marimba groups which toured the country and recorded just like the Guatemalan groups had done (Eyler, Marimba Bands 85-86). The first marimbas produced in America were much like the western xylophones and glockenspiels that had already been produced and perfected by
Deagan in late 19th century. They were fully chromatic, tuned to equal temperament, and were anywhere from three to six octaves in range, depending on the model (Pimentel 61). The transition to xylophone from marimba was very easy for trained western musicians.

As Deagan’s production increased, so did the instrument’s popularity among performers (Smith 39). According to Hope Stoddard:

Red Norvo with his orchestra centered around his marimba provided some of the most thrilling jazz of the 1930s. The Green brothers, William Dorn, Eddy Rubsam, Sam Herman, and Harry Breuer in the East, and Ralph Smith and Dillon Ober in Chicago helped to bring the instrument into prominence (Stoddard 25).

The increasingly popular American marimba band also found its way into the developing new world of television and radio. Throughout the late 1920s Harry Breuer, George Hamilton Green, and other marimba band leaders began performing live broadcasts of dance music for NBC radio (Eyler, Marimba Bands 82). Silent films of the late night 20s, such as La Fiesta and Tropic Holiday featured marimba bands as the predominant voice of the musical score (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 85). The lucrative association that marimba band musicians developed with the film and radio industry pushed their efforts and energy towards promoting and performing the instrument in this arena. After all, it was in novelty and “entertainment” music had its most success between 1908 and the late 1920s. As vaudeville died out and motion pictures began to take its place, the marimba’s shift to new entertainment mediums was only natural. It was not until Clair Omar Musser and the “marimba revolution” of the 1930s and 1940s that focus of the instrument again shifted, this time towards acceptance as a concert instrument. While Musser played a significant role in the development of 1930s marimba bands, as well, these contributions will be discussed below in the section discussing this revolutionary marimbist, composer, advocate, and educator.
The Legitimization of Marimba: 1940-1960

Clair Omar Musser

Perhaps the most recognizable name in the history of early twentieth century marimba bands was that of Clair Omar Musser. Born in the western Philadelphia suburb of Manheim, Pennsylvania in 1901 (Gerhardt 7), he began studying marimba in fifth grade, and devoted the majority of his life to teaching and promoting the instrument in a wide variety of capacities (Weaver 2). Musser’s work seems to fall fairly neatly into an “early” and “late” period. His early contributions involve marimba development, as well as promotion/exposure of the instrument through large marimba bands, and a later period as an educator and composer at Northwestern University.

As the American marimba band movement began in the late 1920s, Musser took full advantage of the opportunity to assist in the development and promotion of the instrument, albeit along the same lines as the “spectacle” marimba bands of earlier years. In “February of 1929, Musser organized and directed a twenty-five-piece, all-girl marimba ensemble” for a promotional event in Chicago” (Eyler, Marimba Bands 100). This marked the beginning of his career as a marimba band leader, and he would continue to lead similar ensembles for the next decade.

While working in Chicago, Musser eventually joined forces with the Deagan Company, and by 1930 became one of their chief designers (Peters 160). Even in his still young career, Musser had already made brilliant contributions to the physical development of the marimba. A brilliant and creative inventor, some of Musser’s earliest innovations include the development of the “marimba-celesta,” keyboard percussion
instrument that had eighty-seven pitches in two manuals— one wood and the other metal
(Smith 40). It was billed as the “World’s First Electronic Marimba” (Kastner, “Emergence” 35). Throughout his lifetime, he obtained over forty international patents for various marimba design elements and innovations (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 97).

Probably the most notable single event of Musser’s early career was the 1933 performance of the “Century of Progress” marimba ensemble which performed at the 1933 World’s Fair (Smith 41). This ensemble, performing at one of the world’s largest and most publicly visible events, featured one hundred marimbists (fifty male and fifty female) performing on one hundred, custom-made “King George” model marimbas (Kastner, Emergence 37). This event marked one of the most widely visible marimba performances date. Musser and his “Century of Progress” marimba orchestra eventually went on to tour Europe, as well as enjoy extensive success at major concert halls throughout the United States (Kastner, Emergence 37).

The first part of Musser’s career in the 1930s set the stage for the legitimization of solo marimba in the concert hall beginning in the 1940s. As a “dynamic” and inspiring personality, Musser’s pupils from his marimba bands in the 30s went on to be teachers in the 40s, further spreading his teachings and philosophies through the country (Peters 164). William Ludwig, Jack Conner, and Burt Jackson are just a few of Musser’s students during this time, all of whom went on to be leaders and pioneers in the 1940s and beyond (Kite 50). Furthermore, Musser’s touring ensembles, including the “Century of Progress” ensemble brought about heightened awareness and increased interest to the instrument. While the early 1920s saw the marimba reserved almost exclusively for
performance by Guatemalan groups, Musser’s work extended the instrument to American percussionists.

Despite this, his achievements were not entirely productive towards the establishment of marimba in a concert hall setting. During the 1930s, he continued to perform entire programs of works transcribed for orchestra. Though this was beneficial because it showed marimba was capable of performing the types of music associated with the concert hall, remaining limited to transcriptions further reinforced the “stigma” that the marimba was meant to play arrangements of famous orchestral works. Criticism of Musser for this approach is not uncommon. Kathleen Kastner states that “critics and students” of Musser “noted the need for original music for the instrument, particularly at that time when the marimba was struggling to emerge as a legitimate vehicle of musical expression” (42). Essentially, while Musser continuously promoted the instrument as worthy of consideration as a “serious” instrument, he did little to expand the marimba to new musical genres. While one may interpret this as Musser desiring to continue to promote marimba music through the “traditional” means: large marimba bands, spectacles, and novelty performances, one must consider that the development of literature and pedagogy takes time, and it is possible that Musser’s efforts in the 1930s were primarily geared towards exposing and establishing interest in the marimba in the only way he knew how. As is exemplified in the later part of his career, Musser used many of the students he mentored in the 1930s to refine marimba education and develop the first generation of great concert marimbists, which is better associated with advancing the instrument than with furthering the “stigma”. 
The later half of Musser’s career, from 1942 until roughly 1956, shows much greater and more apparent advancement of the marimba into a solo instrument in the concert hall. First and foremost was his teaching position in the newly created marimba department of Northwestern University. Musser served as Director of Marimba Music Education at Northwestern from 1942 to 1952 (Gerhardt 7). During this time, Musser “instructed and coached a great majority of today’s outstanding marimba artists and teachers,” including Vida Chenoweth, Gordon Peters, Jack Connors, and Ruth Jeanne Stuber (Peters 165). Throughout his tenure at Northwestern, Musser also heavily promoted the teaching of the “Musser Grip,” a technique for holding four mallets that involves a rotary motion with the wrist rather than the vertical “hinge” motion associated with “cross stick” grips of the early twentieth century (Smith 48). This grip allowed the performer to more easily adjust the distance between the two mallets of each hand, which allowed for smoother and faster harmonic changes.

During this time Musser flourished as a composer, as well. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing onward throughout his time at Northwestern, Musser composed the great majority of his original works for marimba (Eyler, “Marimba Bands” 110). Of particular importance were his five “etudes” and two “preludes” for marimba (Kastner, “Emergence” 41). These short solo works were composed originally out of necessity, as Musser felt his students need music that addressed “specific technical problems within a well organized, relatively brief form” and also served as an appropriate means of solo performance (Kastner, “Emergence” 41). Heavily influenced by nineteenth century/early twentieth century composers such as Chopin, Debussy, and Rachmaninoff, these works were also among the first ever written in a “classical” style intended for performance as a
solo (Kastner, Emergence 41). In total, Musser’s compositional output includes fifty three original compositions for marimba (Eyler, “Musser’s Contributions” 62).

Another significant accomplishment by Musser during this time period was the establishment of the Musser Marimba Company in 1948. After years of working with Deagan, Musser split with the Deagan Company and branched out on his own (Pimentel 63). Shortly after founding his company, however, the creative and inventive Musser abruptly left Chicago and took a hiatus from teaching and performing on marimba. During this time, he pursued a career in the aeronautical/astronomic industries in California and sold Musser Marimbas Inc. (Pimentel 63). Musser’s marimba brand eventually merged with the Ludwig Drum Company to become “Musser-Ludwig Inc.” (Weaver 4). This was significant as it marked the first “competition” to the American marimba industry. Prior to Musser’s company, Deagan dominated the industry, but now the race was on to produce the best sounding and most cost effective instrument. This competition helped to rocket the physical design of the instrument forward, and lead eventually to the development of synthetic bars, which were cheaper than costly rosewood, as well as the invention of bass marimba (Weaver 4).

Musser clearly played a significant role in the progression of marimba as a viable solo concert instrument in the 1940s and 50s. While his passionate and innovative teaching helped mold some of the greatest performers to ever play marimba, his compositional output and advances in marimba technique allowed marimbists to explore new possibilities on the instrument including more technically advanced literature and original, unaccompanied marimba solos of a character appropriate for college-level study/the concert hall.
Creston, Milhaud, and Kurka: The First Three Concertos

It is through great composers writing great literature that instruments become established in the concert hall. In order to be taken seriously, an instrument must have a repertoire that is known and respected. The initial development of a body of literature for marimba occurred between 1940 to 1960. It was during this time that the first three concertos for solo marimba and orchestra were written. Each of these works contributes to the establishment of the marimba through compositional innovation, development of technique, and continuing exposure of the instrument to the public. These three pieces are all considered the foundation on which other solo marimba works, both concerto and unaccompanied would look to as a model as the instrument developed in the later part of the twentieth century.

Premiered on April 29th, 1940, Paul Creston’s *Concertino for Marimba* is considered the first original work for solo marimba intended for concert hall performance (Kite 50). The piece was commissioned by Frederique Petrides and the Orchestrette Classique, a small, women’s orchestra of about thirty members based out of New York City (Smith, Stuber Interview 63). The commission actually came about by happenstance more than intent. It was Miss Petrides’ intent to feature every member of her orchestra in some way. While she initially tried to arrange for one of her percussionists to perform a concerto for timpani and orchestra, none were available at the time (Smith, Stuber Interview 63). As an alternative, the timpanist for the orchestra, Ruth Jeanne Stuber,
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proposed that Petrides commission a concerto for marimba, an instrument she just so happened to have with her in New York (Smith, Stuber Interview 64).

Petrides soon began searching for composers, and Paul Creston’s name came up. Creston was an up and coming young composer at the time, was looking for work, and willing to do anything develop his reputation. In addition to being available, Creston was also known for a compositional style that might be well-suited for a marimba concerto. According to Sara Smith, “Creston’s compositional trademark was rhythm, and he commonly used shifting subdivisions of a regular meter to enhance the rhythms” (62). Furthermore, “the use of long florid melodies” and “forms…based on classical models” associated with Creston’s style helped incorporate familiar elements of western solo concert literature with an instrument still foreign to this genre (Smith 62).

The form of the Creston concerto is fairly typical. It is in three movements, arranged in a typical “fast-slow-fast” format (Kastner, “Emergence” 15). While the outer movements are very rhythmic, written for only two mallets, and often are reminiscent of the vaudeville and ragtime styles of the earlier century, the middle movement is written for four mallets and features a relatively simple chorale consisting primarily of major and minor seventh chords (Kastner, “Emergence” 16). The frequent use of “syncopation, dotted rhythms, and accented and double stops” all give the piece the piece a clear ragtime character at times (Kastner, “Examination” 83). From a technical standpoint, the work was relatively “safe”. Part of this is a result of Creston’s compositional methods. According to Vida Chenoweth, “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” (Kastner, Exam. 83). This is a plausible explanation for the use of narrow
intervals and closed voicing that are present throughout the concerto. It was not until the Kurka concerto years later that a concert composer took advantage of the visual possibilities and aesthetic appeal associated with wide leaps and disjunct contour.

Because some elements of *Concertino for Marimba* drew from the marimba’s earlier influences and others were inspired by traditional orchestral forms, reviews of the premier performance were mixed. According to a *Herald Tribune* review,

…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 the expectations and produced a sturdy composition of inherent musical interest (qtd in Smith, 63).

Another review from the *New York Times* states:

A concertino for marimba and orchestra – at first blush, that might read like a manifestation of the silly season. But don’t laugh: it wasn’t…The program stated flatly that this concertino “is the only work ever written for this instrument in serious form”…Mr. Creston made it an effective vehicle for his ideas and Miss Stuber played it with skill as well as art (qtd in Kastner, “Emergence” 86).

The author of the New York Times article wrote a short editorial on the concerto, as well. In it, he states that “the marimba has its limitations as a solo instrument, but Mr. Creston wrote well within them” (qtd in Smith, 64).

These reviews provide valuable insight into the perception of this first concerto. It is clear that audiences were beginning to accept the instrument as a legitimate concert instrument. The reviews quoted above are among the first to mention of serious artistic compositional quality in marimba music. It is apparent that audiences accepted the music as, at very least, an attempt at something to be taken seriously. On the other hand, it is still clear that, even after the premier of the concertino, much of the listening public was associating the work with its novelty roots.
While the piece’s initial impact was simply to whet the appetite of American concert hall audiences to marimba, the long term impact, according to Kastner,

…was twofold. 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…This description, perhaps partially a result of the xylophone’s novelty ragtime roots, followed the marimba for two decades…The work is fundamental in the teaching repertoire of the marimba, and it 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 (17).

Seven years later, the second concerto for marimba would build on the success of the Creston.

Written in 1947, Concerto, Op. 278 for Marimba and Vibraphone was commissioned by Jack Connors and was premiered by Connor with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on February 12, 1949 (Kastner, “Examination” 84). The piece featured a percussion soloist who switched back and forth between marimba and vibraphone (Fink 26). The genesis of the composition occurred when the debut performer, Jack Conners, approached several of his friends to compose a concerto, but few would entertain his request (Smith 66). This is a testament to the lack of seriousness with which established composers saw the marimba at this time. Eventually, Connors wrote Darius Milhaud, asking him to right the piece. According to Conners,

I had listened to some of his music: Suite Provencale and a Symphonic Poem plus I had very much enjoyed La Creation Du Monde. I further knew that he had written a Concerto for Percussion which I listened to, but had never performed…This led me to believe that Milhaud would be very receptive (Fink 26).

Unfortunately, Milhaud was initially not interested in the commission. According to Sarah Smith, “Milhaud did not think the marimba would be received well in a concerto
situation” (67). Nevertheless, Connors’ passionate desire to see Milhaud write him a concerto led the percussionist to make multiple personal trips to Milhaud’s home in California where he demonstrated the technical and musical possibilities of the marimba (Fink 26). This eventually paid off, and Milhaud accepted the commission. A commission of this level was great progress for marimba, and the first of its kind. Unlike Stuber and Petrides, who commissioned a young and struggling Creston on a shoestring budget for fairly un-established orchestra, Jack Connors was principle percussionist with the St. Louis Symphony, who commissioned a prominent European composer (Fink 26). This marks “the first major twentieth century composer to contribute to the repertoire of the marimba” (Smith 68).

The commission of a concerto for marimba for such by such a high profile performer, composer, and ensemble was progress in itself; never before had the marimba been shown in such a positive light in this venue. However, the piece did mark several significant compositional advancements in marimba writing. First and most recognizable was Milhaud’s “willingness to explore new sounds” (Kastner, “Emergence” 20). This was demonstrated in a multitude of ways. In one passage, Milhaud calls for the performer to play with the base of the mallet, creating an echo-like texture (Kastner, “Examination” 84). In addition, he calls for 14 different individual mallet types to be used throughout the concerto (Kastner, “Examination” 84). This represents a high level of musical thought about the marimba. Whereas extended technique and timbre were used in the past purely for aesthetic purposes, Milhaud’s meticulous and specific definition of desired textures throughout the work represent the seriousness with which he approached composing for marimba. The composer was experimenting with just how
many different sounds he could get out of the instrument, representing a sophisticated level of musical artistry.

In general, the public reception of this piece was not as favorable as Creston’s concerto. A review in *Musical America* simply stated that “a novelty Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone was written for Darius Milhaud for Jack Connor. Furthermore, a review from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch states that the piece was “a generous measure of novelty” and “charming thought slight” (qtd. in Kastner, 22).

Essentially, the most significant advancements associated of the Milhaud concerto were the experiments with texture and composition of marimba literature by a serious composer. Less significant was the reception of the piece by the American public. Nevertheless, seeing Milhaud compose for marimba served as inspiration for marimba composers in the following decades.

The third of the three major concertos composed between 1940 and 1960 was premiered on November 11th, 1959 at Carnegie Hall (Kite 52). The work, titled simply *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra* was written by Robert Kurka, a former student of Darius Milhaud (Kastner, “Examination” 85). The twenty-two minute long concerto was the longest work for solo marimba to date (Eyler, “Robert Kurka” 23). The work was composed for marimba virtuoso Vida Chenoweth, who played a major collaborative role in the piece through her frequent consultation with Kurka concerning the technical possibilities/limitations of the marimba (Smith 68). This was done mainly by Kurka observing Chenoweth while practicing. According to Chenoweth, Kurka told her to “just go through as many pieces of music as you can. I just want to watch and listen.” (Kastner, Evolution 24-25). As Kurka completed pages of music, he would give them to
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Chenoweth to begin preparing and also to give recommendations. This high degree of collaboration had a profound result on the piece. For example, Kurka was very much inspired by the extreme visual aspect of marimba performance. According to Sarah Smith, “He [Kurka] strove to make the piece visually appealing and interesting. The work includes wide abrupt leaps that require extreme physical agility and control” (68).

Furthermore, Kastner states that “Vida Chenoweth’s influence was extremely significant, in that her diligent pursuit of every detail of the score in spite of its excessive difficulty contributed to a final result that pushed marimba repertoire and performance technique into a new realm” (85). This view is supported by several reviews of the Chenoweth’s performance that said her playing “circumvented the instruments limitations” through suburb technique and approach, and “moving back and forth with the ease and grace of a ballet dancer while manipulating one, two, three, and four mallets at a time”. The Herald Tribune described her work as having “exhausting bravura” and achieving “every possible shade of sonority from the wooden keys laid out before her” qtd. in Kastner, “Emergence” 25).

In addition to furthering virtuosic possibilities and physical showmanship, the Kurka’s concerto enjoyed wide public appeal. The Herald Tribune describes the work as “marimba at its best” and goes on to call his concerto “lively and zestful” (qtd. in Eyler, Robert Kurka 23). Musical America describes the work as exploiting “the instrument’s fascinating tonal and rhythmic possibilities to the full…into a score that fairly scintillates” (qtd. in Kastner, “Examination” 85).

Kurka’s Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra was the first marimba work to enjoy both widespread public appeal and widespread recognition of having a high level
of musical sophistication fit for the concert hall. This work clearly had a broader impact than its two predecessors. While the Creston was the first step towards legitimization, its heavy stylistic influence from earlier, less sophisticated genres prevented the work from receiving full acceptance. The Milhaud represents the marimba experimentation by some of the most recognizable names in American concert music, but still failing to achieve widespread recognition. While the Creston and Milhaud advanced the marimba forward in very smaller, specific ways, the Kurka finally represented everything that early marimba composers set out to do in one piece: create a sophisticated and serious musical work that is both challenging to the performer and which has widespread public appeal. It represents the culmination of experimentation and innovation that began with the debut of the Creston.

**Vida Chenoweth**

According to James Strain, “Vida Chenoweth, perhaps more than any other artist, is responsible for raising solo marimba to a level of respect equal in stature to violin, piano or guitar” (8). While Clair Omar Musser ushered in the first twenty years of the development of concert marimba, it was Chenoweth who through her model of virtuosic performance and further development of Musser’s technique, provided a capstone to all work and innovation that had come before. Born in 1929 in Enid, Oklahoma, Chenoweth was raised in a very musical family (Strain 8). She studied marimba with local percussionists and was a prodigy by a young age (Kastner, “Emergence” 43-44). By the early 1940s, she was spending her summers studying marimba at Northwestern with Clair Omar Musser (Hufford 72). Chenoweth studied with Musser on and off over the next
decade, eventually earning a degree in 1951 (Strain 8). Following the premiere of
Creston’s marimba concerto, she added it to her repertoire and performing the work in
congress frequently throughout the 1940s and 1950s, which helped increase the works
popularity, as well as the popularity of concert marimba (Kite 52). The peak of
Chenoweth’s career was from 1957 to around 1963, during which time she performed
regularly all over the world (Weir 53). It was in this period that Chenoweth made some
of the most significant contributions to solo marimba performance in the twentieth
century.

Chenoweth’s main contribution to the development of solo marimba was as a
virtuosic solo performer. According to James Strain, “she pioneered compositional,
performance, and interpretive techniques commonly used on the instrument today, among
these the performance of polyphonic music via independent mallets” (8). Examination of
the key events during the “peak” of Chenoweth’s career provides great insight into just
how far-reaching her contributions were.

The first “breakthrough” concert of Chenoweth’s career occurred in November
1956 when she made her Town Hall debut in New York City, where she performed
multiple transcriptions and few original works in recital, among them Creston’s
Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra (Kite 52). Prior to this performance,
Chenoweth’s talent and growing reputation allowed her to obtain professional
management and concert booking services by the Columbia Lecture Bureau, and was the
first solo concert marimbist to do so (Kite 52). As regular freelance marimbist in the
New York music scene, eventually was booked to perform Robert Kurka’s Concerto for
Marimba and Orchestra with The Orchestra of America, a New York based ensemble
devoted entirely to the works of American composers (Stevens 22). As was discussed above, Kurka’s concerto had been extremely well-received, and the glowing reviews that Chenoweth’s performance received brought attention and recognition to her as a performer and the potential of the marimba as solo instrument. Additional reviews of Chenoweth following this performance describe her as “a master of her instrument,” and “a sensitive musician who raised the level of marimba playing to virtuoso heights” (Strain 8). The positive reviews and continuing success that followed the premiere of the Kurka concerto allowed Chenoweth to frequently perform as a soloist through the last 1950s and early 1960s, including multiple performances of both the Creston and Kurka concertos. In 1962, Chenoweth gave another solo recital in New York, this one being the first to feature predominately original works for marimba, including Suite for Marimba by Alfred Fissinger and Miniatures and Three Country Dances by E. Matthies (Kite 52). In 1962, Chenoweth won a breakthrough record deal with Epic records and became “the first artist to commercially record” for solo marimba (Strain 8).

Chenoweth’s virtuosity and frequent performances brought respectability and widespread acceptance to the marimba as a solo instrument. Until Chenoweth came onto the scene, no one individual soloist could be associated with the marimba. Musser was more interested in being a band leader, educator, and inventor than he was a performer, a role Chenoweth took full advantage of. One can speculate that the lack of inspiring, virtuosic soloists was one reason it was still struggling to gain a foothold in the concert hall. Audiences were able associate the instrument with a particular artist with Chenoweth as the “face” of solo marimba. She also gave aspiring marimbists a great role model to look to as a model for their own careers. Before Chenoweth, there was no such
thing as a professional “solo concert marimbist.” Chenoweth’s efforts also served to inspire composers. Seeing a soloist give multiple successful performances of marimba concerti made composers realize that there was in fact a market and an audience for solo marimba music, which created a rise in compositional output for the instrument over the rest of the twentieth century. Over the next several years, many composers wrote works for Chenoweth, including Harry Hewitt, Hal Momsen, and Jorge Sarmientos (Kastner, “Emergence” 49).

**Conclusion**

The years between 1940 and 1960 brought forth a wave of innovation that define the period as the birth and initial maturity of concert marimba. These changes were brought about by many different musicians and composers. Clair Omar Musser began the era with innovation in the design of the marimba, as well as aggressive promotion of the instrument by way of his large and highly talented marimba bands. Further, he began to write the first short unaccompanied solos, and also helped educate the first generation of great marimba soloists throughout his decade long tenure at Northwestern University. Three concertos written between 1940 and 1960 each played a vital role in establishing a core literature for solo marimba. Creston’s concerto was the first to break the marimba into the concerto hall scene (but was not able to completely shed its novelty roots), and Milhaud’s concerto represents some of the first experimentation with the timbre possibilities as well as the first attempt at a well established, European composer to write for the marimba. Though it was not very well-received, it brought a great deal of attention to the instrument. The Kurka concerto represents the first work to receive full
success. Not only was it appreciated as a serious solo work, but it all received widespread public appeal, which is evident in both its positive reviews and multiple performances throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. When Vida Chenoweth’s career began to blossom in the late 1950s, solo marimba finally began to establish itself in the concert hall. It had an established core literature, began to receive regular performances, and now had a virtuosic soloist whom the public could associate with the instrument.

Vida Chenoweth stated in a 1976 interview that “100 years from now, marimba will have had a history in western culture, which it did not have prior to the twentieth century” (Stevens 24). She continued by saying “as a youngster writing my first term paper, I found it defined in a reputable dictionary as ‘a few rough slabs thrown over an open pit, and beat upon by savages’” (Stevens 24). Clearly, the marimba has come a long was since Chenoweth’s early years. With an ever increasing body of literature and the help of thousands of performers and educators worldwide, the solo marimba of the concert hall is continuing to develop and reach new heights in the world of western art music. As the instrument continues to grow and its history in America becomes clearer, the key role of the musicians, composers, and events of 1940 to 1960 become increasingly apparent and important.


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