

## Creative Living

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## Orchestra's percussionist innovates with sounds

By Carolyn Barnett-Goldstein  
Special writer

From primitive beats to musical effects characterizing outer space, the symphony orchestra percussionist produces the sounds and rhythms the composer writes. In fact, many times the percussionist must create the instrument to produce a particular sound.

"You have to be a carpenter, a mechanic, an inventor, an engineer. You have to be able to put things together — to design things, come up with new ways to hold things, new sounds. It's very interesting," said Robert Pangborn, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's principal percussionist, as he describes his life and work.

He is sitting in the library of the expansive, Bloomfield Hills home he and his wife, Brenda, designed to accommodate their pursuits, interests and collections. His collections of figurines of percussionists from pre-Columbian periods to modern day metal, nuts and bolts with his, along with his collection of instruments from various cultures from around the world, show an appreciation of craftsmanship and the use of materials. He, himself, uses the same metals, woods and stones to create instruments.

HIS HOBBIES ARE an extension of the skills he needs as a percussionist. The model room, dominated by the workbenches he made, is set up with their hobby of train modeling, and his of dollhouse remodeling and making miniature. He said that as head of the four-man percussion section his main responsibilities are "to direct and to organize it, to understand every-

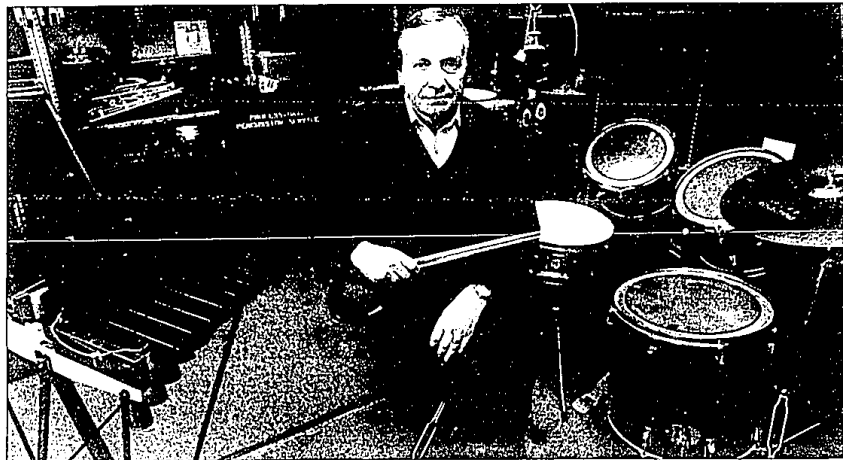
one's abilities, fortes, because, you know, we can't all necessarily play all of the percussion instruments equally well — and I must assign parts." As an example he cited the composition, "Afternoon of Infancy," by Schwaner which the orchestra recently performed. "The percussion parts are written by the composer for two players only, but they are so extensive — it's very difficult. So my job is to edit (the parts) so our full section can be involved." There also are fewer chances for mistakes, he said.

While he is in charge of the "general battery" that includes the snare drums, cymbals and bass drum, he is also assistant timpanist under Sal Rabbio. Timpani, or kettle drums, are played more often than the other percussion instruments in the section because of the repertoire.

"Many conductors regard their timpanists as extremely important in the orchestra for keeping the time. If the left hand is the concertmaster, the right hand of the conductor keeps the beat and is the timpanist."

He paused, then continued, "There was never any question in my mind I wanted to be a musician. The person, my heroes, that I looked up to were orchestra musicians. They were my uncle, who played trumpet in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, and Cloyd Saff, my teacher in high school, and that orchestra's principal percussionist."

Born 54 years ago in Palmsville, Ohio, 30 miles from Cleveland, he credits his mother, who played piano in theaters in the days of silent films, with his interest in music. His father gave him the wood-working skills.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Robert Pangborn, principal percussionist with Detroit Symphony Orchestra, draws on a amazing variety of skills to come up with many unusual sounds called for in symphonic scores.

HE BEGAN STUDYING DRUMS at 9, played professionally in high school and joined the DSO in 1953. Through the years he has continued to learn new instruments and techniques.

"Today," he said, "many composers are trying to use percussion instruments in a way to affect electronic sounds." In the Schwaner composition for instance, he said, "We resin the hair on the string bass bows heavily, and, then, use the bows on the edge of the vibraphone bar. It vibrates the bar, and it gives almost an electronic sound." The "ringing pitches" of the four crystal glasses "fit right in with outer space."

"Where they are not utilizing instruments that are already in existence, many times they're creating instruments, and a lot of percussion instruments are designed and created out of a composer's desire for a certain sound."

This is where his "bag of tricks" comes in. For both studio and symphonic percussionists this repre-

sents their personal collection of instruments, their searches and successes over the years to play sounds and effects. It holds their secrets.

Pangborn remembered, "When I recorded for Motown years ago, and that was a very basic kind of recording, I already had quite a collection of different sounds. Some of the producers were always interested in some kind of new sounds to get something going. So I would bring in weird things. I remember my first set of African log drums I bought in New York. I brought them in. They used them. They were fascinated."

For the symphony his "bag" includes chromatic scales of tuned stones, and "things call boomers, long tubular drums, with a very distinctive sound. Such instruments derive out of Hollywood studio orchestras. Somebody came up with a sound. They were playing around. A composer heard it, liked it, and wrote for it, that's how a lot of percussion stuff we use today in

the 20th century music had its beginnings."

He said that, while other musicians may dispute their validity, "they've found their way into the family of percussion instruments, into our large bag of tricks."

IN THE BOXES on his studio shelves are Balinese gongs, cup bells, Oriental bell trees, clay drums and metal chains.

One of John Cage's pieces calls for wood blocks — not Chinese. "With the help of my father, who had special equipment, I ended up making blocks (in graduated sizes). Of course, they all had a certain pitch. But where was I to get blocks that weren't 'Chinese'? What kind of blocks wouldn't be 'Chinese'? So we designed and constructed blocks that didn't sound 'Chinese.' So they weren't Chinese. We did it. It worked. To me it's one of the fun things about percussion, creating sounds, creating the instruments to play some of these sounds. You call upon your

own abilities, to put some thing together. Sometimes they (the instruments) are a little bit crude looking, but they work. I always enjoyed that part of being an orchestra percussionist — the challenge."

THE PERFORMANCE itself has built-in pitfalls. He said, "One of the most difficult things about being a percussionist is to know where you are at all times, because of the fact that you're not playing that much. Yet, when you make your entrance, it's dramatic — and important. It's an accent point in the music — and it had better be in the right place. So you've got to count."

The cannon effect for next year's performance of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" is already a concern. Will it be the bass drum, a shotgun fired into a barrel backstage or Pangborn's "super huge bass drum — the kind they have to put on a cart with wheels to take onto a football field?" Stand by.

## African-American quilts may steal the show

By Corinne Abatt  
Staff writer

Three outstanding local quilt collections will be on exhibit at "Quilts! Quilts! Quilts!" 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, May 3 and 4, at Evergreen Center, 13 Mile at Evergreen, Southfield.

The show, hosted by BASCC, Birmingham Area Senior Coordinating Council and the Center, is coordinated by Merry Silber of Birmingham, curator of quilt shows throughout the country.

In addition to the quilt display there will be a mini-mail, ongoing quilting demonstrations, quilting supplies and fabrics, films, books, crafts and appraisals.

The award-winning film, "Hearts and Hands," will be shown several times daily at no charge. "Bring

Your Own Quilt," a lecture/appraisal, will be presented at 2:30 p.m. both days.

A new quilt, "Indian Maiden," made especially for this show by members of the BASCC Quilt Club, will be given as a prize at 5 p.m. Friday.

MOST OF the quilts to be displayed have not been shown before, Silber said. They are from the Jean Conway, Kempf Hogan and Albert and Merry Silber collections.

Silber discovered Conway's rich quilt treasure only recently when she was called in to appraise and date them, she said.

The 10 quilts were made by Conway's two grandmothers from original designs of Marie D. Webster, foremost quiltmaker and designer who reigned supreme during the early 1900s, she said.

"Every art form has its Rembrandt — Marie Webster was the Rembrandt of quilt making. She created original designs at Marshall Field (Chicago) and wrote the first full-length book on quilting, 'Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them.'"

Several of Conway's quilts are illustrated in the book. Some of Webster's sample patches and hand-written instructions will be on display at the show.

ANOTHER CONWAY quilt in the show is one made by her great-grandmother, Sarah Morris McGre-

gor of Springfield, Mo., when she was 18. The needlework is extraordinary.

Silber had Conway hold her quilt up before a window and pointed out the cotton seeds left in the filling. "That's one way we date quilts — if they have seeds, they made before the cotton gin."

HOGAN, WHOM Silber described as "collecting everything," is now acquiring African-American quilts, which Silber called "a phenomenon, the hottest new collectable."

The African-American quilts are reminiscent of slave-made quilts,

she said.

The quilts are the "complete antithesis of the quilts in the Conway collection or Silber's quilts, which were recently in a Michigan State University traveling exhibition."

HOGAN'S QUILTS are to Conway's and Silber's as jazz is to Haydn, he said.

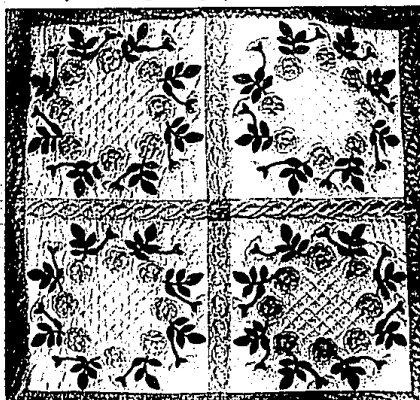
The American Folk Art Museum of New York City recently had a slave quilt exhibition, but quilts such as those are extremely hard to find — for one thing, they were made to be used until they wore out, Silber said.

They are not as finely made as others, doubtless because the makers had little time to work on them, but they are highly expressive and exciting in content and originality.

"Until 1971, these quilts were not recognized," Hogan said.

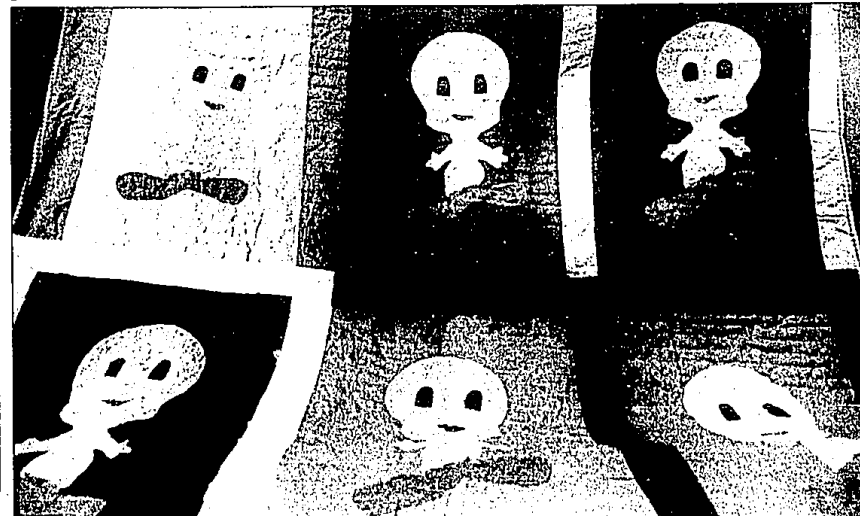
Silber will have posters available at the show of the quilting painting by Romare Bearden that was used for a mosaic at Detroit Institute of Arts.

Admission to "Quilts! Quilts! Quilts!" is \$3. Refreshments will be available. Parking is free.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

"Maggie Rose" is the name of this quilt in Jean Conway's collection. It is in perfect condition and was made by her grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Mann, in 1920 from Marie Webster's pattern.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

This "Tweety Bird" pattern in brilliant primary colors, from Kempf Hogan's collection, is reminiscent of the slave-made

quilts. Many like this were made in the late 1980s by Mattie Jackson of Mississippi.