



Robert van Sice coaches the Curtis Percussion Group before its annual recital.

So Many Gorgeous Sounds

Robert van Sice embraces the sonic possibilities of the percussion studio with characteristic enthusiasm.

BY DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

Marimba master Robert van Sice has a few basic surprises for anyone meeting him for the first time: He's not from the ever-progressive Netherlands—as his name, social graces, and Euro-heavy resume suggest—but grew up in Texas amid Lackland Air Force Base military bands. And do call him Bob, no matter how revered he is in percussion circles.

A Curtis Institute faculty member since 2008, Mr. van Sice has premiered 100-plus works for marimba, from solo pieces to concertos, while teaching at three conservatories. The percussion field has grown exponentially, he says, into a musically rich world he never imagined 30 years ago. And why wouldn't he want to be on a first-name basis with all who are involved with that?

"I would love to hear what Debussy would've done in a solo marimba piece, but I'm in on the birth of my instrument," says Mr. van Sice, 57, between coaching sessions at Curtis. "Composers who would never have thought about writing for percussion 30 years ago now have it in many of their pieces."

Standards of percussion playing continue to defy expectations. Mr. van Sice knew Evelyn Glennie as a participant in his master classes, before she became a percussion superstar and paved the way to the classical mainstream. The future looks even brighter. "Some 16-year-old kid shows up from the middle of nowhere, playing at a level that none of us thought would ever be possible. And one of my colleagues will ask if it's depressing to see a kid who plays circles around you," says Mr. van Sice. "I'm thrilled out of my mind! And if my students don't get better than me, maybe I'm not doing something right."

His typical high spirits were higher than usual one day last spring when he was fresh from the premiere of *Drum Circles*, a new work by Christopher Theofanidis, with the Oregon Symphony and the Percussion Collective (of which Mr. van Sice is artistic director). The piece finds Theofanidis venturing beyond his usual lush orchestrations: "The second movement is a Latin dance ... The third is like one of those Mauricio Kagel pieces: One of the guys plays typewriter," says Mr. van Sice. "The fourth movement is like [Iannis] Xenakis drumming." The Percussion Collective, which includes his former students from several conservatories, will join with Curtis percussion students to perform *Drum Circles* with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in October. "It's exciting beyond belief to see my current students playing alongside my former students," he enthuses.

No longer performing publicly, Mr. van Sice concentrates today on guiding the next generation. In all his teaching, the philosophical message is consistent: His students are musicians first. Percussion is just the voice they've chosen to express themselves. "Beauty of sound and

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PHOTOS BY PETE CHECCHIA

DRUM CIRCLES IN CONCERT

Robert van Sice's Percussion Collective and members of the Curtis Percussion Group perform Christopher Theofanidis's new concerto with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra on October 20 at Verizon Hall. Details are at Curtis.edu/Orchestra



Mr. van Sice insists on cross-pollination, maintaining that he can always hear the difference between players who have concentrated on only one instrument and those with a broader competency.

care of sound is a real signature of what we do,” he says. “The English often jokingly refer to percussionists as ‘bangers.’ Nothing can make my skin crawl more than that. One of the most exquisite parts of being a percussionist is that we can make so many gorgeous sounds.”

CHOICE BY CHANCE

Mr. van Sice’s start in the percussion world rested on the least likely of factors: teeth. An early bloomer, he wanted to take after his father by playing French horn, but didn’t want to wait for his adult teeth to come in. Excellent percussion training was available in the local military band community. His progress was fast, but because he’d skipped a grade in school, his dad nixed Juilliard: The kid was too young for New York. Oberlin was more like it. Soon the young percussionist was commuting to the Cleveland Institute—and well beyond. He absorbed African percussion in Cape Town. In Japan, he studied with marimba pioneer Keiko Abe, whom he calls “one of the founders of the marimba’s voice. Her impact was enormous and the fingerprint of the Japanese approach to instrumental colors, both in the way we play and the way composers write for the instrument today.”

Mr. van Sice played the first solo marimba recital at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in 1989. He later instituted Europe’s first solo marimba program at the Rotterdam Conservatory, while concertizing largely in Japan. In 1997, the Yale School of Music lured him back to the mainland U.S., and he later he added Peabody Conservatory to his teaching load. Eleven years ago he came to Curtis, attracted in part by his immense admiration for Don Liuzzi, his fellow Curtis faculty member and Philadelphia Orchestra principal timpanist: “If Don didn’t have such a magical ear for color, the end product with the orchestra would be a completely different thing,” he says.

Much of Mr. van Sice’s role at Curtis involves preparing students for orchestra auditions—fitting into the real world, as opposed to changing it. “He’s all about trying to make you sound the way the person on the audition committee is going to want to hear. It’s getting into the head of an instrumentalist who doesn’t play percussion and knowing how he thinks,” explains recent Curtis graduate Zubin Hathi.

So Mr. van Sice would seem to be practical. But when exploring new possibilities, “he’s the opposite of practical,” laughs Curtis alumna Mari Yoshinaga, who plays in his Percussion Collective. Evidence of that is his enthusiasm for experimental new works by composer James Woods, who introduced Mr. van Sice to newly developed quarter-tone marimbas. The composer’s *Cloud Polyphonies*, which Mr. van Sice recorded at Yale, impractically packs the stage with nearly 50 instruments—“but so worth the effort,” Ms. Yoshinaga adds, echoing the philosophy of her former teacher. “The sound world is only possible by combinations of percussion instruments.”

The sensible meeting point between these polarities is this: “Let’s say you just learned this John Cage piece that shows you how to breathe with somebody else on an entrance,” Mr. van Sice posits. “The next question is how that’s going to serve you in the orchestra on an evening with Yannick on the podium.”



Opposite and above: Mr. van Sice demonstrates a passage for percussion students (l. to r.) Hanna Kim, Julien Bélanger, and Yoonseo Kang; Zubin Hathi; Sijia Huang and Julien Bélanger; conducting a high point

BROAD COMPETENCY

Mr. van Sice “would love to see the percussion world accepted and respected alongside some of the other, older, more recognized instrumental disciplines.” He insists on cross-pollination among percussion instruments, maintaining that he can always hear the difference between players who have concentrated on only one instrument and those with a broader competency. He’s passed this philosophy on to his students. “You can learn how to make sound on the marimba by practicing timpani. You can incorporate how you phrase on marimba on the snare drum,” says Ms. Yoshinaga.

With that sensibility comes a deep-tissue examination of nearly every element of any piece Mr. van Sice coaches. Nothing goes unexamined, whether he is working out mechanistic details deep within Bartók’s *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* or, as in a lesson last spring with student Zubin Hathi, preparing Mark Applebaum’s *Aphasia*. This extraordinary work calls for the performer to make silent physical gestures that match the composer’s pre-recorded scattershot soundtrack. Mr. van Sice and Zubin even discussed if he should shed his glasses for a more communicative performance. (He did.)

Ensemble playing requires a distinctive brand of counsel. Isolated at the back of the orchestra, a percussionist might wait 80-some measures to make an entrance that everyone is likely to hear—especially if it’s not quite right. Mr. van Sice’s prescription: “Calm your nerves with preparedness.” Some of his students study full scores like conductors, getting the overall shape so they can feel their way into an entrance.

In rehearsals he is demanding but intensely personable, and unfiltered in ways that encourage true performances. “Guys, when you’re out there, just throw caution to the wind,” he told the members of the Curtis Percussion Group last spring, just before its end-of-year recital. “If you make a mistake, make it a really loud one—and it will make for a fantastic story afterwards!”

Zubin recalled his own reaction to this advice as a turning point. “In that moment, all of the pressure that I’d been putting on myself disappeared,” he said. “That was when I realized that rather than going out there and trying to be perfect, what I needed to do was simply trust all of the work that had already been done.”

Just as his teacher intended. ◊

David Patrick Stearns is a music critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and contributes to *Gramophone*, *Opera News*, and WQXR (New York), in addition to *Overtones*.

MORE ONLINE

Robert van Sice coaches the Curtis Percussion Group, comprising all the percussion students at Curtis. See and hear the ensemble at Curtis.edu/Overtones

PHOTO: MATTHEW GOLDSTEIN



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—ROBERT VAN SICE

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