FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Percussion Education in Norway

Andrew P. Simco

NORWAY—"THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT sun!" A land of crystal clear streams and fjords, pine trees and mountains! This is the picture that comes to mind when one thinks of this beautiful Scandanavian land It is however, also a land where an interest in percussion is rapidly growing, where competition for jobs is getting stiffer, and most importantly, where the level of playing and instruction is rising at a fairly fast pace It is this unknown "picture" of Norway which concerns us here I will attempt to describe it, albeit in a general way, with the result that the reader will at least gain a feeling of what has been and is going on here regarding percussive education

In order to do so, we need to take a very quick look back in time to 1964 or thereabouts to see what percussive life was like then Up until this period, percussion teaching was mainly in the hands of musicians connected with the local orchestras in Oslo, the Oslo Philharmonic (then known as the Philharmonic Society Orchestra, that name lasted until 1979) and the Norwegian Opera, and in Bergen by those associated with the Bergen "Harmonien" (since 1987 known as the Bergen Philharmonic). With the arrival of Per Erik Thorsen as principal percussionist in the Oslo Philharmonic, and of Paul Hægeland in Bergen, things changed over the years Each was instrumental in developing a program in their respective cities which gradually turned out students of sufficient caliber to carry on the work that they started into the 1970s, 1980s and now the 1990s

In Oslo, Per Erik Thorsen, solo percussionist with the Philharmonic from 1964 through 1987, and currently a member of the section, is considered by many to be the "founding father of modern percussion teaching" due to his work not only with the Philharmonic and his many recordings of contemporary Norwegian literature, but also to his years on the faculty of The Norwegian State Music Academy (known here as Norges Musikhogskole), and later The East Norway Music Conservatory (Ostlandets Musikkonservatorium) Many of his former students are carrying on the work he began, and have succeeded him on the faculties of both institutions His systematic and thorough approach to teaching brought organization to the system and was instrumental in raising standards of both teaching and playing. In Bergen, Paul Hægeland did somewhat the same with his work at the Orchestra and the Bergen Music Conservatory (Vestlandets Musikkonservatorium). In Stavanger, Trondheim, and in regions further north, percussive education has developed at a much slower pace, due mainly to the population distribution, which is centered in the main cities of Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim. Indeed, in Trondheim and the north, it is still somewhat in an embryonic form Christian M Berg, is the newly appointed solo percussionist with the Oslo Philharmonic He cites the lack of a sufficient student enrollment at the local conservatory as a major barrier to growth in this area. During his time in the Trondheim Symphony, there were at most two or three percussion students at the music conservatory there

The best way to enable the reader to understand what percussive life, especially in an educational sense, is like in Norway today would be to follow a "typical" student's course of instruction from youth to college and career opportunity. As we come to each stage, the author will describe the type of instruction available along with any method books used

The "typical" percussion student starts out associated with a school band called in Norway "skolekorps" or "Janitskorps." Just about every elementary school (called barneskole) has one, and the band is run by the parents who make up the Board of Directors They hire the band director and any instrumental instructors needed, which in our case includes a percussion instructor. At this stage, the instructor is either a very good student from the conservatory or a young professional just getting started The student begins as an "aspirant," literally an aspiring musician, one who is given instruction, but not allowed to perform with the band until his skills mature sufficiently to enable him to manage at least the simplest requirements Instruction at this stage is at its most basic, the student being given a pair of sticks and a printed tutor (text), plus some "Daily Practice Exercises" usually written by the instructor The student

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usually works out of these for several weeks or months, or until he is sufficiently trained to progress to full membership in the ensemble itself. Age of the players ranges from 8 years to 15 years, with the older players generally playing the more complicated instruments. The student learns basic techniques on bass drum, cymbals with a little glockenspiel thrown in. Thus equipped, the student participates in the events of the band, concerts and parades looking forward to the "Big Day" for the korps, the 17th of May, "Syttende Mai," Norway's Constitution Day, in which all of the local skolekorps march in the famous "Children's Parade" Every city and town has their own celebration on that day.

In addition to the weekly practice sessions, the korps provides semi-annual seminars for the members. These are usually held on weekends, and are usually an overnight affair, with instruction on both Saturday and Sunday. They involve the whole band, which breaks up into groups according to instruments. The percussion is taken as a section Instructors for these seminars are either advanced students from the music conservatory or professionals The author has personally conducted several of these seminars, and can explain from experience the "goings-on" What is involved here are demonstrations of technique, (everything is done in group instruction), ensemble playing, and going through the music the band plays regularly The seminars are designed so that the student will "stretch" him or herself Here is an example Saturday morning, 9 30-12 00, group technical instruction covering specifics on snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, traps and keyboard instruments. Saturday afternoon, 1 30-4 30,more of the same, plus ensemble training, using the Tom Brown series This teaches them to listen not only to what they do, but to each other Sunday morning, 9 30-12 00, group instruction with emphasis on music the section has been playing in, or will play.

Depending on the student's interest, age and capability, method books vary The most often used book for the skolekorps percussion student is the "Practical Instruction in Snare Drum," by the noted Norwegian composer and percussion pedagogue, Kjell Samkopf The book comes in two volumes, and it is quite simple and direct. The nearest equivalent the Americans have would be the well used Rubank Elementary Series. As mentioned earlier, emphasis on percussion instruction during the skolekorps years is on snare drum with bass drum and cymbals coming next in priority Mallets are next and timpani is last to be taught and mastered. Most korps in the outlying areas include at least glockenspiel, with the larger cities including xylophone, marimba and chimes However, in the outlying areas, tunable rototoms are used as timpani substitutes due to the lack of funds and also of adequate instruction. The larger cities have gradually rectified this situation since most of the korps now own their own timpani. However, for the most part timpani remains the most difficult of the percussion instruments for the student to master

Before we move on to the high school level, a note of explanation is needed concerning the types of schooling. In America, one has the elementary school (from grades 1-6), junior high school (grades 7-9) and high school (grades 10-12). In Norway, the system is somewhat similar, although starting age for pupils is 7 years. Elementary school, called here "Barneskole," goes from grades 1-6; the equivalent of junior high, called "ungdomskole," covers grades 7-9 and high school, which is called "Gymnas," or "Videregænde skole," covers grades 10-12.

We now look at percussion life at the high school level. When the student reaches the age of 15 or thereabouts, he is finished with skolekorps and ungdomkorps in general. Although if interested, they can progress to the amateur adult bands, called "voksnekorps." If the student is sufficiently skilled and exhibits musical talent, he or she might not go to the regular high school, or "gymnas", but might apply to and attend "videregænde skole." This offers most of the regular high school curriculum with the special addition of an expanded curriculum in the student's field of interest, in our case, music. The school has a "musikklinje," a music curriculum containing instrumental instruction, theoretical subjects, ear training, music history and ensemble. This curriculum is designed to help students learn more about music in addition to developing their instrumental skills. It also helps them determine their future course of education

IN OSLO, THERE ARE TWO SUCH SCHOOLS with music as an emphasis, Manglerud Videregænde Skole, where the author is responsible for the instruction of percussion; and Foss Videregænde Skole, where Anders Rønningen, timpanist of the Norwegian Opera Orchestra, is in charge of the program. Since the videregænde skole covers the high school curriculum, the music curriculum is also a three year affair This brings the student to his or her 18th year and college. Percussion instruction at this level is more intensive than at the elementary level. My own experience as an instructor at Manglerud Videregænde skole can provide a pattern for the type of instruction offered. The first year student receives a more thorough grounding in the rudiments of percussion with emphasis on snare drum and mallets The emphasis in lessons is for the students to organize themselves properly through practice procedures involving rudiments, sight reading and preparation of pieces for performance.

Many of the first year students have had irregular instruction at best (mainly involving seminars and occasional visits from the instructor who didn't necessarily teach every week). I tend to go over the basics of each instrument rather thoroughly "from the ground up"

so to speak To aid the student, the Podemski method on snare drum provides excellent assistance, as do the Goldenberg books on snare drum and mallets I also encourage the students to use the 'Stick Control' series on snare drum. This book by G L Stone has proved invaluable in the development of the roll and other rudiments

The first year students are not subjected to any juries so they are free to concentrate on developing their technical and musical skills In both the second and third year the student is expected to play semi-annually before a jury of music teachers on snare drum, mallets and timpani We continue to develop tone and technique, but the emphasis changes to performance Together the student and teacher choose pieces that will best serve the student's needs, and the student is then put through his or her paces. They have the opportunity to "try out" each piece during student concerts This builds their confidence and prepares them well for the jury Officially, the school offers ensemble training, a wind and percussion ensemble one semester, and a jazz ensemble the next. While there is no specifically planned percussion ensemble, I try to have several percussion ensemble sessions a year in addition to the regular teaching

My colleague over at Foss Videregænde skole has his own method of teaching, but the goals and the basic methods are the same At this stage, the student has reached the end of his 3 year course of studies, and now must choose the course of his higher education This education may be interrupted by a one-year stint in the military forces, (compulsory for all males of 18 and over), in which case the student, if sufficiently diligent, may enter one of the many military bands scattered throughout Norway. After his one year in the military is over he returns to the college scene, subject of course to college entrance exams and auditions

The serious student should by this point have had a chance to seek out as many performing opportunities as possible through the adult "janitskorps," and through the Norwegian Amateur Symphony Orchestra League which offers summer and winter seminars and concerts. Also available is the Norwegian youth Symphony which meets every summer up in the peaceful village of Elverum Entrance is by application and a small stipend is offered to the successful applicant to help with tuition and room and board The Youth Symphony rehearses and trains for a series of three or four concerts performing demanding literature such as Mahler's "Fifth Symphony," Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps," Holst's 'The Planet," Nielsen's "Fourth Symphony' and other such literature The students are given several days of intensive instruction at the beginning of their season (usually the month of August) After the week or so of intensive instruction, which includes just about all of the literature to be covered during the season, the students then go into rehearsal and concerts This program, instituted in 1973 by Harry Kvæbek, Leif Jorgensen and Karsten Andersen has been a rich source of material for the orchestras in Norway today Rolf Cato Raade, formerly timpanist of the Trondheim Symphony and newly appointed to the same position with the Swedish Radio Symphony, is a graduate of Elverum, as is Tom Vissgren, timpanist of the Bergen Philharmonic, Rune Martinsen, solo percussionist of the Norwegian Opera and Bjorn Loken, now on the faculty at East Norway's Music Conservatory, to name a few

HILE THE YOUTH SYMPHONY IS OPEN to students of high school age, it is usually high school seniors and college students who take part As mentioned before, the Norwegian Amateur Symphony Orchestra League, with its semi annual seminars and concert series, is the more usual route for students to develop their potential Before moving on to the college level, one last word concerning videregænde skole Not all students who are talented and have a desire to try their hands at a music curriculum are able to get in So what often happens is that the student may enroll in a normal gymnas (high school), and also take private instruction through the nearest videregænde skole as a sort of aspirant He or she pays extra for a weekly lesson in order to keep up his or her percussive abilities, and at the end of three years may apply to the school for a position in a special Fourth Class. This class is strictly devoted to instrumental music, theoretical and eartraining It is a course designed for those students who have the desire to prepare for a college music program and are sufficiently prepared for the one year course The course is literally a "cram session" with auditions at conservatories and entrance exams the main goal Entrance to the course is by audition and entrance exam

Let us now assume that the student has successfully completed his or her high school studies, and has passed the entrance requirements for a music school The main schools of opportunity include the Norwegian State Music Academy, East Norway Music Conservatory in Oslo, and the West Norway Music Conservatory in Bergen There is also the Rogaland Music Conservatory in Stavager, and the Trondelag Conservatory in Trondheim But due to enrollment and population, most of the work is done in Oslo, Bergen, with some progress in Stavanger

The music courses available to the student are very similar to those in America For example, at the Academy in Oslo there is a four year course, with the graduating student being known as a "kandidat," which is similar to a Bachelor's program A fifth or sixth year successfully completed gives the student a "Diplom," the equivalent of a Master's degree

The percussion staff of the Norwegian State Music Academy is presently made up of three individuals, Kjell Samkopf, noted percussionist, composer and pedagogue,

Trygve Wefring, assistant timpanist with the Oslo Philharmonic and for many years percussionist with Norway's "New Music" Program; and Rune Martinsen, from the Norwegian Opera. Kjell Samkopf has the primary responsibility for keyboard mallet instruction and administration. Trygve Wefring teaches timpani and percussion ensemble and Rune Martinsen concentrates on orchestral percussion and snare drum The students receive one hour a week on each main area of percussion which means up to three hours weekly.

Regarding timpani instruction, the incoming student has to show some facility with tuning, as well as basic technique. From that basis, the goal of the students both at the Academy and Conservatory is to improve both tuning and technique and to instill in them a concept of a sound that will enable them to play well, both orchestrally and in a solo capacity. The Goodman "Modern Method of Timpani Playing," and Fred Hinger's "Timpani Technique for the Virtuoso Timpanist" are the most often used books. Works such as the "Sonata," by Daniel Jones and Elliot Carter's "Eight Pieces," to name a few, offer the student scope for developing solo skills. The orchestral repertory is covered and often relates to what the Oslo Philharmonic is playing in a particular week, especially if it is a work such as "LeSacre," or any of the Mahler Symphonies, etc

Mallet instruction is quite thorough. Students must master the intricacies of the marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel and chimes Emphasis is placed on technique, musicality, sight-reading and tone. The Leigh Howard Stevens "Notebooks" Volumes 1 and 2 provide an excellent guide here along with sight-reading material and exercises chosen by the various instructors Rob Waring, noted vibraphonist and free-lance musician from New York, is also on the faculty of the East Norway Conservatory, and has written many fine exercises and instructional aids for vibraphone So there is no lack of proper instruction in this area. George Hamilton Green's "Fifty Studies" for Xylophone is also used.

Concerning snare drum, the Goldenberg "Modern Method" provides a good basis, especially with its section on orchestral percussion Sight-reading for juries and exams comes out of this book. The Delecluse series of "12 Etudes" is also a rich and rewarding source of sight-reading material as well as his "Initium."

Each of the schools field a fine percussion ensemble The Academy's program is under the direction of Trygve Wefring. The Conservatory is under the direction of Rob Waring and there is one at the Rogaland Conservatory, under the direction of Ivar Atle Fjordheim, timpanist of the Stavanger Symphony Each ensemble gives concerts throughout the school year. The Oslo ensembles appear on the series of concerts held at the famed Edward Munch Museum, as well as at various schools. In addition, they have been very active in appearing at the yearly symposium of the Norwegian Percussion Club.

The students are subject to a jury exam semi-annually from the second year on and are expected to give a recital, especially if they participate in the "Diplom" program. They can choose the program and some choose to perform a solo work with the orchestra

From then on it is every man for himself in the increasingly competitive job market in Scandanavia. There are opportunities to play free-lance in the theaters, as extras with the Oslo Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonic, Stavanger Symphony, Trondheim Symphony and the Norwegian Opera Orchestra when needed Also teaching with the various korps is an option

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Due to the efforts of the faculties of the above mentioned schools and conservatories, the standard of playing and teaching is immeasurably higher than it was even 15 years ago. The results can be seen in the increasing number of fine musicians turned out by the schools in demanding positions: Christian Berg, Oslo Philharmonic since 1989, previously Trondheim Symphony, 1984-89; Tom Vissgren, timpanist, Bergen Philharmonic since 1983, Hans Kristian Kjos-Sørensen, acting principal, Bergen Philharmonic, (from January 1990) These are just a few of the students who have profited from the example of Per Erik Thorsen and his successors who have done much to ensure the future of percussion in Norway.

Percussion is indeed alive and well in Norway! ■

Andrew P. Simco *received his B.Mus. and M.Mus. in percussion from the Manhattan School of Music where he was a pupil of Fred D Hinger and James Preiss. After graduation in 1975, he worked freelance in New York until 1977, when he was appointed timpanist of the Albany Symphony and Lecturer in percussion at Dartmouth College. In 1980, he was appointed Adjunct Instructor of Percussion at the University of Evansville, and timpanist with both the Evansville Philharmonic and Owensboro Symphony Orchestras, positions he held until 1983, when he was appointed solo timpanist of the Oslo Philharmonic, a position he still holds. Since his appointment in Oslo, he has served as percussion coach with the Norwegian Youth Symphony, substitute lecturer in percussion at the Norwegian State Music Academy, and since 1984 has been lecturer in percussion at Manglerud Videregænde Skole*

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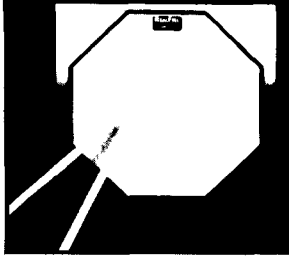
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