

Rebecca Kite Career Biography

Summary

Rebecca Kite is one of the most important percussionists of her generation and is the only woman of her generation who is recognized and honored internationally for her contributions to the percussion and marimba community. Today, at the age of 68, she continues to be engaged in her professional performing and teaching career of more than 48 years. She has recently served as a jury member of the 2017 Universal Marimba Competition in Belgium and as an invited, external jury member for two marimba PhD defense examinations for candidates Ludwig Albert in 2016 and Cheng Chin Lin in 2019 at the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp.

Entering the profession during a historical time when playing percussion in the classical music world was a male dominated activity, and women, in general, were not expected to have careers, she found that her dreams and aspirations were not supported; she was going to have to create her own opportunities to build a career as a professional musician.

Over the long arc of Kite's career, she developed strong threads for aspects of being a musician and excelled in all areas: performance, teaching, writing, instrument design, and service to the percussion community. She wove these threads together into the cloth of a substantial career, making important contributions to our field with each one. Three achievements stand out in major significance: timpani design and patents, her biography of Keiko Abe/History of the Marimba research and book, and her success in creating a life-long career as a woman percussionist.

Her career has provided inspiration to everyone, but especially to young women percussionists, for how they can weave their own musical paths into a strong cloth and fulfilling life as a musician. She is a role model and mentor to young players.

The full cloth of Kite's career – the threads of activities, musical experiences, projects and accomplishments - demonstrate what a career can become that does not fit the standard model that is seen in most percussionists careers– 40 or 50 years in the same orchestra or in a tenured full time faculty position at a university with hundreds of students. When you create your own opportunities and you follow the threads that pull you into artistic opportunities where you can be passionate about your art, a fulfilling and productive career will follow, as Kite's career shows. She has inspired women to persist in their personal goals and create their own career thread; to weave together their own career cloth as a musician and percussionist.

Performing Career

Kite grew up in a musical household. Both her mother and aunt were accomplished amateur pianists and Kite's home was infused with music. By the time she was ten years old, she was playing piano, violin and percussion. Living in a small college town where the school was part of the local State Teachers College, she also played snare drum in the college band as a middle school student and filled in with the college orchestra on violin for commencement exercises.

There was no percussion specialist available for private lessons, so she was self-taught after one year of beginning percussion lessons with her band director. As a high school student, she sought out sheet music that looked too difficult to sight read or that had new material she had not seen before. She purchased it, analyzed it, and learned to play it.

An outstanding music student, she excelled in percussion performance and was an All-State musician in both her Junior and Senior years of high school. A six-week summer camp experience at the Midwest Music and Art Camp in 1968 at Kansas University cemented her love for percussion, as she had her first professional instruction in timpani from George Boberg, and was completely immersed in the musician's life of practice, rehearsal, and performance – and she loved it!

Based on that experience, she decided to become a music major in college. After playing both violin and percussion in her first year, she decided to focus on percussion exclusively and transferred to the UMKC Conservatory of Music in Kansas City. Her professional career began in 1972 when she was called at the last minute to play timpani, sight reading a Symphonic Band Spring concert at Missouri Western University in St. Joseph, MO.

She joined the AFM (musicians union) and began gigging in her senior year of college, most often on drum set (on which she was self-taught, inspired by drummers in the KC scene, especially funk and R&B drumming by Melvin Webb drummer for Bloodstone, Marvin Gaye, and James Brown). After graduation, she and four other students (all women) formed a five-piece band (drums/rhythm guitar, percussion/vibes, keyboard/sax/singer, singer/organ, bass/acoustic guitar) named Pandora (later Airhart). Applying their experience from music school of selecting music, rehearsing, polishing, and performing, they rehearsed for 6 weeks, created arrangements, hired a booking agent, and by the beginning of September were performing at clubs, parties, weddings, dances, etc., and making a living doing it. Pandora built a regional reputation and was heard nationally on NPR's Jazz Alive program, at the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, and at other major events in the central Midwest.

During this time, Kite was also timpanist of both the Kansas City Civic Orchestra and the Northland Symphony. Realizing her passion was really being a timpanist in classical

music/orchestra instead of drumming, she began private study with Cloyd Duff and eventually quit the band to go to graduate school at Indiana University to study with George Gaber in order to focus on timpani performance and audition preparation.

After study with Duff and George Gaber and receiving a Master's degree from Indiana University, she sought free-lance opportunities as well as orchestra employment as a timpanist. Over the years, she was timpanist of the Owensboro (KY) Symphony, Evansville (IN) Philharmonic, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, Plymouth Music Series Orchestra (MN) in addition to assistant timpani positions in Albany (NY), The Glimmerglass Opera (Cooperstown, NY), and the Utica (NY) Symphony. She also free-lanced as a percussionist and drummer in the Central Indiana and Minneapolis/St. Paul areas, performing as second percussion with the Minnesota Opera for 8 years. She also performed with touring shows, theater productions, and new music performances.

Over this thread of percussion and timpani performance, she shared the stage with many luminaries such as Ella Fitzgerald, Franco Gulli, Rudolph Nureyev, Garrison Keillor, Carol Channing, and Keiko Abe.

Kite began performing solo marimba recitals in 1980 as her interests began to shift toward marimba music. As her experience and repertoire developed, she drew on her experience as a drummer in Kansas City to seek out opportunities for marimba performance, such as small clubs, weddings, concert series, and art gallery performances. When the five-octave marimba first became available in 1985, she purchased one and immediately began developing techniques, mallets, and repertoire, learning how to get the greatest possible musical expression from this exciting and inspirational new concert marimba.

She was recognized as an emerging artist worthy of state-wide notice by the Indiana Arts Council, which awarded her fellowships in both 1988 and 1992 for her "Research and Development work in the Arts." This financial support was important for the preparation, recording, and CD production of her debut album, *Across Time*, which includes her groundbreaking interpretation and performance of the Chaconne in D minor by J.S. Bach – the first commercial marimba recording of this piece in the US. This recording established her national reputation as an exceptional marimba soloist:

"The expressive range of the marimba is limited by both its distinctive and unchanging tone color and its inability to sustain tones beyond a short duration. Rebecca Kite is, however, a fine performer with an impressive technique, a good deal of musical sense, and the ability to exploit all the nuances of the instrument . . . The most satisfying piece on the disc is Kite's own transcription of the famous Bach D-Minor Chaconne. Here Kite's pacing and building of the often - complex variations are exemplary, and even

thought the central D-Major section of the work calls out for an instrument on which a true legato could be played, her voicing of the chords and her sensitivity to the musical line somehow make it work.” Richard Burke, *Fanfare Magazine - The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors*, November/December 1994.

Building on the success of this recording, Kite continued to expand her activities as a marimba soloist and created and performed on a dedicated marimba concert series for five years in St. Paul, Minnesota: The Heartwood Marimba Series. In addition, Kite began touring internationally in 1996 and in 2000 was awarded an American Composers Forum Collaboration grant with composer Bruce Hamilton for the composition, recording, and international premier of his piece in Argentina. Since 1996, she has performed in South America, Central America, Japan, Spain, Europe, and across the United States.

Teaching

As with performance, teaching has always played an important part of her musical activities and is a strong thread woven throughout the length of her career. In addition to growing up in a rich musical household, Kite grew up in an atmosphere where learning was important – both of her parents were teachers. Teaching became second nature to her--she started teaching private percussion lessons while she was in high school, and has continued throughout her life as she is in the 50th year of her teaching career.

In recognition of her excellence and dedication to teaching, including her CD recording *Prism*, released in 1996, where she performs student level marimba pieces so young players can hear the possibilities they can strive for in interpretation, Yamaha honored her with their Legacy Award in Education in 2017 in honor of her lifelong dedication to music education.

She has a lifelong interest in percussion pedagogy and has taught students of all ages and levels ranging from beginning percussion and drum set students who are in elementary and middle school to adult amateur percussionists. Her specialty focus since the early 1990's has been teaching keyboard percussion, preparing high school level students for college auditions, teaching and mentoring percussion majors at the university level, and professional level musical coaching for young, aspiring marimba soloists. She has been part of the faculties of the University of Minnesota, The University of St. Thomas (St. Paul), Hamlin University (St. Paul), and the University of Maryland, College Park. In addition, she was engaged as Artist in Residence for semester appointments at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, and SUNY Fredonia.

As part of her teaching, she has written method books for beginning four mallet students and for young adults and college student to learn to become fluent readers of pitched music. *Reading Mallet Percussion Music* (1994, third edition 2010) has been highly regarded and used by thousands of percussionists to learn to read pitched music and improve their sight reading skills. The *Anthology of Lute and Guitar Music for Marimba* (2001) has also been used by many percussionists to improve their four mallet playing and sight reading, and pieces from the book have been chosen for solo and ensemble contests, All-State auditions in Texas.

Instrument Design

In the early 1980's, after graduate school and a few years of teaching and playing in regional orchestras in Kentucky, Kite returned to Indiana University to be the Percussion Technician, in charge of instrument repair, acquisition, and logistics. During this time, she became familiar with the various designs of timpani that were in use and their individual quirks and shortcomings. Many flaws she observed became a source of inspiration to build a new set of timpani with improved design for different parts of the instrument. Kite found a business partner in Barbara Allen and the two founded GP Percussion. The timpani she designed and built are now on display at Discovery! Rhythm Center. Throughout the process of building and refining these drums, GP Percussion was granted four timpani patents for their 35 refinements of timpani design.

Kite and Allen strengthened the frame and made improvements in the mechanical aspects of the pedal, rocker arm, and spider to improve the sound production. They redesigned the bowl to better work with the sound wave produced when the head is struck for a particular pitch. They made the timpani easier to move and also lock the drum in place so it would not move by introducing rolling locks and swivel locks.

GP Percussion produced numerous timpani for over a decade and their timpani are currently used by orchestras, universities, military bands, and professional percussionists all over the United States as well as Germany. The innovations in these timpani have inspired numerous drum makers to adopt several of their ideas into their instrument designs.

In addition, she was engaged by Pro-Mark for three years, doing research and development for new product ideas.

Writing

Kite became interested in writing, specializing in timpani and marimba topics, toward the second half of her career. She then served PAS as Timpani Editor for Percussive Notes for four years and published more than twelve articles for Percussive Notes. She has also written for the Grove Dictionary of American Music. In 2000, she started the most significant writing project in her career up to that point: researching and writing the biography of marimbist Keiko Abe.

Keiko Abe's work as a marimbist is un-paralleled and the significance of her work as a performer, teacher, and her collaboration with Yamaha in designing the first five-octave concert marimba all have given rise to a world-wide popularity of this instrument, thousands of compositions, and many thousands of marimbists today around the globe.

Having met Abe in 1981 and having studied and performed with her, then purchasing one of the first 5 octave marimbas made and developing her own performance with it, Kite had witnessed Abe's work (for which PAS had honored Abe by her election to the Hall of Fame in 1993) and wanted to document it so future generations would understand the significance and impact of this marimbist.

Rebecca Kite's biography, *Keiko Abe – A Virtuasic Life: Her Musical Career and the Evolution of the Concert Marimba* began in the spring of 2000 when Kite met with Abe to ask her to cooperate with the project of writing her biography, to which Abe agreed.

Research for the book involved five trips to Tokyo to find and collect primary sources for use in writing about Keiko Abe's career and her influence on marimba music and the instrument itself. Kite conducted more than 50 interviews, and met with Abe's colleagues, family, friends, former students, and composers who wrote Abe's most important commissions. Primary sources from Abe herself included sheet music, copies of programs, diaries, photographs, LP recordings (Kite digitized 25 LP recordings made before 1975), correspondence, newspaper reviews and articles, and other materials. Additional sources included writings on Japanese music, Buddhism, Japanese History, and Japanese Culture. Many articles from Percussive Notes, and the Gerhardt collection were used as well as photographs from the PAS Museum holdings. In all, Kite collected more than 385 bibliographic sources for reference in writing the book.

Published in 2007, this book received many reviews and was praised as being "the first scholarly book about percussion history that is based on primary research and has created new knowledge of our past since the James Blades History of Percussion Instruments (published in 1970)." It is currently an important reference book for graduate level study, theses, and doctoral dissertations, globally.

This book, which tells the inspirational story of Keiko Abe's musical life and the history of the marimba, has inspired marimbists and percussionists all around the world. Its importance and influence is shown by publishers in Japan and Mexico taking on the translation expense and its publication in Japanese by Yamaha Media Press and in Spanish by the University Press of UNICACH in Chiapas, Mexico.

Service

Rebecca Kite has been a PAS member for 50 years, since her freshman year of college in 1969. Since 1992, she has participated in leadership roles in PAS – from serving as an officer in various capacities at the state level, to editing timpani articles for Percussive Notes, and writing and submitting articles for Percussive Notes. Kite was elected to the PAS Board of Directors in 1994 and 1996. She served on the WPN committee, which set up the first online presence for PAS during the 1990's and was awarded the 1999 PAS Outstanding Service Award for this work.

Kite was the Founder and Chair of the Marimba Committee from 1997 to 2002, and she focused on assisting international marimba artists to come perform at PASIC. She also introduced the panel discussion format into the PASIC programming.