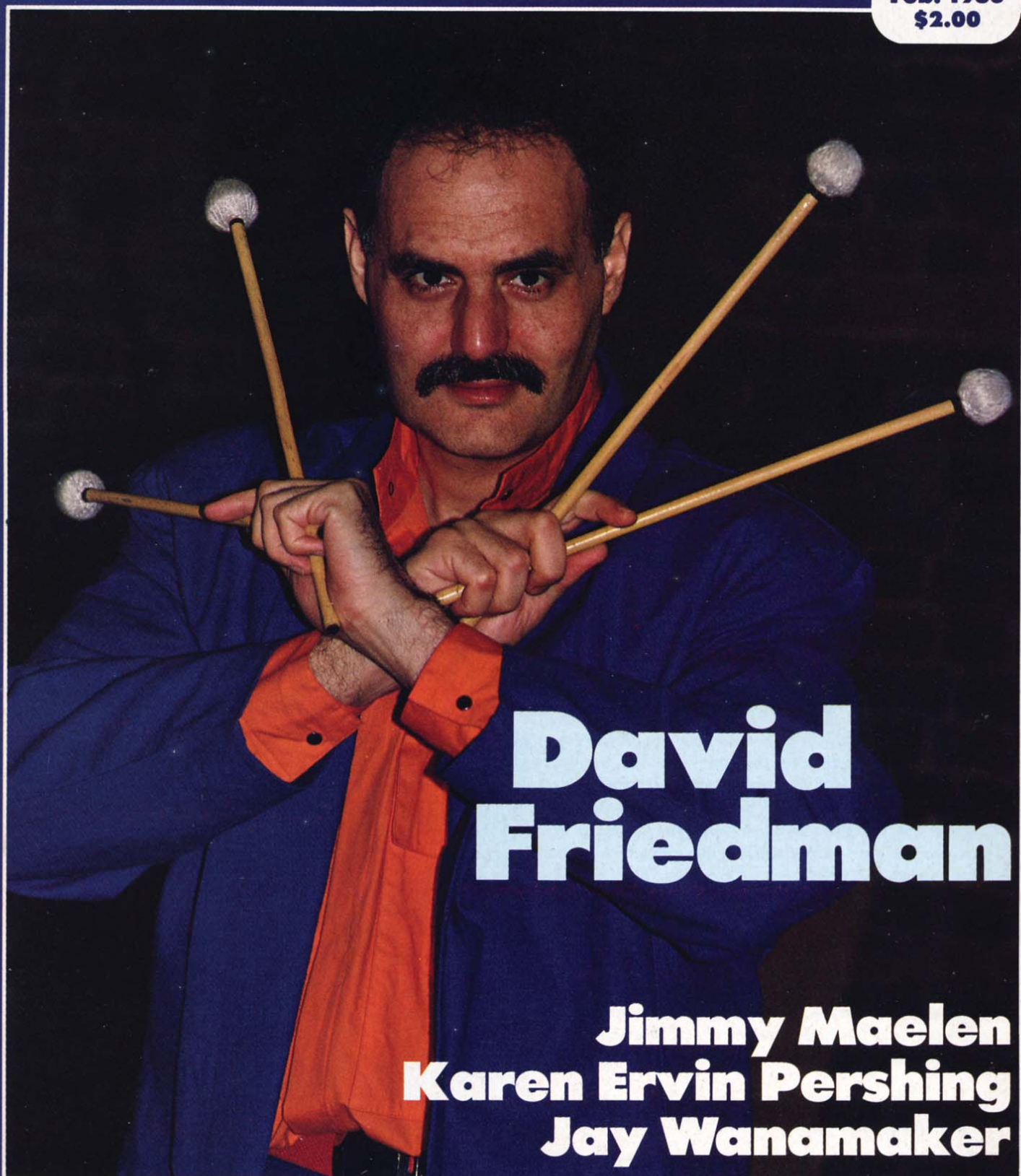


# MODERN PERCUSSIONIST



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**David  
Friedman**

**Jimmy Maelen  
Karen Ervin Pershing  
Jay Wanamaker**

**Glen Velez's Tambourines • Studio Doubling Scales**

**DOING  
IT  
HER  
WAY**



**KAREN  
ERVIN  
PERSHING**

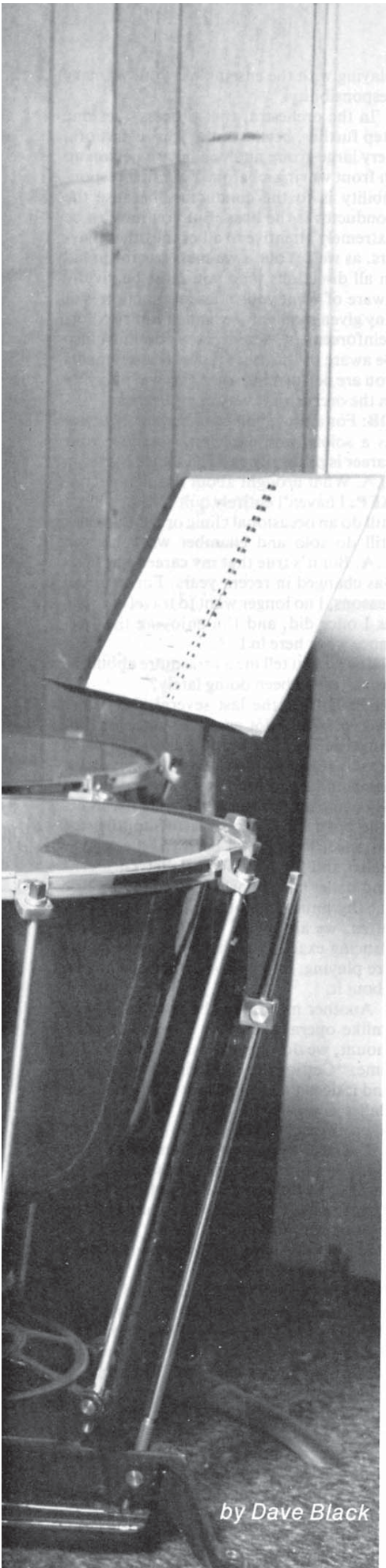


Photo by Jaeger Kotos

by Dave Black

**K**AREN Ervin Pershing is recognized as one of this country's outstanding solo percussionists. She has twice been a prize winner in international competitions: the prestigious *Concours Internationale d'Execution Musicale*, Geneva, Switzerland, and the *Competition for Contemporary Percussion*, held in France. She has received enthusiastic acclaim from critics and audiences alike for three solo recordings: Karen Ervin, Percussionist (*WIM 5*), Music For Winds and Percussion (*Crystal S164*), and Karen Ervin, A Marimba Recital (*Studio 4 Productions*). Karen is a former clinician/artist for the Musser Marimba and Ludwig Drum Companies. She is currently teaching at California State University, Northridge, and keeps a busy schedule as a free-lance musician in the Los Angeles area.

**DB:** Do female percussionists have more opportunities available to them today than they did when you were growing up?

**KEP:** Yes and no. I think my school years were a transitional period. On the negative side, several teachers warned me that being a female would make it difficult for me to have a career as a percussionist. It may be that I did lose some work because of my sex, though I only know of one instance when that happened. But even then, attitudes were changing toward women in percussion and toward women in music, for that matter. Almost as soon as I got out of school, I was employed often enough not to feel particularly discriminated against.

Now, it's obvious that things are open to women percussionists. For instance, in one of the prestigious college-level youth orchestras in Los Angeles, the entire percussion section is female. Naturally, I think that's a good thing. These women play well, and their abilities are recognized.

**DB:** When you first expressed an interest in percussion, were you taken seriously?

**KEP:** My family argued against it for reasons you might suspect. They couldn't imagine their "little girl" being a drummer; the instrument itself seemed unfeminine to them. More than that, they were worried about my going into music at all, since it seemed to be an insecure career. But when I continued to be serious about it, they made a 180-degree turn. Both my parents have been extremely supportive of my career. Now, they're my biggest fans.

**DB:** Would you say that your original goal was unusual, considering your gender and the prevailing attitudes of the time?

**KEP:** I guess it must have been, but I just didn't think about it much. Despite the fact that my parents were initially against my going into music, they had brought me up to believe that I could do anything I wanted to. Being male or female never came into it. What did seem unusual, and perhaps a little scary, was the interest I developed in solo percussion. This was

1965, a time when everyone I knew was aiming toward a career with a symphony orchestra or possibly as a studio musician.

**DB:** What are some of the challenges involved in having a career in solo percussion?

**KEP:** When I decided I wanted to be a solo percussionist, I didn't know if there even was such a thing. Later, I learned that there were people involved in solo percussion, most notably Christof Caskel and Max Neuhaus, but at the time, I hadn't heard of either of them, I'm ashamed to say. So my first challenge was to discover if it could be done.

The challenge that still remains is the repertoire. We simply do not have the backlog of solo pieces that the strings, the woodwinds, and even brass players do. Since our repertoire does not span several hundred years, it's difficult to plan a recital with an interesting balance and variety.

There is an even greater problem finding a concerto to play with an orchestra. Wouldn't it be great if there were a Brahms Concerto for marimba? But of course, there isn't. Unfortunately, most symphony managers consider contemporary music difficult to "sell" to their audiences, and of course, contemporary music is all we percussionists have to play.

**DB:** How did you make a career in solo percussion work for you? What were some of the positive and negative aspects of that?

**KEP:** I never tried to work through regular concert booking agencies, but instead contacted colleges and universities where there were audiences composed of percussionists and other music students. Those audiences were quite open to hearing a percussion soloist.

The positive aspect was that music students and musicians were generally predisposed to be interested and to be favorable. The negative aspect was that I felt, at times, a wish to communicate with a broader audience that included people who simply enjoyed hearing music. I was able to do that a few times when a concert series was willing to take a chance on a percussion player, and I found it very satisfying.

When I did have a chance to perform for a general audience, I tried to talk a little about what I was doing. I'd give some information about the instruments and the pieces I was playing. Everybody, you see, has heard a violin, but there are an awful lot of people who have never heard a marimba, or if they have, they don't know they've heard one. I think it helps to do a little explaining. Our job is communication, and I don't see anything wrong in communicating in as many ways as possible.

**DB:** What has been going on with solo percussion literature within the last ten years?

**KEP:** Naturally, there has been quite an increase in solo percussion literature.



Photo by Jaeger Kotos

There are new pieces being written all the time. Many of them are excellent, and of course, others will fall by the wayside.

**DB:** Can you mention any of your favorites?

**KEP:** Some of my favorite pieces that I've performed again and again are pieces that combine percussion with other sounds. Two that come to mind are both by California composers: a piece by William Kraft called "Soliloquy," for solo percussion and tape, and "Intercurrence" by Daniel Kessner, also for percussion and tape. The tape sounds in both pieces add a larger dimension to the music.

Among marimba pieces, two of my personal favorites are "Continuum," also by Daniel Kessner, and "Music Of The Spheres" by Larry Solomon. I think the reason these two stand out in my mind is that they are clearly conceived for the marimba and couldn't be played by any other instrument. Some marimba pieces have that characteristic, while you can imagine others working equally well on piano or for strings or winds. Also Bill Kraft has written a new timpani concerto that is very exciting. So far, I've only heard it on tape, but I'm looking forward to having a chance to perform it sometime.

**DB:** What would you advise someone to do who wants a career in solo percussion?

**KEP:** I think there are several ways of going about it. One thing that was valuable

for me was participating in percussion competitions. I was involved in two in Europe that not only helped my reputation as a player, but also gave me a sense of how I played and what I could be doing better. I learned a great deal from watching and listening to the other competitors.

For instance, in the first competition I entered, there was this one extremely graceful player. When I got home, I worked very hard to improve the grace and style of my own movements. I also gained a feeling of accomplishment from those competitions. Once I had done them and had won a couple of prizes, I felt more confident about going to someone at a college and saying, "Hey, I'd like to play a solo concert for you."

The other thing I'd recommend for an aspiring soloist is to have pieces written. We still need a lot of literature. If you know or can find good composers who are willing to write something for you, it helps you by giving you something new to offer in your programs, and it also helps percussion in general—as well as the composers who benefit by having their work heard. I think that some of the best things I've done have come about through working with a composer whose talents I respected.

**DB:** You've worked as a solo percussionist, a chamber percussionist, and an orchestral percussionist. What are the differences among those three fields?

**KEP:** As a solo percussionist, your first job is communicating your ideas and those of the composer to your audience. You are the soloist—the one in the spotlight. Therefore, you must be very strong and very powerful, because you're solely in charge of getting the musical ideas and emotions across.

When you work with chamber music, you are joined by one to x number of other players, and a new dimension is added. In one way, your responsibility decreases,

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since you have help now! Visually, you have to be careful not to stand out quite as much as you did as a soloist, for fear of taking attention away from the ensemble as a whole. Perhaps your movements should be a bit more restrained. But a new responsibility is added. You have to listen very intently. You have to be aware that the triangle note you're playing might be with the oboe or the viola. Blending and

playing with the ensemble is your primary responsibility.

In the orchestra, that process goes one step further, because now you're part of a very large group and you have a person up in front waving a baton. Your first responsibility is to the conductor, because the conductor is the boss. But you have to be extremely attentive to all of the other players, as well. Your awareness has to spread in all directions, and you must be vividly aware of what your musical function is at any given moment—whether you're color, reinforcement, accent, etc. You must also be aware of the other types of instruments you are performing with. In a way, playing in the orchestra is very complicated.

**DB:** For a time, you were extremely active as a soloist and clinician, but now your career is primarily as a free-lance player in L.A. What brought about the change?

**KEP:** I haven't entirely quit solo playing. I still do an occasional clinic or recital, and I still do solo and chamber work here in L.A. But it's true that my career emphasis has changed in recent years. For personal reasons, I no longer want to travel as much as I once did, and I'm enjoying the free-lance work here in L.A.

**DB:** Can you tell me a little more about the work you've been doing lately?

**KEP:** During the last several years, I've been playing a lot as a free-lancer in Los Angeles, doing a lot of ballets for some reason. In L.A., certain people get called again and again for certain kinds of work. My name must be on a big ballet list somewhere. In the last couple of months, for instance, I've played both for the Joffrey Ballet and for American Ballet Theater. I find ballet particularly enjoyable, because the rhythmic element is so important. Very often, we are aware that the dancers are dancing exactly to what we percussionists are playing, so we have to be very precise about it.

Another nice thing about ballet is that, unlike opera where the singers are paramount, we don't get shushed down all the time. "Getting the hand" is what we call it, and it doesn't happen very often in ballet. Ballet is enjoyable. I find that I'm very happy in the ballet pit.

I've also been doing a number of other things—some opera, some chamber music, and I play extra fairly often with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. That's always a lot of fun, of course.

**DB:** What do you find challenging about that kind of work?

**KEP:** In recent years, especially, I've found that I very much enjoy working in the orchestral context, for the reasons that I mentioned earlier. There's something really satisfying to me about, for instance, making my bass drum note work perfectly with the tuba or striving for a really great cymbal crash. There's so much going on in an orchestral situation that you really have to be aware all the time of who you're play-

ing with. You have to make your sounds function the way they're supposed to. I guess I've gotten to the point where I enjoy that challenge as much as, or more than, the challenge of being a soloist.

**DB:** When you were growing up, were you motivated to attain higher goals because of your sex?

**KEP:** I don't think about it in those terms. I was motivated because I came from an achievement-oriented family. I grew up expecting to do well at whatever I did. I don't think it had to do with being female.

However, I do notice one interesting difference between male and female students, especially younger ones. It seems as if boys in elementary school and junior high often play drums because it's fun; it's socially acceptable. The girls, it seems to me, go into percussion, because they really like it, and they tend to be extremely serious and hardworking.

I've had many male students who were serious, of course, but also some who obviously weren't. They were appalled to discover that college-level percussion work meant hours and hours of practice every day. But I've never yet had a female student who wasn't strongly motivated and hardworking. Perhaps I'm overgeneralizing and other teachers haven't had the same experience, but so far, I've found it to be true.

**DB:** Do you think that the field of percussion is still looked upon as a predominately male profession?

**KEP:** Statistically, it is, of course. We are still vastly outnumbered by the men. On the other hand, it's been a long time since a conductor has noticed me in a section and acted at all shocked or surprised. Interestingly enough, in the Los Angeles run of American Ballet Theater, the percussion section was exactly balanced—two men and two women. This is slightly unusual, I'm sure, in terms of overall statistics, but no one has acted as if it were a big deal in any way.

**DB:** Do you feel that women today in the percussion field have had to work harder in order to prove themselves?

**KEP:** When it gets to a professional level, everyone who is successful has worked very hard. I couldn't make a distinction between men and women. In actual fact, there have been times when I've thought I had a slight advantage over my male colleagues.

**DB:** Why is that?

**KEP:** Let me answer that by asking you this question: Out of a section of ten percussion players, who are you most likely to remember, the nine men or the one woman?

**DB:** I see what you mean.

**KEP:** In several cases, especially in my early years, I would be on a job with four or five colleagues and would get called back the next time, perhaps when only one player was required. I'm sure it wasn't



Photo by Jaeger Kotos

because I'd dazzled the contractor or conductor with my wonderfulness, though I'd love to think that was the case, but only because I was remembered more clearly than the three or four guys.

There are also contractors—bless their hearts—who have deliberately sought to hire women percussionists and women in general. These men felt that any stigma against women was wrong and tried to combat it.

I have a great story along those lines. When I was first starting to play in L.A., in the late '60s to early '70s, I did lose out on one job that I know about, because the conductor flatly refused to have a woman in the percussion section. If the story I heard was accurate, this man laughed himself silly when my name was suggested to him. I won't name the conductor, though I'd love to.

Very soon, the word got around town about what had happened. Within a couple of weeks, I got a call from a contractor I'd never met and who had never heard me play. He told me that he heard about this other situation, was furious about it, and

wanted to hire me.

My first few years of work as a free-lance player were largely due to this man. He gave me the chance, simply because he felt that I had been treated unfairly. In the long run, I got a hundred times more work than I had lost owing to the chauvinist conductor.

**DB:** When you're working with respected male percussionists, do you feel that you're treated as their equal?

**KEP:** Absolutely, both by the players themselves and by others.

**DB:** In your opinion, who are some of the outstanding female percussionists?

**KEP:** The names that come to mind are Vida Chenoweth as a marimba soloist, Linda Pimentel, also as a marimbist, and of course, Keiko Abe. Other outstanding performers are Elayne Jones as a timpanist, and Sumire Yoshihara, who is an extremely fine all-around percussionist. My apologies to the many other fine women I've no doubt overlooked.

**DB:** After being involved in the field for a number of years, would you still encourage a young female to go into percussion?

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**KEP:** Just as much as I would encourage a young male. Nowadays, there are women in major symphonies; in this country, at least, it no longer seems to be a problem. In L.A., at least, there are several successful women in the studios.

The problem is not one of gender. Success in music or in any of the performing arts is very, very difficult to attain. Anyone involved in music should be aware that there's no job security out there. For every job, there are dozens—sometimes hundreds—of qualified people available. I'm not just talking about symphony openings, but about the free-lance field as well. Young players come out to L.A. to break into the business. Some of them grow bitter when they're not immediately hired and feel that there is some kind of conspiracy to exclude them. "It's all politics," is a refrain you hear often. But the fact is that there are highly qualified people currently doing the jobs. Is one of them supposed to be bumped in order to make room for a new person? The idea is ludicrous. The problem is that there are simply not enough jobs.

On the other hand, I have yet to know anyone who plays very well, with technical expertise and musical sensitivity, and who is also a reliable, responsible, and decent person who does not eventually make a satisfactory career for himself or herself. Sometimes this requires the creativity to put together a career out of various kinds of playing and teaching activities. But it can be done.

There's a topic for you to write about, Dave—the kinds of careers percussionists manufacture for themselves. I deliberately use the word "manufacture," because that's what it often amounts to. I can give you a whole list of people who are doing very interesting combinations of things in order to make a living in music—both women and men, by the way.

**DB:** How do you feel about percussion education at the university level as it exists today?

**KEP:** There are many colleges and universities in this country that are doing an excellent job in percussion. Frankly, I have oftentimes been surprised, when giving a clinic at some little school I had barely heard of, by the extremely high quality of teaching and learning that was going on there. Real excellence exists in many places.

Naturally—and here's the commercial—I'm particularly pleased with what we're doing at Cal State Northridge. We continue to try to broaden the scope of the program by bringing in experts in various areas—Latin percussion, African drumming, tabla, special accessory classes—in order to give our students as much breadth as possible. The well-rounded student,

capable of responding to whatever challenge or career opportunity may arise for him or her is what we're after. Of course, many other schools are doing the same kinds of things. And there are other schools that are highly specialized, which is ideal for the student who knows without question that he or she wants a career with an orchestra, for example, or a career in contemporary music.

At the moment, I guess that my main criticism of university education is that I'd like to see less emphasis being placed on solo playing and more on section work. Perhaps that sounds odd, coming from one who was so heavily involved in solo playing, but at the moment, I'm doing a lot of section work and am vividly aware of the problems involved. At Northridge, we've gotten transfer and grad students who play marimba beautifully, but who haven't the faintest idea of how to play the tambourine or crash cymbals.

**DB:** Do you think it's conceivable that males and females have different approaches to playing percussion?

**KEP:** Women are better! No, wait. That's a joke. I can't say I could really define any differences. I will tell you, though, that one of my early teachers told me that a lot of people would expect my playing to be "namby-pamby"—the words he actually used were considerably more graphic—simply because I am a woman. "If you're going to be criticized for something, make it be because you're too strong," he told me.

So that's always been the way I've played. If I have to guess how loud a conductor might want a certain passage, I will be careful to be on the strong side, although I try not to overplay. Most of my women students also play quite aggressively, but then maybe they've picked up that attitude from me.

**DB:** As a whole, how do you feel percussionists are treated by conductors?

**KEP:** Better—a lot better. When I was starting to play in the mid to late '60s, I was always hearing smart remarks about the "kitchen," the "toys," or the "noise-makers." It's been years since I've heard that from a conductor, even in jest.

The improvement of our image comes, I think, from the influence of contemporary music, where the percussionists' skills are so vividly displayed. Most conductors—most musicians in general—now realize that it requires as much talent and skill to play percussion as it does to play any other instrument. I would definitely credit contemporary music with this improvement in our status.

**DB:** What percussion instrument is your personal favorite?

**KEP:** That's the hardest one yet! As a soloist, my favorite instruments are the marimba and vibraphone, but some of my biggest thrills have been as a timpanist in the orchestra. There's something about

having that tremendous power, the range of dynamics and tone color, and the continual challenge of blending with the orchestra that is very satisfying to me.

On the other hand, right now I'm playing a lot of section percussion—bass drum, cymbals, all the accessories—and that's fun, too. Working for the perfect tone color in a cymbal crash or the right degree of articulation on the bass drum can be a real challenge and very enjoyable.

I guess the answer is that I like playing all the instruments. I will admit that I'm not crazy about chimes, simply because I'm too short to feel comfortable playing them. Of course, I've never heard anybody rave on and on about loving to play chimes.

**DB:** Where do you see the percussion industry heading within the next ten years?

**KEP:** I think there's a real concern with the emergence of electronic drums, because they're doing such an excellent job of duplicating the drummer's sound. So far, the stand-up percussionist has been less affected, because there are so many sounds to be programmed and dealt with. But it's a huge problem for all musicians. Theoretically, we could all be done away with in the near future.

Of course, the live fields are safer, because who wants to go to a concert and watch a lot of speakers? But the studio industry is being affected. No one has an answer right now. I've heard some people express the thought that there will be a turnaround back to the creativity of live players, but there is a lot of concern.

**DB:** Would you like to see more women going into the field of percussion?

**KEP:** Right now, for the first time in a number of years, I don't have a single female student, and I rather miss having them. It's usually fun to work with women students. In terms of more women going into the field, I think they ought not to be discouraged, but I don't believe that anyone should be encouraged to go into percussion unless it is the one thing he or she really wants to do. Being a musician is great, but only if it's what you really like. Even if you are successful, the hours are terrible; the work plays havoc with a social or family life; security is out, unless you're one of the fortunate few to land a job with a major symphony; even a successful free-lancer has to learn to deal with lean months.

So why do it? Only if it's what you like best to do in all the world. If that's the case, then go for it! I still believe that perseverance is the key. It takes lots of hours of practice, lots of thought about sound quality and musicianship, being reliable, being well prepared, and being a person who works well with others. With all those qualities, you have a good chance at success. And a woman has just as good a chance as a man. That's how I feel about it.

