



# 2024 Hall of Fame Beverley Johnston

By Russell Hartenberger



ver the past four decades, Beverley Johnston has been at the forefront of the artistic development of percussion repertoire and is unparalleled in her contribution to Canadian classical music. She is singularly responsible for commissioning, performing, and/or recording compositions from over sixty Canadian composers. Through her teaching, she has inspired female percussionists to achieve and excel in a field that has historically been a male-dominated arena. As a performer, Beverley is the first Canadian – male or female – to achieve significant international recognition as a classical percussion soloist.

To honor her accomplishments, the Government of Canada recently announced that Beverley Johnston has been appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada – the highest level of distinction in the Canadian Honours System. An Officer of the Order is an elevated rank that recognizes outstanding achievement and merit of a high degree, especially service to Canada or to humanity at large. Beverley's investiture into the Order of Canada took place in Ottawa, the nation's capital, and her award was presented by the Governor General, who is the King's representative in Canada. She is now entitled to use the designation Beverley Johnston, O.C.

Other distinguished Order of Canada appointees include Neil Peart, drummer with the Canadian band Rush and member of the PAS Hall of Fame, musicians Bruce Cockburn, Leonard Cohen, Celine Dion, Oscar Peterson, Diana Krall, k.d. Lang, Gordon Lightfoot, Anne Murray, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and Shania Twain, author Margaret Atwood, film-makers James Cameron and Atom Egoyan, actors Eugene Levy and Donald Sutherland, philosopher Marshall McLuhan, and architect Frank Gehry.

"I never set out to be nominated for these awards," Beverley said of receiving induction into the PAS Hall of Fame and investiture into the Order of Canada in the same year, "but with my career, all along, I was determined to follow my in-

stincts and to collaborate with other musicians/artists who I liked as people and who also were open to different ways of expressing themselves. The fact that I was a female percussionist never really got in the way of my music-making because I was always accepted by my fellow percussionists when I was in university. There were a few adversities along the way, but my objective was centered on the music itself. There was always a way in my mind to sidestep any obstacles or to simply take another direction in my approach, if needed."

### EARLY LIFE

Beverley was born June 4, 1957, in Lachine, Quebec. She began her musical career with piano lessons at age 7, and even though she quit lessons at age 10, she "was drawn to the piano like a magnet" and continued playing. When it came time to choose an instrument in high school, she selected percussion because of the variety of instruments to play and because of her ability to create a sound right away.

Beverley continued her studies with Lanny Levine at Vanier College in Montreal before transferring to the University of Toronto. Her decision to attend the University of Toronto was not based on the percussion faculty; she had no idea who the percussion teacher was or that Nexus was the ensemble-in-residence. Like many young people, she was just eager to move away from home and become more independent. However, her parents insisted that she study music education, since it seemed to them there was no future career possibility as a percussionist.

While pursuing a degree in music education, Beverley also fulfilled all the requirements of a performance major. She won the concerto competition and played the Creston "Concertino for Marimba" with the university orchestra. For her senior recital, she played the first all-mallet solo recital at the school. The program included "Ragtime Robin" by G. H. Green, the G-minor fugue from J. S. Bach's unaccompanied violin sonata, her own arrangement for mallet quartet of Scott Jop-

lin's "Swipsey's Cakewalk," a composition by Canadian composer Larysa Kuzmenko, and Gordon Stout's "Two Mexican Dances." In 1980, Beverley became the first female percussionist to graduate from the University of Toronto.

She soon became a busy percussionist in the Toronto music scene. In 1980, she co-founded the Toronto Percussion Ensemble with three other University of Toronto percussion graduates. She became a regular member of the National Ballet of Canada Orchestra and performed often with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra and the Toronto Symphony. As word of her musical ability spread, she was invited to perform at major chamber-music festivals in Canada, including the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity,

*Photo from recording session 1985 of her first album titled 'Impact'*



Ottawa Chamber Music Festival, Festival of the Sound, and the Stratford Summer Music Festival. She collaborated with many leading chamber groups including Amici Chamber Ensemble, Penderecki String Quartet, Nexus, and The Art of Time Ensemble, as well as with violinist Marc Djokic and flautist Susan Hoepfner.

## MARIMBA

Beverley is known as a virtuoso marimba player. Her approach to marimba playing begins with the sound she creates. Beverley said, "I'll never forget what Nan-

cy Zeltsman said about tone production. She mentioned that the moment the stick actually hits the instrument is the moment of least control. The preparation of the stroke is when one controls the mallet; that way the sound becomes less harsh upon attack. I have found that in some circumstances, though, one may need a 'harsher' sound to evoke the feelings in the music. I also feel there is a forward motion to connect one note to the next. It could be a development from my piano days, but it has a bit to do with, on the keyboard percussion instruments, thinking

more 'horizontally' than 'vertically.' Playing each note is not an end in itself; it's the connection from one note to the next that adds to the flow."

Beverley has recorded seven solo CDs, one of which garnered a Juno nomination (Canadian version of a Grammy), and she is a featured performer on fifteen chamber-music recordings. Her performance in the CBC-TV documentary *Sunday Arts and Entertainment* resulted in a GEMINI award nomination. Beverley explained, "I have many recording highlights, but a recent one was Dinuk Wijeratne's multi-movement marimba solo, 'The Spirit and the Dust,' simply because the piece allowed me to investigate, yet again, all the tone colours I could coax out of the marimba in relation to the composition at hand. I love doing that! Another recording highlight, which got my career off the ground, was *Marimbach*, recorded in 1987. I multi-tracked Bach Inventions and Sinfonias along with solo works. Although my technique at the time was not as refined as other marimbists who recorded some amazing renditions of Bach, I could still focus on what I could handle – the phrasing and blending of the sound within the multi-tracked pieces."

Internationally, Beverley has appeared as a performer and given performances and master classes at Ivana Bilić Marimba Week in Croatia (2017), the International Katarzyna Myčka Marimba Academy in Europe (2013, 2015, 2023), the Zeltsman Marimba Festival in the USA (2005, 2009, 2013), Shenyang International Percussion Festival, China (2010), International Marimba Festival and Conference, Minneapolis (2010), Stockholm International Percussion Festival (1998), Živković International Marimba Academy, Germany, Journée de la Percussions, Paris, France, and Expo 90, Osaka, Japan. She performed at PASIC in 1988, 1995, 2006, 2009, and 2014.

Fernando Meza, Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Minnesota, said, "I first met Beverley at PASIC in 1995 where she performed a program that included Michael Colgrass's 'Te Tuma Te

Theatre work 'All too Consuming' by Diana McIntosh from the Zeltsman Marimba Festival 2009



Collaboration with flautist Susan Hoepfner from a concert in 2014



Papa' and one of her own compositions. The impression I had at that time was one of a masterful artist in complete control of her art form. Since that time, my admiration for her has grown exponentially. I have had the great fortune to enjoy her artistry in various other performances, including some which I requested of her for the Marimba 2010 International Festival and Conference in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota." Meza added, "She is a force of nature in our field and someone who has advanced immensely what we all do in the world beyond the walls of percussion."

According to Nicholas Papador, Professor of Music at the University of Windsor, "Bev has been a leading female percussion soloist for decades with performances and output that rival legendary players of her generation such as Keiko Abe and Dame Evelyn Glennie. Not as many in our community know Bev's work as they might other top-tier soloists and ensembles. However, I believe there are several reasons why she is a deserving and trailblazing candidate for the Hall of Fame. Bev has commissioned and premiered new works on a scale equal with Nancy Zeltsman. The composers she champions are not the current 'hot property' or established names. Composers she's commissioned are typically emerging artists, they are all Canadian but come from different nationalities, and at least half of these are by women and people of color. Bev has been a leader in promoting diversity and equity within the field of percussion. She was, for these reasons, awarded the title of Canadian Music Centre Ambassador. Also notable in Bev's repertoire is an abundance of works for theatre/spoken percussion and works involving electronics and emerging technology. Works that are currently in vogue on PASIC Focus Day panels are activities Bev has been championing for decades."

### THEATRE/VOICE/DANCE

Beverley had an interest in vocal and theatrical aspects of music from an early age. She approached the journey seriously and worked with stage directors, vocal

coaches, dancers, and actors to broaden her performance skills.

"In true 'following my nose' fashion I have been blessed with meeting interesting people outside the percussion realm," Beverly said. "I have always been fascinated by acting and singing. My high school music teacher, Iwan Edwards, who later became director of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra Chorus, really liked my voice and encouraged me to go into singing, but I was more interested in percussion! However, through the years I participated in workshops that involved the voice. I have

an ongoing love of contemporary music and have worked with vocal coaches including studying extended vocal techniques with Richard Armstrong and more recently studying with Meredith Monk. I love Meredith's approach to music making, which is SO organic. A wonderful example of this is her collaboration with percussionist John Hollenbeck. I love how they work together!

"I am also fascinated with theatre, dance, and acting," she continued. "Highlights of that have been my collaborations with performance artist Diana McIntosh,

*Performance of 'The Spirit and the Dust' by Dinuk Wijeratne at the 2017 Festival of the Sound*



*World premier performance of 'Eagles' by Russell Hartenberger with Russell, Bev, Aiyun Huang and Randall Chavez Camacho*



the female collective Urge, the Blue Rider Ensemble – collaborating with choreographer David Earle and Michael Montanaro from Cirque de Soleil – and theatre/film director George Bloomfield, who was extremely encouraging and helpful. I have always been in awe of actors and their process and what enables them to become ‘chameleons’ in their roles. I find that musicians also must ‘become’ the piece they are performing.”

## COMMISSIONS

Beverley has commissioned, performed, and/or recorded works from over sixty Canadian composers. One composer with whom she has a very special relationship is her husband, Christos Hatzis. Many of the works he wrote for Beverley have become standard repertoire in the percussion community. Beverley said, “Of all the compositions I have commissioned from Christos, probably the most internationally renowned is ‘Fertility Rites’ for marimba and audio playback. I feel that there is room to breathe in that piece, even though the performer must sync with the audio. Within that work I was able to discover different tone colours on the marimba.

“Christos has written many expressive works for me including solo, chamber music, and concerti. In many of his com-

positions he combines music from his Greek heritage, western classical music elements, and other world music genres to take you on unusual journeys. He has often remarked that he, too, ‘follows his nose’ when composing – not knowing where the piece will take him but just trusting his own instincts. And what instincts he has! He has subsequently been commissioned by other well-known marimbists/percussionists including Theodor Milkov.”

In describing some of her other commissioning projects, Beverley said, “Because of my work in the arts outside of just playing percussion, I have been fortunate to commission different composers to write unusual works for me. One of these is a collaborative performance work called ‘Psionic Interference’ in which I wore a percussion costume to which was attached different auxiliary percussion gear. I worked with costume designer Aniko Fenivesy, choreographer Bill James, and composer Peter Hatch on this project.

“Another interesting work, by Canadian composer Chan Ka Nin, requires a percussion rig that I wheel on stage! The piece is called ‘The Consequential Web of Life,’ and I play the part of the spider! Other works of interest are my collaboration with performance artist/compos-

er/pianist Diana McIntosh in which we theatrically depict perfume testers, visual artists, authors, etc. She also composed for me a work called ‘All too Consuming’ in which my dinnerware turns into percussion! One of my recent ventures is a piece called ‘wild with the music of color’ by young, creative composer/visual artist Holly Winter. In the piece – which pays homage to my favourite visual artist, Georgia O’Keeffe – I wear a paper dress that I rip off my body.

“My latest commission is from percussionist/composer/visual artist Julie Spencer,” Beverley said. “This piece, called ‘Angels in Arches of Hildegard’s Bingen,’ is for vibraphone, cloud bowls, cloud gongs, and voice. I love Julie’s musical sensibility. I’m also fascinated with exploring iconic and historic female figures, and Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century female composer, is one of those figures. Synchronistically, Julie and her family live in Bingen, Germany, where Hildegard lived centuries ago!”

Beverley also composes, although, she says, “I cannot say that I’m a ‘composer’ really! All the works I have created have been structured improvisations. One of them was called ‘Centre’ in which I play inside a cage of wind chimes. The ostinato for the piece is the constant rhythm created by sleighbells attached to my ankles. Another wacky piece is ‘Bathtub Music’ in which I recorded the sounds made in the bathtub of dripping/running water, rubbing sounds on the bottom of the tub, etc. The live performance includes water-based percussion effects played against the audio recording. Probably the most notorious of all the pieces I created was called ‘Snare Drama’ in which I basically ‘make out’ with a snare drum. In the live performance I dress up as a teenage boy who is ‘lured’ by the snare drum, which he does not play very well. I subsequently created a similar piece called ‘Marimbad.”

## TEACHING

Perhaps one of Beverley’s most important contributions to Canadian culture

*Performance of ‘wild with the music of color’ by Holly Winter in Newfoundland 2022*



is her role as educator to young Canadian musicians. She joined the University of Toronto Faculty of Music in 1996 and served as Interim Head of Percussion in 2016/17 and again in 2024. Her presence has led to an increased interest in percussion by women, and her international reputation as a performer and pedagogue has attracted students from Europe, Asia, the United States, and Australia.

"Honestly, when I first started teaching at the University of Toronto, I was not very good at expressing myself in terms of concepts," she admitted. "Everything I did before I started teaching was internalized. It took me a while to figure out what my concepts were! I would say that the *most* important concept for me is articulation on various instruments but *only* within relationship to the music at hand. The technique that can enhance one's approach to sound has to do with developing one's ears. Listening to as much music as possible in every genre possible is crucial in enhancing tone production, but you cannot improve that technique unless you know consciously what you are after. For example, if you want to create a distant rolling effect on the marimba to produce a sense of mystery, what do you have to do with your technique to achieve that? Perhaps sticks lower, ripple roll, speed of roll, different playing spot on the marimba bar, or a gesture to evoke the feeling? There are so many possibilities. All of this is not possible unless you are connected and inside your own sound world, and you *really* must listen carefully to yourself. This also applies to chamber music. In most cases, your sound must blend with the other performers.

These are the things I like to discover with the students, and it's especially satisfying when they can come up with their own ways of discovering their unique sound palettes. I must say though, that my own teacher was open minded enough to allow his students to be creative in many different aspects of percussion playing. Thank you, Russell Hartenberger, for that! It has helped me also in my approach to teaching."

According to one of her students, Hoi Tong Keung, "Beverley is a passionate teacher who guides her students to find their own voices. Influenced by the multicultural arts scene in Toronto, she draws creative connections across different musical styles." Another student, Bevis Ng, explained, "Her teaching centers on guiding students to understand the details of the score and formulate personal interpretations. She also has a unique sense of sound and musicality, which broadens my views on the different possibilities in musical interpretation."

Julie Spencer, said, "From the time that Russell Hartenberger of Nexus first told me about a young player named Beverley, whose renown and tremendous career he predicted, I have been inspired by so much more than just the virtuosity – which is breathtaking. Johnston has become a world leader in the field of percussion also because of an absolute joy and contagious passion that effuses her work as a beloved professor, and an in-demand guest lectur-

er and competition jury member, as well as a leading voice for broad horizons in new music. Not only is Johnston one of the premier percussion soloists of the last several decades, but she has secured her position as one of the great women in history at the forefront of the expansion of percussion in the 21st century. That is the legacy of Beverley Johnston."

On a personal note, Beverley was a student of mine at the University of Toronto from 1976–80. Over the ensuing years, as Beverley's career unfolded, I watched her mature into an exceptional musician, mentor to young players, and role model for other percussionists. I look forward to following the accomplishments of her many students who are blessed by the generosity and commitment to music that is the essence of Beverley Johnston. **PN**

