



Barbara Brabec's World

It's All About *LIFE*, Folks!

BarbaraBrabecProductions.com

Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Drummer

Photos and Published Articles about Him
by Fellow Percussionists



**First Drum, 7 years old
Second Drum, 9 years old**



**Senior picture (1944) shows
the many medals won in
contest for drum and marimba.**

THE TRAINING HARRY RECEIVED in the Cicero, IL grade school and J. Sterling Morton High School—which had the finest music department in America at that time—gave him unlimited opportunities to perform with the school’s various bands and orchestras, making him a consummate professional by age seventeen. Like so many of his school friends who landed in the Chicago Symphony, Harry should have had a career with the Symphony for the rest of his life. But sadly, his name became legend at the end of the 1956 season when Fritz Reiner refused to renew his contract for purely personal reasons.

(See Chapter 8 of [THE DRUMMER DRIVES!](#) for the legendary Reiner-Brabec stories and fascinating behind-the-scenes drummer tales.)

Comments from Percussionist Friends

“So much of what I am came from Harry.” – Fred Wickstrom

“I admired Harry's playing and his expertise in percussion. We made several Windjammers' meets and I always enjoyed playing alongside Harry.” – Doug MacLeod

“I always enjoyed hanging out with Harry, talking about big bands, symphony stuff, and life in general. He was my tympani teacher.” – Bob Cousins

“Harry was my mentor in school, and I emulated him. He blazed the trail for me.” – Gordon Peters

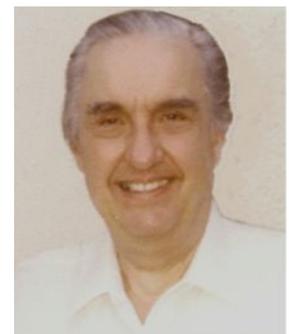


Two Articles Reprinted from the Intermezzo, the trade paper of The Chicago Federation of Musicians

by Joel Cohen

HARRY BRABEC, the legendary percussionist and master of the snare drum, died this past February 3rd at the age of 77. His musical career ranged from big bands to Disney World to the Chicago Symphony. Regardless of the venue, he loved playing and is remembered for his exceptional artistry.

Harry was a member of the Civic Orchestra in 1944. After this experience, he was a member of the National Symphony. His next major symphonic job was with the Chicago Symphony. He joined the orchestra in 1951 as a section percussionist. The following season he was promoted to Principal Percussionist. That was the good news. The bad news was that the new conductor of the CSO, Fritz Reiner, would end up dismissing Harry a few years later.



During those years, there were many storied exchanges between Brabec and Reiner. One of the more famous stories involved Reiner's dissatisfaction with the triangle being used. Harry was ordered to go out and get a silver plated one. Annoyed by the unreasonable request, when the rehearsal ended he walked over to Frank's Drum Shop and found the drawer of triangles. Harry shut his eyes, reached in and randomly selected one. Without trying it, he had it sent to be silver plated. Ironically, that triangle turned out to be quite good, and was used for many years!

In another memorable incident, the CSO was going to play the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky. At that time, the percussionists would create the cannon effect by shooting a shotgun into a barrel.

Harry went into the maestro's office, shotgun on his shoulder. He was told by Reiner that they would not use the shotgun for the effect this time. Reiner added, "Besides, I don't trust you!"

Harry returned to the CSO in 1966 and worked in the music library. He later moved to stage manager. During this time, he also played extra with the orchestra. He would continue his new affiliation with the CSO until 1971.

Harry's musical performances weren't limited to symphonic music. His experiences included dance bands, shows at the Shubert Theater, and he was one of the first musicians to perform at the newly opened Disney World. There, he would perform with many different ensembles each day, changing costumes for each group. In his latter playing days, Harry was happy playing with a weekly trust fund concert band in Bensenville. Harry is survived by his wife, Barbara, and her sisters. Services were private.

Harry J. Brabec: Musician, Drummer, Teacher, and Mentor (1927–2005)

by Gordon B. Peters

THE PASSING OF my first percussion teacher, a person largely responsible for my musical life, brings back many memories. "I wanna be like Harry" I told my parents. I first heard about Harry from our Cicero elementary school orchestra director. Harry was four years ahead of me in school, so our academic careers never overlapped. I soon learned that he lived just down the street, and I'd see him walk to school or work.

My mother contacted him about drum lessons. First came the rudiments and then the drum books and timpani. Before long he said: "Okay, Gordon, it's time for you to get a xylophone." So, Harry and I drove out to Crystal Lake to look at a 3+ octave Deagan xylophone for sale by Bohumir Vesley, retired Chicago Symphony Orchestra Principal Percussionist. (Little did either of us know that both of us would end up in that same position.)

Harry's reputation as a drummer in high school was legend. He set high precedents for me. He was the ideal role model. He suggested what teacher to go to and when: Roy Knapp, Otto Kristufek, Jose Bethancourt, Clair Omar Musser. He studied with them, and, of course, I followed his path and advice. By introducing me to Frank's Drum Shop, which was like

“Percussion Central,” and to the percussion instrument companies (Deagan, Ludwig, Slingerland), he helped connect me to “the profession.”

After high school, Harry played in the Chicago Symphony’s training orchestra, the Civic Orchestra, and then moved on to the Grant Park Symphony, the National Symphony in Washington, and finally the CSO first as principal percussionist and later as librarian and then stage manager. He taught privately at Northwestern University and North Park College. Along the way his versatility led him “behind the drums” with Woody Herman, Wayne King, Chuck Foster, the Chicago NBC Orchestra, the Melody Top Theater and Shubert Theater Orchestras, and even a stint with the Florida Disney World Marching Band (he loved circuses).

Ultimately, he set the drums aside, and, with Barbara, his wife of 43 years, delved into the arts and crafts business.

Barb tells of his having an engraver write this saying on the bottom of an antique brass spittoon: “Old saloon drummers never die, they just take their drums and beat it.” Barbara used to chide him that she would, one day, use that spittoon for his ashes.

It is interesting that Harry’s name, BRABEC, in the Czechoslovakian language means “sparrow.” Well, this tall, energetic guy who poured his heart out teaching and helping me was no little bird.

As one who partook in a slice of Harry’s life of generosity, caring, patience, dedication, and mentoring, I wonder where my life’s trail would have led me without him. I am most indebted and grateful for his faith and friendship. I owe him as do many others.

Author’s Note

HARRY HAD AN UNUSUAL and amazing career as a professional musician. He died February 3, 2005 at the age of 77. My former website devoted several pages to Harry’s life and accomplishments that have now been captured in a PDF document titled “Remembering Harry Brabec” (see link below.)

Harry had a wonderful sense of humor that is featured in nearly every chapter of my memoir, *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides*. One day early in our marriage when Harry and I were driving in Chicago and passed a tombstone factory, we began to muse about what our own headstones might say about us. I’ll never forget the sound of his laughter when, in a rare flash of genius, I said to him, “If you should precede me to the great beyond, I know exactly what I’ll have inscribed on your stone:

**Here lies Harry Brabec.
He finally took his drum and beat it.**

As it turned out, Harry chose to be cremated, so his only monument now is the written one I’ve created of his life. I simply sent him off with a pair of drumsticks in his hands. But before he left, he gave me another lasting memory—of the day when we were visiting a crafts fair and he became intrigued by a craftsman who was spinning brass spittoons. He simply had to have

one, he said, but the craftsman had to inscribe something on the bottom. As Gordon Peters rightly remembered in his article, it was “**Old saloon drummers never die; they just take their drum and beat it!**”

The spittoon immediately found the perfect spot in his office. I still have it on the same bookshelf in the room that used to be his office and is now my “Room of Contentment.” Below, you can see the spittoon in the top left corner holding the stems of a flowing line of dried flowers. From time to time, Harry would ask me to frame a picture for the wall that documented a new part of his musical life. After he was gone, I redecorated the room, and rearranged and expanded the wall of photos. It gives me great comfort to have this visual evidence of a musical life well lived in the room where I now study my Bible and continue to thank God for the life he gave me and Harry for nearly 44 years. It was quite a journey!



Related Article:

[Harry J. Brabec: A Look at the Man and His Musical Legacy](#)

Your feedback to this writing is invited.

IF YOU KNEW HARRY, or wish to comment on this story, I would love to hear from you.
[Email me here.](#)



BARBARA LAUNCHED BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "[Barbara Brabec's World.](#)" It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

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