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SHOW DRUMMING **Learning the Trade, Designing Your Setup**

by the late Harry J. Brabec,
Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist
and Show Drummer
(1927-2005)

The following article is one Harry wrote in 1985 just because he enjoyed writing. He never tried to publish it, so I did it for him after he died, adding some comments and photos to illustrate it.

Originally published in 2005 on BarbaraBrabec.com as part of my "Remembering Harry" widow's tribute, it has now been reformatted as a PDF document for republication on BarbaraBrabecProductions.com. – Barbara

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AS YOU START TO READ this article, I don't want your thoughts to be drawn to the finesse of a rudimentalist or the flash of a great jazz drummer. This, in a sense, is a great "show" of many hours of study and practice. These people have worked hard and accomplished a great thing.

But what about the real show drummer . . . the one who plays the theatre pits, vaudeville acts, circuses and television? Where did he study? In all probability, most of his knowledge came from watching and listening to other drummers in places that were a little off the beaten path. Seeing a dancer kick up a heel . . . hearing a singer miss a beat . . . or even seeing a circus bear sit down when he was supposed to stand up. The drummer has to catch all the cues, plus remedy any mistakes that are made. So, from these experiences, he has learned.

These drummers are not exactly percussionists, but they are musicians. They have heard and watched, and they have depth of thought and feeling for what they have seen. It is really tragic that the students of show drumming nowadays usually are not exposed to such places as vaudeville, burlesque, circus, and show-type night clubs. These places were, and are, the training ground for great show drummers.

However, let's face the problem at hand. A good show drummer must be able to anticipate a tempo change and catch cue after cue, in addition to musically backing the group he is working with. (Naturally, the conductor has something to say about this!) Also, to be a complete, well-rounded show drummer, a technical knowledge and functional application of all the mallet-keyboard instruments, timpani, and traps is a necessity. Furthermore, modern-day musical shows may require anything from auto horn and anvil to washtubs, much after the fashion of the drummer's responsibilities in the pit during the days of the silent movies.

Coping With Space Problems

NOW LET'S GET INTO problems of space. There are very few places where a show drummer has enough room to manipulate all his equipment. You may say that this sounds impossible, but have you ever thought of playing timpani seated on a kitchen chair, or having to play a chime part picking up each tube one at a time, or having to play a xylophone part with your back to the conductor as you watch him in a mirror?

Every pit and stage has a personal problem for the drummer which, again, has to be remedied by the performer and the conductor. I find that in my particular work, a drum set consisting of a 22" bass drum, high hat, snare drum, two suspended cymbals, a floor tom-tom and a tom-tom mounted on my bass drum (with a reversible mounting that will allow me to turn this drum in any direction or angle) works best. A combination of wood block or cow bell holder attached to the bass drum is a necessity. In addition, I have a special rack that places a set of bells over my bass drum and traps when necessary. To buy something like this would be an impossibility, but with a little thought and imagination, this rack can easily be made out of conduit.

The cowbell and wood block should be carefully selected to produce just the sound you have in mind. Also, the relative pitch of your bass drum, tom-toms, and especially snare drum (I recommend a metal shell-type) should be to your taste. This and all your other traps should sound the way you would like to hear them from the audience. You might ask one of your colleagues to go out into the audience area and listen to your equipment. His observations can be of great value in improving the percussions you evolve. If possible, the player himself should listen to his equipment from the vantage point of the audience.

Also remember that there is a tambourine, and there is a *tambourine*. Which means, of course, that you should always seek a better instrument or stick that might give a better sound for a particular purpose. Show drumming is the roughest style of them all, but after a fine performance, whether a one-nighter or a one-year's stand, the satisfaction is one of an award. Remember, you helped make it possible.



A Note from Barbara: Regrettably, the photo below is the only one I have of Harry sitting behind his famous drum set. (*This photo was cropped oddly to remove unwanted elements in the picture I wanted to put in a framed collage of pictures.*)

Some details of the setup have been lost in the cropping, but if you look closely you can see the instruments mentioned in this article—how he attached the woodblock, cowbell, and triangle. On the rack that sometimes held a set of bells is a tambourine. Notice that Harry never bothered to carry a drummer's throne. He simply turned his drum case on end and threw the pad he used to protect his snare drum over it. He was nothing if not practical.



In the detail shot of just the bass drum below, you can see how Harry attached the bass drum pedal to the drum frame as well as the holder for his tom-tom (*cymbal holder is on the right side*).

He designed this set for the hotel jobs and recording dates he was doing in the forties, saying that, in all his years of playing and meeting drummers across the country, he never saw another setup like his.

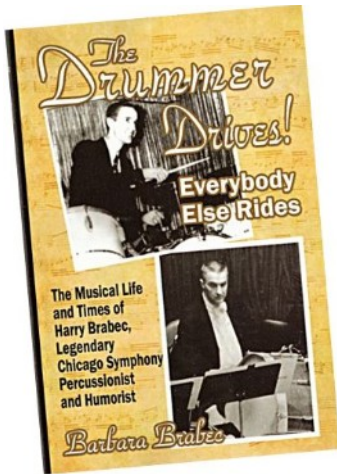
What he wanted was a set of drums he could easily pick up as one unit and quickly move from one hotel room or recording studio to another.



LIKE THE DRUMMER who played it, this old set of drums was truly one of a kind, and Harry couldn't bear to part with it even when he was no longer playing. Just too much nostalgia attached to it.

It was still in his music room when he died. The interesting story of how it was acquired and where it ended up afterwards is told in my memoir, *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides*. The book also features stories about the many percussionists, musicians, entertainers, bands, orchestras, and conductors Harry worked with during his fifty-year career.





Harry Brabec Remembered

The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides—The Musical Life and Times of Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist and Humorist
by Barbara Brabec (2010).

Details about this book will be found [HERE](#) on Barbara Brabec's World. Print and Kindle editions are [available on Amazon](#), where you can read a lengthy excerpt from the book.

"... a meticulously crafted memoir . . . an exceptional look back at the unique lifetime of a humorist who also happened to be one of the most outstanding musicians of his time."

- Sam Denov, author of *Symphonic Paradox—The Misadventures of a Wayward Musician*

Visit the categories of Books, Music, and Stories in the [ARTICLES](#) archives to find several articles about Harry's life, work, special interests, and humor, which will be found throughout Barbara's memoir of her life with him.

Of special interest would be "[Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Drummer](#)" (photos and published articles about him by his peers).



Your feedback to this writing is invited.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO comment on this writing or share your own "drummer remembrances" with me, I'd love to hear from you. [Email me here](#). Please include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I'd like to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion.

Remember that this document may be freely shared with others as an email attachment. THANK YOU!

Barbara Brabec



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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