

His own beat

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In the old days, classical percussionists were seen but rarely heard. They'd show up in their tuxes, stand with their arms folded for two movements, then suddenly leap into action at the climax of the piece, tapping the bass drum or the cymbals with rhythmic precision.

These days, with more percussionists composing and picking up the baton, that's no longer the case. Drums, as music critic Allan Kozinn wrote last December, are the new violins.

And that's just fine with **Allen Biggs, principal percussionist of the Santa Rosa Symphony**, who will perform Christopher Rouse's "Der Gerettete Alberich" this weekend with his colleagues in the Santa Rosa Symphony.

"It's unusual to have a percussion solo, but percussion has really come into its own as a solo instrument on the world stage," Biggs said. "Colin Currie and Evelyn Glennie can have careers as soloists now."

The 6-foot-3 percussionist, who grew up playing in a rock 'n' roll band in San Francisco and developed a passion for world music, will bring some of his own instruments onstage with him, including his first drum kit (paid for with proceeds from his paper route) and the log drums he brought back from the Cook Islands on his honeymoon.

"The log drum has a chunky, visceral sound," he said. "I love using instruments that I have a real connection with. I believe your energy is imbued in the things you hang out with."

Sandwiched between two Beethoven symphonies, the Rouse work - A Fantasy for Percussion and Orchestra, written in the fast-slow-fast form of a concerto — calls for an arsenal of percussion, including four log drums, four tom-toms, two bongos, two timbales, snare drum, steel drum, marimba, two guiros, pedal-operated bass drum and drum set.

"Not many percussionists play such a big battery of things," Biggs said. "The skills required are expanding exponentially for percussionists. ... That stretches out the art form, and I like how it's stretched me."

In addition to the Santa Rosa Symphony, the 46-year-old Biggs also plays regularly with the California Symphony in Walnut Creek and the Napa Symphony and has performed with a wide range of Bay Area groups, from the San Francisco Opera to Bay Area Jazz Composer's Orchestra.

This weekend, Biggs is looking forward to playing his percussion solo under guest conductor Barry Jekowsky, music director of the California Symphony. Biggs studied timpani with Jekowsky at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

“I trust him, because he knows me so well,” Biggs said. “It's nice to deal with musicians that you know. They have my back.”

During the Rouse work, Biggs will play the part of Alberich, the demonic dwarf from Richard Wagner's opera “Der Ring des Nibelungen” whose actions lead to the apocalyptic denouement of “Götterdämmerung.”

In “Der Gerettete Alberich,” Rouse toys with the idea of bringing Alberich back to life and imagines how the character would live in modern times.

“I embody that person,” Biggs said. “At best, he is morally ambivalent. At worse, he is a mischief-maker.”

Although the work has been known to provoke concertmasters to put cotton in their ears, it actually starts out very quietly, quoting one of the “Ring” motifs.

“It's big and loud, but not all the time,” Biggs said. “There is a huge dynamic range and a wide palette of sounds. It starts out with Wagner ... people are going to think they're at the wrong concert.”

At the opening of the work, Rouse imagines Alberich crawling from the wreckage wrought at the end of Wagner's “Ring,” and he creates that character with the scraping sound of the guiro, an Afro-Cuban gourd with notches.

“Here's this beautiful, lush music, and here I go with the rasp,” Biggs said. “I imagine myself rising up from the ashes. That's him rustling and dusting himself off.”

During the work, the impish dwarf scampers over dramatic terrain that moves from fast and frantic in the first movement, with bongo cross-rhythms, to slow and intense in the second movement, with marimbas and steel drums. The work ends thunderously with an over-the-top rock-drumming sequence that quotes Led Zeppelin and threatens to lift the roof off the hall.

Biggs said he is looking forward to bringing together the dexterity of his classical training with the heavy-handed style of his rock 'n' roll past.

“I like how my worlds come together in this piece,” he said. “It's like my worlds colliding. ... This piece has all those extremes.”

For Biggs, the Rouse work also exemplifies the trend of different styles of music fusing together.

“I think music is expanding out and the lines are blurring,” he said. “The more things you can do, the more fun it is.”

As a kid growing up in the Richmond District of San Francisco, Biggs always had fun with music. Both of his parents were professors, and he played lots of different instruments, from classical guitar to jazz piano.

“We got dragged around the world a bit,” he said. “We lived in Pamplona, Spain, for two years ... then we lived in Poland.”

At age 3, he was given his first drum, an instrument made by a friend. He went on to experiment with rubber bands and other percussive gadgets, then started a rock 'n' roll band in his teens. By the time he was 19, he was playing in a jazz trio on a cruise ship to China.

Biggs didn't get really serious about music until he went to San Francisco State University and found himself “at the bottom of the pile” of percussionists.

He worked hard and ended up getting a masters degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Soon afterwards, Biggs started playing with the Santa Rosa Symphony; that was 25 years and three conductors ago.

“It's always been a friendly place to play music,” he said. “It's a community of people I'd want to hang out with anyway.”

About 20 years ago, he won the post of Santa Rosa Symphony principal percussionist - auditioning with Mozart's “The Magic Flute.” Three years ago, he married violinist Kathryn Marshall, after carpooling with her to rehearsals.

From his home in San Rafael, he also commutes to San Francisco six nights a week to play in the pit of the stage musical, “Wicked.”

Like the Rouse piece, “Wicked” calls for a big battery of exotic percussion, leaving the drummer with little time to daydream.

“The show is so demanding, and my part is so disjointed, that you're exhausted,” he said. “But it's also creative. I get to decide how to make the sound of a magic wand or the sound of a witch melting.”

Still, Biggs would rather be playing all the time than counting measures and waiting, which is the fate of most orchestral percussionists.

“It's like a Zen meditation,” he said. “You may not play for a whole movement, then you come in.... You have to be focused.”

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