



# Greatest Hits

Dame Evelyn Glennie enjoys an international status matched by no other percussionist. As she releases a new disc of concertos written specially for her, she takes Claire Jackson on a guided tour of the instruments that have helped her to build her unique career

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD CANNON

**A**n industrial park on the outskirts of Cambridge is an unexpected base for the world's leading solo percussionist. However, when your instrument collection comprises some 2,000 items, practicalities prevail. Over three decades, Evelyn Glennie has amassed a diverse range of percussive paraphernalia, from triangles to tamtams, tambourines to timpani. She's also commissioned an entire body of repertoire: over 200 pieces, concertos included.

The scores and correspondence associated with these works are also held at Glennie HQ, where a small team is busy cataloguing the archive. Yet the first item that greets visitors is not a piece of percussion at all; it's a shiny MV Agusta F4 motorbike – Glennie has held a motorcycle licence since 2001. It's a reminder that this is not a museum, but a working office, a usable storage space and a testament to a fast-moving, ceiling-smashing career. ●



Give it some stick: (left) a 19-year-old Evelyn Glennie with a marimba on the BBC series *A Will To Win*, 1984; (right) playing the snare drum, the instrument that sparked her passion; (far right) working her magic on the marimba in 2006

'EVER SINCE MY FIRST pair of drumsticks I knew I'd be a collector,' says Glennie as we enter an Aladdin's Cave of glockenspiels, handbells and wood blocks. 'This piece was made for the Tan Dun Water Percussion Concerto,' she explains, selecting a dark purple two-piece from a rack of neatly hung stage outfits. It is the outfit she wore for the 2004 BBC Proms performance of the experimental work that requires the soloist to 'play' basins filled with water. 'In the past, the soloists were men and they wore the usual suit and it didn't mater when they got splashed. This colour was chosen so that it didn't go see-through when I got wet.

'I haven't kept everything, but it's nice to see that the cataloguing is already proving useful. I had a student visit recently from Spain, where she is writing a thesis on the marimba. She was looking for some information on the John Metcalf concerto that was composed for me in 1991. There have been so many first performances that it's helpful to have the detail noted down.'

As well as the concert programmes, photos and cuttings, there are also 'work-in-progress' versions of scores that Glennie has worked on with the composers, often denoting interesting amendments. 'I've kept the manuscripts as these often change,' she explains. 'For example, the original title for the John Corigliano concerto was *Triple Play* but the published version is *Conjurer*. The reason is that after the premiere, the composer said that the way my hands were working looked like a conjurer – so he renamed the concerto.'

Most archives of this nature tend to be put together once the artist is no longer around to endure the intense personal scrutiny. Sometimes, as in the case of Pavarotti, the process begins once it

## 'My local music shop sold only pianos and organs – they had one drum!'

doing this to make sure the information is available when I've gone, but it's a living collection that I will continue to add to.'

Though the entirety of the collection is fascinating, it is the instruments themselves, each with its own story to tell, that really command our conversation...

### The snare drum

We wander past an enormous tamtam and xylophone to the very back of the room. Glennie pauses in front of a long row of snare drums and selects a modest-looking specimen. 'This was my very first drum,' she says. 'My parents bought it for me when I was 13. I grew up on a farm just outside Aberdeen and the local music shop only sold pianos and organs. They had one drum – and this was it!' She turns it over in her hands. 'To be completely honest, I remember feeling quietly disappointed when I first saw it, having dreamed of those shiny, colourful snare drums.' A peacock-blue drum winks down from the shelf above us. 'That said, in a short time this instrument became an extension of my limbs and I played it every day. I still



feel fondness for it.' She places it back alongside its fancier neighbours.

Glennie was born in 1965 and spent her childhood in rural Scotland. 'My first teacher, Ron Forbes, was an army musician and he taught us to be sound creators first, then musicians, then instrumentalists.' Forbes supported Glennie as she began to lose her hearing, helping the young percussionist to experiment with new ways of learning and thinking about sound. 'We didn't have much at school – two hand-tuned timpani and a little xylophone, as well as auxiliary instruments like bass drum, cymbals and triangle – but already I was hooked.'

### The marimba

It's difficult to imagine when ensconced in such a varied (and valuable) instrument collection, but during the early stages of Glennie's career access to percussion was not easy. We step away from the shelving units and move towards the free-standing



GETTY, ALAMY, MARCO BORGREVE

instruments. Glennie carefully peels away a cover to reveal a wooden mallet instrument. 'This looks like a xylophone but is actually a marimba,' she explains. 'This and another marimba were bought on my behalf by the Musicians Benevolent Fund, along with the Beethoven Fund for Deaf Children. They were old BBC instruments that were no longer in use. I was about 15 or 16 and I treasured them as though my life depended on it. They are quite rickety but haven't changed much since I took them on. I used them a lot in my early days.'

This marimba is smaller than today's instruments. 'Nowadays marimbas are five octaves, at least,' she confirms. 'This one is four octaves. In the library at the Royal Academy of Music there were two marimba concertos: one by Paul Creston, which fitted on a four-octave marimba and I played it to death! The other was by Robert Kurka, which needed extras, so I had to bring sections of it up an octave.'

The marimba has remained a favourite instrument of Glennie's ever since. It seems incredible to think of a time before marimba concertos, but pre-Glennie, they were a rarity (more on that presently). The percussionist's latest recording for Naxos is a compilation of concertos for mallet instruments, in which the marimba is a prominent fixture, alongside glockenspiel, vibraphone and xylophone. Performing alongside the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong under Jean Thorel, Glennie once again proves that these instruments deserve their place in the concerto repertoire. Alexis Alrich's Marimba Concerto and Ned Rorem's Mallet Concerto receive their first recording (something else to add to the database), sandwiching Jenkin's *La Folia*, an ode to the much-loved melody.

### The timpani

Today's aspiring percussionists can hear the likes of Colin Currie, O Duo and



Italian style: percussionist Simone Rubino

## Beating a path

Five other leading percussionists

### Colin Currie

Another Scot, Currie was the first percussionist to reach the finals of BBC Young Musician of the Year (1994), was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2003-05 and is the founder of his own Colin Currie Group. Elliott Carter, Jennifer Higdon and Thea Musgrave have all written works for him.

### Adrian Spillett

In 1998, while a student at the Royal Northern College of Music, Adrian Spillett became the first percussionist to win BBC Young Musician of the Year. The following year he formed the ensemble 4-MALITY with which he has toured extensively. He has performed with several major UK orchestras.

### Pei-Ching Wu

A founder-member of the Ju Percussion Group, Wu has innovated marimba playing techniques involving up to six mallets. In 1999 she appeared with the Hungarian Amadinda Percussion Group in the Budapest Spring Festival and performed with pianist Martha Argerich in Taipei in 2001.

### Simone Rubino

The Italian (pictured) made a spectacular impression when he won the ARD-Musikwettbewerb in 2014, performing Avner Dorman's *Frozen in Time*. He has recorded several albums, including 2019's *Water & Spirit* for Sony.

### O Duo

Formed in 2001 by Owen Gunnell and Oliver Cox while studying at the Royal College of Music, O Duo have toured to glowing press reviews and have recorded two albums for Champs Hill. Since 2018, Cox's place in the duo has been filled by Toby Kearney.

## The best of Evelyn Glennie

Five essential albums to explore

### James MacMillan

*Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* etc.

Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Jukka-Pekka Saraste RCA G010001846447Z



Though not Glennie's debut album, it was this premiere recording of James MacMillan's riotous and exuberant showpiece, *Veni, Veni,*

*Emmanuel*, that truly launched her international career.

### Martland Street Songs; plus works by Klatzow, David Horne etc.

The King's Singers RCA G010000245012M



Steve Martland, something of a brutalist maverick among British composers, showed a more urbane side to his creativity in this

remarkable collaboration with Glennie and The King's Singers.

### Erkki-Sven Tüür

*Symphony No. 4, 'Magma'*

Estonian National Symphony Orchestra/Paavo Järvi Erato 385 7852

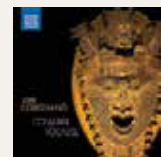


One of Glennie's most charismatic outings, with what *BBC Music Magazine's* reviewer described as 'an

intoxicating physical score', its awe-inspiring climaxes caught in demonstration sound.

### John Corigliano Conjurer

Albany Symphony Orchestra/David Alan Miller Naxos 8.559757



Another remarkable showpiece for Glennie, and also for the family of percussion instruments, of which each branch – wood, metal and skin – is showcased individually.

### Ecstatic Drumbeat: Works for Percussion and Chinese Orchestra

With Tzu-You Lin, Tsung-Hsin Hsieh et al BIS BIS-SACD 1599



Glennie has frequently collaborated with percussionists from non-Western musical traditions; here is one of her more recent and most seductively recorded results.

Twincussion. If they can't get to one of Glennie's concerts, they can listen to her 40-odd recordings. But when Glennie was starting out, there was no such thing as a solo percussionist – not least a female solo percussionist. Definitely not a female profoundly deaf solo percussionist. Both the Royal College of Music and the Academy expressed reservations about admitting a deaf musician. At the final hour, the Academy changed its mind and Glennie moved to London.

'Everything was geared towards percussionists becoming orchestral musicians,' she recalls. 'We didn't play anything exotic. We played timpani!' Lessons on more complex orchestral percussion parts such as those by Penderecki and Lutosławski ignited her interest in how percussive timbres could be organised. She also gained the support of visiting tutor James Blades, a legend among percussion players. 'James had worked closely with Britten and Stravinsky and given advice on percussion parts. He was in his eighties by the time I studied with him and it was an enormous boost to have someone of his calibre believe in me. He had a vision of what my future could look like and told me that I could be a soloist.'

Glennie eventually bought some instruments from Blades – the tamtam we passed earlier had belonged to him. She shows me the timpani bearing the inscription 'James Blades'. 'He also told me to always put my name on my instruments,' she smiles.



Having the support of a well-respected elder gave Glennie the confidence boost she needed to take the next – somewhat controversial – step. 'First-year pupils had the opportunity to put their name forward to perform a concerto. Naturally I thought I'd do the Creston, as that was all that was open to me, so I applied – and I got a note back saying that it wouldn't be fair for the orchestra to learn a concerto that they'd never play again. I decided that the way to get around this was to commission a piece by a student composer, so I asked Kenneth Dempster, who was there at the same time as me. I applied – and the principal David Lumsden called me to his office.'

Rather than berate the first-year, Lumsden echoed Blades's encouragement and even attended Glennie's performance. It sparked her lifelong commitment to

## 'For a three-hour practice session, I had to hire a van and a rehearsal room'

commissioning new music. 'I realised that I needed repertoire, so I got the *British Composers Yearbook* and sent letters to all of those I thought might be interested. Naturally, I got replies saying, "Yes, I am interested – what's the fee?". I hadn't even thought of that!' Since those early days, Glennie has co-created a body of work for solo percussionists. 'My aim has always been that orchestras have at least one percussion focus per season – high-quality music that they believe in, like they would a violin concerto.'

### The gamelan

A major breakthrough was the concerto James MacMillan wrote for Glennie to premiere at the BBC Proms in 1992. *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* propelled her on to the world stage – and there was no longer any doubt that percussion could be a solo discipline. However, it wasn't only artistic reasons that had prevented percussionists from having solo careers. 'After the premiere of *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* in 1992



– the first percussion concerto premiere of the Proms, following on from the first percussion concerto performance in 1989 – I vividly remember sitting down after that performance in the dressing room and saying to myself that things couldn't go on the way they were,' she says. 'I was living in a one-bedroom flat in London. All my instruments were in a storage space in Wembley. To practise, I had to hire a rehearsal room and a van – it took all day for a three-hour session. Most practice was done alone with the score, in my head. When I was about 26, I decided to move out of London and came here [Cambridge].'

It was another bold move and one that paid off – the premieres continued. In 1997, Glennie was back at the Proms for another percussion concerto first performance, this time by Jonathan Harvey. Dotted around the room are pieces of an even bigger instrument. 'There are 27 parts to this gamelan,' she explains. 'It was made in Indonesia, inspired by the works for gamelan and Western percussion written for me by Neil Sorrell. I asked for it to be tuned in both Indonesian and Western scales because I wanted to play it alongside the marimba and vibraphone. The instrument maker kept asking me whether I was sure! I used pieces of this gamelan for the Harvey concerto.'

### The aluphone

Alongside the 'serious' percussion instruments lie a dozen wooden frogs with sticks in their mouths. These can be drawn across the protruding spines to create a 'ribbit' noise, or struck as wooden blocks. 'It's not about how expensive or inexpensive something is, it's about using your imagination,' says Glennie. 'I'm forever going into antique shops or toy stores and seeing things that might be



Mallet moments: Evelyn Glennie, plus conga; (left) playing the timpani in 1994; (opposite) James Blades was an early inspiration

useful for a particular sound.' And if you can't find a specific timbre? Commission your own instrument! At the front of the collection sits a row of connecting silver bells. 'This is one of my most recent instruments; it was used at the Olympics opening ceremony in 2012.' She plays a few notes and an eerie, tingling sound fills the room. 'We wanted a new instrument to represent the new athletes.' The aluphone was the centrepiece of *Caliban's Dream*, which she played as well as leading a 965-strong ensemble of drummers.

### The armonica

Additions to the collection arrive on a regular basis. 'Can you guess what this is?' she asks, gesturing to what looks like a large wooden box. 'A clavichord?' I venture. Glennie opens the lid to reveal a series of glasses. It's an armonica. It had been used as a coffee table for many years – it came from a farm in Scotland. What's so special is that all the glasses are

glazed and pre-tuned; you just put water in there.' She indicates the surrounding cups. This is one of just a few known examples of such an instrument; it's safe to say that the armonica's days as a coffee table are over.

As well as the instruments and costumes there is a cabinet of prizes, but Glennie modestly waves these aside when asked for details. Among her many accolades are 15 honorary doctorates and an OBE, a damehood and appointment to the Order of the Companions of Honour in 2017. A cartoon in the downstairs loo best sums up her impressive CV. It depicts Queen Elizabeth II poring over a newspaper cutting announcing the musician's latest award. 'OMG...', shrieks Her Majesty; 'I'm gonna meet Evelyn Glennie.'  *Evelyn Glennie's new album of concertos by Alexis Arichs, Karl Jenkins and Ned Rorem (Naxos) and her recording of Christian Lindberg's 'Liverpool Lullabies' and 'Waves of Wollongong' (BIS Records) are out now*