



Interview Culture for Friends NL

An unruly child, who became a marimba teacher

The Belgian teacher and performer Ludwig Albert, marimba aficionado in heart and soul, was considered an unruly child at an early age. Of course such children will change the moment they are treated well and their ambitions are fulfilled. However, the young Ludwig was called unruly and the label stuck. But the unruly child had lots of interests, including music. As it turned out, he was musically very gifted. Ludwig remembers: "When I was eight, I played on a small marimba and a vibraphone at a music school in Tongeren. I enjoyed that; here in Belgium learning to play music means connecting with traditions and experiences from the past. We had an accordion teacher visiting us, as my brother was learning to play the accordion. As my mother thought I was unruly, she asked that teacher: 'What on earth should I do with Ludwig? He's full of pent-up energy!' And the teacher replied that I should learn to play percussion. He said that would help me get rid of my energy. And so I was allowed to go to the music school in Tongeren. I also played the drums a lot at the time. I joined several bands playing many styles, even hard rock and I played the drums in a large accordion orchestra which of course was also great fun."

He bought his first marimba, a Korogi, in Japan.

In 1992, when he was 23, Ludwig Albert bought his first large, 5-octave marimba in Japan. It was a Korogi; it had to be transported to Antwerp by cargo ship. It didn't fit into his suitcase. It was his granddad who gave him money to buy his first marimba. He didn't realize yet that this would be an important turning point in his life, which would help him develop into one of the most prominent marimba experts in the world. Albert not only brought the first large marimba to his home country, but he also introduced the instrument at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. In fact, he gradually became the most influential marimba teacher in Belgium. He also developed into one of the five best marimba virtuosos in the world. He has performed at many top locations throughout the world, as a soloist and as guest player in renowned orchestras, and he has developed his own marimba techniques, which he currently teaches to international marimba students at both the University Colleges of Arts of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp and the Lemmens Institute of Leuven. He also recorded over 15 albums, showcasing his versatile art and his internationally praised sonority as the rare lyrical marimba player. Not bad for an unruly child!

Ludwig Albert introduced the first European Master's degree in Marimba in Belgium

Ludwig Albert explains: "Marimba had always been part of percussion studies here in Belgium, but from 2000 we founded as a European creation a marimba Master's program here at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, which meant that for the very first time you could study the marimba and get a Master's degree in solo marimba in Europe. I introduced the Master's degree together with Pascale de Groote, the dean of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. In the same year we started the Universal Marimba Competition in Belgium, which is held once every two years, under the High Patronage of Her Majesty Queen Paola. Albert is the founder, artistic director and jury member of this International Marimba Competition profiled as World's leading Competition. He continues: "The problem for marimba students is that if they want to develop an international career, they can never take their instrument with them. It's too big: it is three meters long and weighs about 300 kilos. It can't be collapsed and is difficult to transport, so you need an international carrier to move your instruments from one place to the next. That's far too expensive. A laureate who has to give a concert, can't afford that." That way it is important to be presented as an endorsing artist with some company which will care about your overseas presentations and make sure the marimba will be delivered. Ludwig Albert also composes occasionally for various projects and mentions that nowadays marimba players often seem to need to showcase their own compositions in the interests of their future career. He dedicated several works to his wife Marika and to his daughter Oshin, who used to study piano, and to his son Ilias, who now plays percussion. His recent Marimba Double Concerto "The Universe" was world premiered with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic Orchestra and also performed abroad and for National TV live broadcasts at the famous National centers of performing Arts in Beijing (China) and Seoul (Korea). Ludwig Albert explains: "I also recorded it in Russia, because I'm there every year and work closely together with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic Orchestra."

Ludwig Albert in Siberia - A unique story

"In 2000 I went to Siberia. I was asked by the Russians there to give a concert. I arrived in Siberia and there was absolutely nothing. No airport, no terminal, just a runway and a building. It was 35 degrees below zero, and the cabin crew simply threw your suitcases out of the aircraft. I also found it hard to find a hotel, because you weren't welcome there as a foreigner. I was invited by the Novosibirsk Philharmonic Orchestra. I was 35 at the time, and had already built up an international



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reputation. We were really doing pioneering work in Siberia. That orchestra played in the Philharmonic Concert Hall, so there wasn't much there, but they have magnificent concert halls, twice, three times as big as the large European opera houses; it was insane! In Russia each concert attracts an audience of 5000 people, while in Europe concert halls often have an audience of only 1500. There are lots of concert halls in Russia. They also have excellent acoustics. But I needed a fur coat to cope with the cold. I was lucky, as one of my Belgian friends, Anita Evenepoel, is a fashion designer. She made a special coat for me that protected me against the low temperatures. Not a fur coat, but a short coat consisting of three layers with small air holes, so that the body's perspiration could escape. She said: 'In a fur coat you feel the cold that gets inside your coat. It gets sealed off, and then you get chilled. The cold air gets trapped inside your coat. But my coat consists of three layers, which means you don't feel the cold, as it can escape. So it is a special design. You really need all kinds of different layers, with nothing in between, and that's your insulation against the cold.' And so I didn't feel cold at all. After that I performed in Siberia every year, in Anita's special clothing. I also had to get thermal underwear."

"The oldest marimba was found in China."

"My concerts in Siberia have been one big success. The people are incredibly enthusiastic. I have been given 50-minute standing ovations. In Novosibirsk they call me a star. Belgium is culturally very different. Here in Belgium, the audiences are more conservative. In Russia audiences consist of both intellectuals and the ordinary man in the street. There is a lot more respect for concerts in all the different layers of society. People think concerts are wonderful; they have grown up with them. I have also performed a lot in Mexico. I went across there many times over a period of ten years. The 'modern' marimba actually comes from Mexico and Guatemala, although the oldest marimba, made from a hollowed-out stone, was found in China 5000 years ago and can now be admired in the musical instrument museum in Paris. But Mexico in particular has a long marimba tradition. There even is a 'Parque de Marimba' in Chiapas, where the chromatic marimba was developed. It attracts a lot of tourists; people dance and sing along with marimba music for 3 hours every week there. At one point I was called onto the stage, which was a bit of a shock. They wanted me to play something, so I played the well-known tune 'La Cucaracha', and since then people always call me 'Maestro Cucaracha' or 'Maestro Cockroach', when I return to Mexico. This year I give a number of anniversary concerts, in countries including Mexico, Taiwan, Poland, China, Portugal, Lithuania, Belgium, Hong Kong, Thailand, Korea and Russia." While sampling a tiramisu in the restaurant of the Conservatoire in Antwerp, Albert talks about his career in an entertaining way, which suits his joie-de-vivre lifestyle. He has 1000 mallets at home and four marimbas. The marimba is his passion. He smiles amiably: "It's mainly the sound, you can do so much with it. You can play Latin music on it, that sounds great, but also folk, meditative music, classical music and contemporary music. Yes, you could say that marimba music takes up my life. I was very proud of my first marimba. It was on the ground floor in my studio, in my parents' house, and everyone said: 'He is mad. What are you going to do with that, earn a living?' I replied: 'I don't care, I just love hearing marimba music.' My percussion teacher Leo Ouderits said to me: 'Look, it's a nice instrument for a percussion session, but you'll never earn a living with it.' So I said: 'I think it's a fantastic instrument, and I want to become a better player. He said: 'OK, I'll help you.' But I then explained I only wanted to do marimba, and no other percussion instruments. He agreed to this."

"We had to explore the instrument together."

"The concert solo Marimba was not yet being taught in Belgium at the time, so we had to explore the instrument together. Of course, the marimba did exist as an ensemble instrument, but in a smaller version. Leo Ouderits was a versatile teacher, a man who could play all kinds of percussion instruments, at a very high standard: different kinds of drums, timpani, vibraphone and even the Swiss cowbell. He was an incredibly good teacher, and someone who was in high demand. He also did jazz and classical music. So I was very lucky. Leo Ouderits also founded the Mol Percussion Orchestra. Like him I also played the vibraphone, but I no longer do that. I only teach marimba in Leuven and Antwerp, and I give international master classes and concerts. I often perform abroad in all continents. I get invited to play everywhere. It's great to meet so many different people and cultures." After Ludwig Albert had played on his Korogi for a number of years he was approached by Yamaha, and switched to a Yamaha marimba. More or less at the same time the American company Innovative Percussion offered to make personalized signature marimba mallets, especially for him; it was a great honor he was very willing to accept. "That meant I was the first European to play with signature mallets. It feels quite good to produce special Ludwig Albert

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mallets with Innovative Percussion from Nashville. In the end, after playing on a Yamaha for fourteen years until 2010, I changed to an Adams marimba (see the above photo), which produces my signature Ludwig Albert concert marimba, an honor as well, presented for the first time to a European marimbist. A Yamaha marimba is bigger and wider than an Adams, and the problem is that when you have to play very difficult pieces you have to reach further with your arms, and that requires more effort and energy."

Keiko Abe - The Japanese marimba legend

"In 2000 I went to Japan to study under Keiko Abe. In a record shop in Antwerp I came across an LP with numbers played by the famous Japanese marimba player and teacher. So then I thought: I want to buy a marimba. I then went to Japan, to Keiko Abe, whom I had already met at an interesting Festival in in the USA. She invited me to go to Japan. I then was taught by her for two years, so that I learnt to master the instrument well. I didn't really live in Tokyo, as I returned to Belgium every four months. I stayed with her for three months at a time. She's a very nice woman. She's nearly 80 now, and she's still playing. Keiko is an authority in marimba music. Keiko Abe has composed a lot since then, and has also commissioned many composers all over the world to write for marimba. So really she's the one who has developed the marimba into a serious instrument. It's thanks to her that the marimba started to develop. As a child I learnt the cross-grip, with crossed mallets, and in Antwerp I learnt the independent grip, but under Keiko Abe I had to improve the cross-grip. we performed together many international concert productions. The first memorable concert in Belgium was in 1996 and our last concert was in 2004. I also recorded on the album Marimba Waves, a tribute to Keiko Abe - a selection of her masterworks, performed in a special version with several guests." (Culture for friends NL, Jos Evers, June 1, 2016).

For further information please visit: www.ludwigalbert.com

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