

For Percussionist Sean Kennedy, the Beat Goes On

Posted By Jeff Meade on Sep 17, 2015 in Arts, Music |



Sean Kennedy

Most people wouldn't take an encounter with a vicious predator and turn it into music—especially music of such a high quality that it merits exposure at Carnegie Hall.

Sean Kennedy isn't most people.

An accomplished percussionist and Upper Dublin School District music teacher, Kennedy recalls the moment back in August 2001 when he was snorkeling off the coast of Maui and he noticed a barracuda swimming alongside him, just a few feet away.

“I was in the most beautiful place on earth and off to my left I saw the scariest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” recalls Kennedy. “It was like I was in heaven, but then there was a monster next to me.” The fish held its position for a couple of minutes, quietly checking him out, and just as suddenly as it had appeared, it disappeared into the deep.

When he was asked to write a percussion score for an international youth concert at Carnegie Hall—the YPHIL-International Youth Philharmonic Orchestra “Concert for Peace” on September 27—Kennedy says he remembered those moments before the barracuda appeared, followed by two minutes of stark terror, and finally the relief that swept through him when the fish vanished from sight. He translated all of those feelings into a piece called “Kaku, Kapala. Fear in Neutral Buoyancy.” The commission came as a result of Kennedy’s work in 2013 as percussion instructor with the World Peace Orchestra—another international youth ensemble.

“I was a bridge between their world and what was expected in a Western orchestra,” he says. “I’ve been in contact with them for two years to make their orchestra even better.

“In the second week of August, Sevki Faruk Kanca, the leader of the group sent me an email, and he said, ‘I know you’re a composer, and how would you feel like writing a piece for the concert at Carnegie Hall?’ And he needed it in two weeks!

“For three days, I was nauseous. Literally for three days I could not do anything. It was overwhelming. And then I remembered my ‘WIPS’—works in progress. I had dozens, so I started to go through them.”

By the time deadline rolled around, Kennedy had crafted a piece that brought together elements of rock, jazz and classical music—together with a fair amount of improvisation.

As if this honor were not enough, another unexpected kind of recognition came along at just about the same time. His recent music book, “Sixty-Second Solos,” notched the second runner-up position in DRUM! Magazine’s Drummie Awards, a poll of the magazine’s readers.

“The book is a collection of intermediate level solos for young percussionists—three for mallets, three for timpani, and three for snare drum,” Kennedy says. “That combination of instruments is standard for percussionists to audition to get into regional youth orchestras and colleges.”

Kennedy has co-written other music books, including one with Liberty DeVitto, former drummer for Billy Joel, and another with sax player Richie Cannata. The fact that this book, the only one he has written on his own, garnered such acclaim was a shock.

It's not the first time Kennedy's work has drawn notice. In 2014, [he was a quarter-finalist](#) for Grammy Music Educator Award, and even that didn't

Yet, none of this acclaim seems to be going to his head—far from it.

“I get these opportunities, and yet in my mind I'm still that 13-year-old in band and still trying to learn the paradiddle,” he says. “I'm totally blown away.”

Author: Jeff Meade

Jeff is one of the founding editors of irishphiladelphia.com.