

CONCERT REVIEW

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“Kassaba Brings a Plethora of Percussion”

By Christina Hickman, Arts & Entertainment Editor

I am sure many of you know what the bongos are, and even the maracas. But what about a talking drum or even a mbira? These are only a few of the strange instruments from different nations *Kassaba* used to bring the sounds of jazz to Walsh University Feb. 1. The Cleveland based group performed as a quartet, trio, duo and solo in the Science Center Auditorium.

About a year and half ago, pianist and percussionist Greg Slawson formed *Kassaba*. This unique, innovative and unusual group draws from roots in jazz and classical music to create and perform original works by Slawson. Slawson earned a Master of Music degree in piano performance from Cleveland Institute of Music (CIM) and was finalist in ASCAP's Morton Gould Young Composers Competition. He also won a prize in the IBLA Grand Prize–European International Composers Competition.

The group includes a second pianist/percussionist, Candice Lee. Lee also received her Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in piano performance from CIM. She has travelled all around the world participating in programs in Banff, Moscow, and the Hamptons, and performed in Canada, the U.S. and Russia. Lee has won prizes at the Missouri Southern International Piano Competition, Corpus Christi Young Artists' Competition, and the IBLA Grand Prize–European International Competition for Pianists in Italy. Lee and Slawson alternate piano and percussion duties in *Kassaba*.

The bassist Eric Hosemann received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois. At CIM he completed the Professional

Studies program. Hosemann won the Concord Chamber Orchestra Concerto Competition performing Bottesini Concerto No. 2 in 2000, naming him the “Emerging Talent for the New Millenium.” He is a former adjunct bass instructor at the College of Wooster and a member of the Canton Symphony Orchestra.

Saxophonist Mark Boich is comfortable with various musical styles from jazz to fusion to rock. In *Kassaba* Boich plays alto, tenor and soprano saxophones along with percussion. He received his Bachelor of Music in performance and jazz composition from the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

On Sunday, Feb. 1 the instrumental group *Kassaba* filled the auditorium with their unusual percussion mix.

They use a variety of seven hand drums: bongos, the djembe, the doumbek, the frame drum, the tabla and the small tabla and finally the talking drum; each coming from a different area of the world. Originating in West Africa, the talking drum is named for the way it imitates the rhythm and intonation of spoken language. It was created as a means of communication before writing was invented. The drum has a head at both ends. Leather cords (thongs) run the length of the body; the cords control the pitch of the instrument.

Shakers are another form of instrument used by *Kassaba*. The group's name is inspired by the cabasa, a shaker that used to be made from hollow gourds or coconuts with

metal beads. Other shakers used by the group include maracas, the egg shaker that contains small pieces of synthetic rice producing a gentle sound. Big brother to the egg shaker is the rock shaker, which contains more materials and has a larger aluminum body. The last shaker is the shakere, which is made with a large gourd wrapped in a lattice of beads.

A central aspect of *Kassaba's* sound is different types of percussion. There is the pitched percussion such as agogo bells similar to a cowbell, an earth bell which is a metal tube that resonates a pure single pitch when struck by its rubber mallet. There is also the mbira—special metal keys mounted onto a wooden soundboard, as well as finger cymbals.

Probably the most interesting instruments of the night had to be the ocean drum, the spring drum, and the udu. The ocean drum sounds like the ocean waves coming ashore. The spring drum is a two-handed drum featuring a shell with a large hole on the side and a spring that hangs down. The spring drum produces a thundering sound when shaken. The udu is a drum that looks like a jar that has a hole in the side that controls the sound that comes out of the top of the jar. Wood blocks and claves round out *Kassaba's* drum line.

Kassaba was interesting to listen to and watch as they moved from instrument to instrument. But I think the best part of the night was the instruments themselves, which Slawson calls the real *Kassaba*. And I would have to agree, the instruments seemed to have a life of their own. Each told a different story as they were played.