



Rob interviewing Helen and Karl Smith about the Mallet Station

Karl: I suppose the simplest way to describe it is a sort of electronic xylophone, but it's actually much more than that. It looks a little bit like a xylophone and it has all the keys set out like a xylophone, but it's operated with a computer and the software of the computer permits the instrument to play a whole range of different instruments. Unlike a synthesiser, which synthesises its own sound from within the instrument because it's using computer software it's using what we call sampled sounds which are, musicians in a recording studio have played real xylophones, real vibraphones, real timpani, what ever and recorded all of those sounds to create samples, which goes into the software. So when Helen plays on the instrument she's playing a xylophone sound, and the sound you get is a real xylophone, if she's playing a marimba the sound you get is a real marimba and so on. So it's quite fascinating.

Rob: It's a very flexible machine.

Karl: Absolutely, the instrument was developed originally for use in orchestra pits on Broadway or in the West End, something like that, where they might have a large orchestra but very little space for a lot of percussion. So a big show like for example, West Side Story, would have xylophone, marimba, timpani, all sorts of instruments and they take up a huge amount of space in the orchestra pit and so the Mallet Station was developed as a way of having all of those sounds in one instrument. So it's really a space saver originally, but then as it was developed they thought, this would be actually a great educational tool, for children to learn percussion instruments and get interested in playing music and having the experience of all these different sounds just from one instrument.

Rob: So in the orchestra it's actually a percussion instrument.

Karl: It is.

Rob: Hence the mallet.

Karl: Yes.

Rob: Which we are going to hear in a minute.

Karl: I didn't really explain that. The name Mallet station is because it is played with sticks or mallets. Xylophone sticks are, are, referred to as mallets. It's played with sticks just like a normal xylophone or marimba, whatever it is.

Rob: This is new to Brittany? Are you responsible for bringing it here?



Karl: We believe that it's probably the first one in Brittany. The instrument was developed in America and it's only just begun to come over into Europe, and I happened to spot it advertised somewhere, and we were looking for something, we were actually looking for something which would replicate timpani, because timpani are huge, much too big to carry around all over the place, but the sound of the timpani within a band or an orchestra is a wonderful instrument. So I was looking for something that would sound like a timpani without all of the material to cart about.

Rob: Ok, but in fact you have to cart around,.. I can see in front of me, at least 2 computers.

Karl: Well, we only use one to operate the instrument the other one we use to play along recordings....so that Helen can play along with other instruments. So when we are playing the instrument it just takes one computer and it can be used with a tablet. It can even be used with a mobile phone, if you've got the right software to do it.. so it's actually quite flexible.

Rob: And what's it like to actually play this instrument Helen? You're a multi-instrumentalist anyway aren't you?

Helen: It's absolutely fabulous. I absolutely love it. It was several years ago now I came to Percussion in the first place by joining the Funfare de Corlay playing tambourine, maracas, castanets, oh you name it.. triangle, everything and absolutely adored doing that... and then Karl bought me a sort of a miniature xylophone, two or three years ago now... and I was determined to get my head around that, so I did that and got on very well with it.... and then as I say I was fortunate enough to play in a gala concert, a gala Gilbert and Sullivan concert, back up in the Midlands where I hail from, with an orchestra. The first time I've ever played with an orchestra. Karl was the musical director, he conducted the orchestra and he invited me to play percussion. Well I was thrilled and I did this and a friend of mine did lend us a couple of real timpani drums, which again was the first time I'd ever played them and it was fabulous, but as Karl says it takes up such a lot space. So when we got back having done so well on the mini xylophone Karl decided mmmm, I'm going to have to have a look....

Rob: This was your reward.

Helen: This was my reward and of course I'd played so well in the concert that Karl, as he said , wanted to find something that replicated the timpani without the big drums and hence he bought me the Mallet Station for Christmas.

Rob: Excellent, and how do you enjoy wielding those mallets.



Helen: Yes, I love it absolutely love it. It is so satisfying and the different sounds that this instrument produces are just so exciting and it makes everything so much more interesting, because obviously I can go from being a xylophone, to being a marimba, to being timpani, to being a harp, to being a b...

Rob: Well could you maybe demonstrate that for us?

Helen: Yes of course, of course, of course, of course, so first of all we'll do the glockenspiel and I'll just show you a little. I've got a little phrase I can play. I do hope I don't hit any wrong notes

...
... How beautiful does that sound, absolutely lovely, and then we have the marimba, which again I can show you the sound of. I'll play you the same phrase...
... not quite the same phrase but it works and then we have what we call vibraphone, with a motor, which is fabulous, we love the vibraphone, it's very exciting....
... and then just to demonstrate, because I said about the harp, we have the harp...
... and then very quickly to show you the timpani, obviously I can't really play a phrase on the timpani but I can sort of show you... brilliant!

Rob: Ok so you've got all these different possibilities..

Helen: Yes.

Rob: How are you actually using it right now?

Helen: Right now, I, well I used it to play with the Funfare de Corlay in the carols that we did at Gouarec, which was fabulous, I think that was possibly its first public outing, which was fun and fantastic. But basically now I play it in the Funfare de Corlay, I take it along to rehearsals every week, so I have all the band numbers that Karl has arranged parts for me so I can play on the Mallet Station... and that's fabulous and there is talk of us doing another concert back up in the Midlands, another gala G and S concert, later in the year, so all being well I'll be able to play the Mallet Station in that.

Rob: Ok, well I hope we'll hear you soon in Central Brittany.

Helen: Thank you, Thank you very much Rob.

Rob: Thank you very much Helen, Thank you very much Karl, thanks very much indeed.

Helen: You're very welcome.