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EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VIBES

By Jacqueline Meyer
Recording Secretary, PAS
Assistant Professor of Music
Indiana State University

The first vibes-like instrument was attempted in 1916[1] by Herman Winterhoff, an employee of the Leedy Drum Company of Indianapolis, Indiana. He experimented with a steel marimba trying to gain a *vox humana* effect. The steel marimba was a keyboard instrument with a thin flat steel keyboard. The marimbaphone was the same instrument but situated in a different position. Rather than the performer playing on top of the bars, the keyboard was tilted into an upright position and the resonators of the natural bars were parallel to the floor, directed toward the performer. The resonators of the bars analogous to the black keys on the piano were likewise parallel to the floor but directed away from the performer. In lieu of playing directly on the bars, the playing area was designated as the edges and were to be played with a bow rather than mallets. The bars were curved in a concave manner to facilitate a better playing area. The range of the steel marimba/marimbaphone was two, two and one half, or three octaves. Mr. Winterhoff attained the *vox humana* or tremolo effect by placing a motor on the steel marimba, near the floor, to raise and lower the resonators.

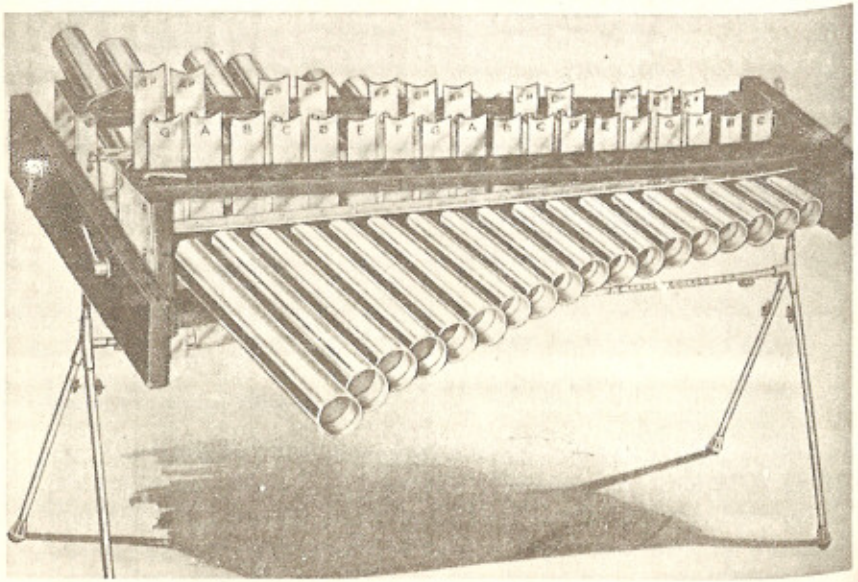

Figure 1 - Leedy

On a second experimental model, the resonators were moved laterally by a motor. This invention contained no damper pedal, as we know it today, to sustain and dampen the tone. The tremolo or vibrato effect obtained from these early experimental models was characteristically the same as from the contemporary model vibes in that it is not an alternation of pitch as on other instruments or voice, but an interruption of the air column between the bars and the resonators. This tremolo effect is unique to the vibes. No other bar percussion instrument is capable of producing this effect without the aid of a performer.

In 1921 the instrument was further refined. The motor remained under the frame but was positioned nearer the bars. A rod, operated by the motor, was placed through the top of each set of resonators with metal disks, slightly smaller than the resonator diameter, attached to the rods above each set of resonators. These disks, called pulsators, were rotated, rather than the resonators moving. In 1922 George Way, formerly Sales Manager and Advertising Manager for the Leedy Drum Company, coined the term "Vibraphone" for this new instrument.[2]

The first piece of printed matter concerning the vibes this author could find was written in 1924 or 1925. The Leedy Vibraphone had steel bars and controlled rotating fans in each resonator. "The speed control level on the motor enables the performer to set the Vibrato [sic] to suit the character of the number being played . . . ."[3]

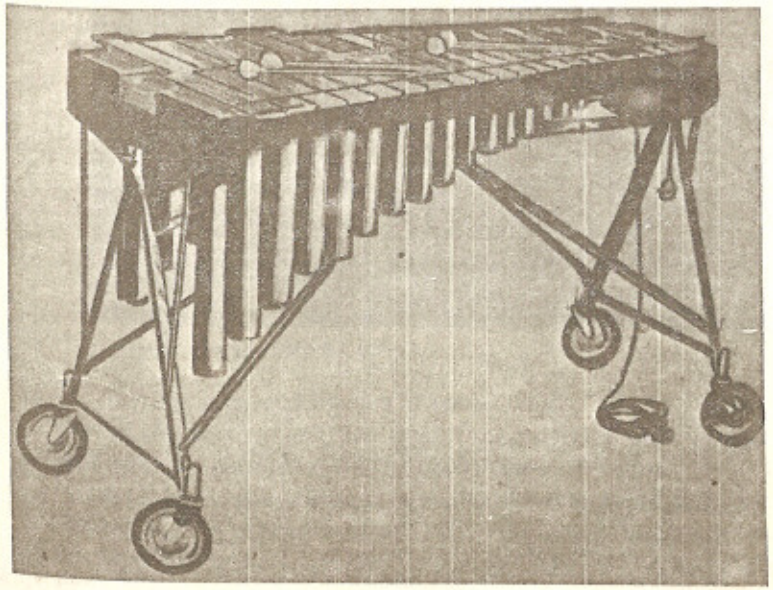

Figure 2 - Leedy Vibes