

Rammel helps demonstrate the 'shape of sound'

By Travis Gulbrandson

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When most musicians want a new instrument, they go to the store and buy one, or have a professional builder make one to their specifications.

When Hal Rammel wants a new musical instrument, he makes – and sometimes invents – one himself.

Rammel was in Vermillion last week Thursday, June 13, to speak and play some of his creations at the opening reception of "The Shapes of Sound: Hearing with Your Eyes," an exhibition at the National Music Museum that features more than 40 unusual instruments.

"I was interested in approaching music in the way that I approached drawing, making a sculpture out of found objects, those kinds of things," Rammel said. "You take what you had, take what you discover, something that you come across by accident, and find form, shape and detail."

One instrument Rammel played Thursday was the "triolin," a nail violin he built in 1985 using an old chair leg he found in a Chicago alley and wood from the bottom of a discarded dresser drawer.

"When I made my first nail violin, I didn't want to make a circular box," he said. "I thought a triangle was much more interesting. It was just a much more dynamic form."

Nail violins have been around since the 1700s and create sound when someone draws a bow across the nails, which have been hammered into place on a wooden box.

"It has very particular acoustics principles and limitations," Rammel said of the exotic-sounding instruments.

First, the bow has to be drawn near the top of the nail to elicit any noise. Also, a hammer is required if the musician wants to change the pitch of the nail.

"If you get it in too far, you have to back it off with a pliers, so ... you have some real challenges," Rammel said.

Rammel's "triolin" uses braising rods instead of nails.



Hal Rammel plays an amplified palette at the opening reception of "The Shapes of Sound: Hearing with Your Eyes," an exhibition at the National Music Museum that is open through Sept. 3.

(Travis Gulbrandson/Vermillion Plain Talk)

"I decided at the beginning that I wasn't going to fix the rods at the back of the noisemaker, that they fit snugly in holes in the soundboard," he said.

After his work with the "triolin," Rammel decided to create an instrument using the same techniques, but which would make a louder sound.

That is when he began using amplified palettes, which use both wood and metal rods of different diameters and lengths to create varied sounds.

"They're not acoustic instruments – they have no resonator," Rammel said. "They're amplified through what is called a contact microphone, which

changes vibrations into an electrical signal that can be run through some preamplification to enhance the presence that would not be audible to us – the low tones and higher tones that are in this instrument, but are not at an audible level."

The artist's palette was a "natural form" in terms of instrument-building, he said.

"It was perfect ergonomically," he said. "It's been refined over centuries, and I wanted a handheld instrument. It's also a really dynamic shape."

The amplified palettes aren't the only "dynamic shapes" on display as

part of "The Shapes of Sound. There is a violin that looks like it could have been designed by Salvador Dali, a drum shaped like a flamingo and cases filled with unusual harmonicas and whistles, among other items.

Dr. Cleveland Johnson, museum director, said the exhibit began as a result of a Dr. Seuss festival that was held in Sioux Falls.

"We managed to have a small presence there of instruments that were in the spirit ... of Dr. Seuss," he said.

At the same time, the museum was looking for a suitable summer exhibit,

and these instruments seemed like a good place to start.

"There are so many amazing, interesting instruments in our collection, many of which are really hard to find a place for because the context isn't ever quite right," Johnson said. "And so, we found an opportunity to pull some of those instruments from the shadows, pull them out of storage and put them together in what you see before you."

Johnson added that he was glad Rammel could attend the opening and give visitors some insight into how these instruments came into being.

"Most of the names that you see appended to the instrument strips, most of those builders you see listed ... are just names to us," Johnson said. "How often do you get to meet a real instrument maker? If you're a specialist, if you're a player, maybe you get to interact with someone every now and then."

"The wonderful thing about this relationship is that Hal, after a long career of building and exploring ... instruments, decided that his long oeuvre of instruments, his long career of building and creating beautiful, artistic instruments, really needed to find a permanent home," he said.

"We're so thrilled that he chose the National Music Museum to get in touch with. We're happy his instruments have found a permanent home where they will rest for all eternity to be displayed and enjoyed, and shared with the public as often as possible."

Rammel said he has learned a lot from building instruments, in particular when they didn't turn out the way he had envisioned.

"I always tell my students to make something out of wood at home," he said. "Bring it in and we'll talk about what works and what doesn't work, because when things don't work and you examine that, you learn much more about it than if it worked."

"Making mistakes, making things that don't work is fantastic if you're not discouraged by it," he said.

Vermillion chief named to SAVIN commission

Attorney General Marty Jackley has announced today the addition of the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification (SAVIN) Program to South Dakota.

With the passage of SB70, came the creation of this program that will benefit crime victims and those that serve them.

The South Dakota SAVIN Program is a free, automated service that provides crime victims with vital information and notification 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

This service will allow victims to obtain offender

information and to register for notification of a change in offender status. Such information may include important hearing, trial or sentencing dates, as well as changes in bond conditions or release from custody.

Legislators of the 2013 legislative session allocated \$790,000 for this project's two-year development process.

Jackley has appointed several individuals throughout the state to participate in a SAVIN Advisory Commission. The Commission will work to plan, create and implement the most

effective services necessary to best serve the victims in South Dakota.

"SAVIN presents the opportunity to provide both victims and defendant's family members timely information to assist them through what is often a difficult process. I thank the committee members and encourage them to develop a system that saves taxpayer resources by avoiding duplication and to bring greater transparency to government action in the criminal process," said Jackley.

The following have agreed to serve as part of the advisory commission:

- Chief Matt Betzen – Vermillion Police Department
- Kathy Christenson – Unified Judicial System
- Ben Duns Moor – Media
- Dawn Elshire – Codington County State's Attorney
- Laurie Feiler – Department of Corrections
- Krista Heeren Graber – SD Network
- John Hult – Media
- Jeanie Hutmacher – Victim representative

- Chris Jongeling – SD Coalition
- Lori Martinec – Department of Social Services
- Tatewin Means – Oglala Sioux Tribe Attorney General
- Sheila Purring – Defendant representative
- Sara Rabern – Attorney General's Office
- Sheriff Kevin Thom – Pennington County Sheriff's Office

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