

**VIDA
SUE
CHENOWETH**
1928-2018



**CONCERT
MARIMBIST,
LINGUIST, AND
ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST**

The marimba, a 250-pound wooden percussion instrument that resembles the xylophone, had its origins in West and Central Africa. Hailed as the first concert marimbist, Vida Chenoweth pioneered compositional, performance and interpretive techniques still popular today.

Vida Sue Chenoweth was born in Enid in 1928. Every Sunday, the family would gather at the family music store to play the musical instrument of their choice. At fourteen, after suffering an infected finger while studying the piano, she took up the marimba and studied with a local teacher for a year, until he left town for lack of business. Her father arranged for virtuoso Clair Omar Musser's orchestra to appear in town. Before college, Vida began performing with his 200-member marimba orchestra.

She attended Williams Woods, Fulton, MO, and graduated from Northwestern University's School of Music in 1951 with a double degree in music criticism and marimba performance and Chicago's American Conservatory in 1953 with master's degrees in percussion and music theory.

Chenoweth did historical research on the marimba in 1957 in Guatemala on a Fulbright scholarship. Her book "The Marimbas of Guatemala" became the standard reference on the instrument. She moved to New York City in 1958 to audition with the concert managers at Steinway Hall, impressing them with her Bach number. Finding a place to live and practice in the city proved more difficult.

On November 11, 1959, Chenoweth and the marimba debuted in Carnegie Hall. The demands of the piece specifically written for her were so strenuous that she had to take fencing lessons to strengthen her legs to meet the piece's requirements for balance and movement. Receiving rave reviews from Time and Variety critics, the wide leaps and agile artistic movements became a hallmark of her performances.

She soon began performing all over the United States and Europe, and became the first artist to commercially record marimba music, releasing an album on the Epic label in 1962. When she read an article by a New York critic called 'Pioneering the Marimba,' she didn't think she was "pioneering"!

In 1961, Chenoweth's music career abruptly ended after severely burning her right hand when her apartment gas oven exploded. While recovering, she learned about the Summer Institute of Linguistics. She traveled to Papua, New Guinea to serve as a linguist to help translate the Bible into the Usarufa language. For the next thirteen years, she also helped them develop hymns in their own style, embracing the new pioneering work in ethnomusicology. In 1974, she received her Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Auckland, focusing on music, anthropology, and linguistics.

In 1979, she joined the faculty of Wheaton, Illinois College's Conservatory of Music to teach ethnomusicology, the study of music of various cultures from the perspectives of those who create it. Every year, she took a group of students to Senegal, Cameroon, the Solomon Islands, Peru or Indonesia to document the music and practices of these cultures.

After retiring in 1993, Chenoweth returned to Oklahoma and cataloged nearly a thousand field tapes of world music for the Library of Congress. She was inducted in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1985 and the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 1994.

Chenoweth died in December 2018 at age 90 in Enid. She is credited in raising the marimba to a level of respect equal in stature to other instruments through her highly artistic abilities. For many years nearly every major work for the instrument was written for, dedicated to, or performed by her.