The Marimba as a Versatile Instrument

By: Will Sewell

Introduction:

This concert serves to argue that the Marimba is an incredibly versatile instrument, with many compositions written for it that explore all sorts of different sounds, techniques, and genres. The marimba as a concert instrument is less than 100 years old, so all music written for it intended to be performed in a concert hall was written after the year 1900, allowing for the full body of repertoire to be selected from for this program. Incidentally, the three pieces included on this concert are considered "standards" in the repertoire for being extremely difficult from both an interpretive and technical standpoint. All three pieces ask for many different things from the performer. The pieces will show the extreme dynamic range that the marimba is capable of, a couple of different extended techniques that are possible, and the different types of strokes and beating spots that are used to create different sorts of sounds. *Time for Marimba* will foster a discussion on mallet choice, and just how much that affects the overall sound of the piece and the instrument. The three pieces are indicative of three quite different genres: Japanese Marimba music, Free Atonality/Quasi-Improvisation, and Pop-inspired Marimba music. The audience should leave the concert with a better understanding of the marimba's capabilities not only as an instrument that's great for ringtones, but also as an instrument that can be used for deep and meaningful music making across a variety of styles and genres.

Program:

Time for Marimba (1968) …….…….Minoru Miki (1930-2011)

Laudate Lignum (1980) ……...……Werner Heider (b. 1930)

Northern Lights (1989) ……...……Eric Ewazen (b. 1954)

Program Notes:

Miki: Time for Marimba

Minoru Miki was a Japanese composer who wrote scarcely for marimba, but two of his marimba works, *Time for Marimba* and *Marimba Spiritual,* became staples of the marimba repertoire that now receive multiple performances every year across the globe. As a composer, Miki's largest project and main compositional goal was his set of nine operas whose subject matters spanned over 1600 years of Japanese history—from the 5th century to the 20th. He was also very avid about promoting Japanese music, creating *Nihon Ongaku Shudan* (Pro Musica Nipponia) in 1964 and serving as its Artistic Director for 20 years. This ensemble produced over 160 performances all over the world in order to "internationalize traditional Japanese instruments."[1]

Time was written in September of 1968 for marimba virtuoso Keiko Abe to perform at her groundbreaking recital showcasing the capabilities of the marimba.[2] Miki was inspired by the sounds and repetitive nature of Indonesian Gamelan music, which he got to experience first-hand in a trip to Bali a few months earlier. He wrote the piece extremely quickly, finishing in just ten days, and presenting the piece to Abe only ten days before the recital.[3]

The overall form of the piece is A-A'-B-coda. The A sections are based on a six-note set: C-B-Eb-G-E-Ab. This set gets manipulated rhythmically through quintuplet rhythms and motivically by shifting the starting pitch to create a sort of improvisatory, "free" feeling.[4] The B section is a sort of Theme and Variations based on different thematic material. The improvisatory nature mixed with the extreme dynamic shifts and free atonalism are hallmark staples of the "Japanese Marimba music" genre. Other great Japanese marimba works like *Mirage pour Marimba* by Yasuo Sueyoshi and *Two Movements*

[1] Miki, "Profile" & "Concerning of Marimba & Percussion pieces."
[2] Kite, *Keiko Abe*, 196.
[3] Ibid. 52.
[4] Zator, "Comparative Analysis," 11.

for Marimba by Toshimitsu Tanaka feature these styles heavily and have all been codified as classic Japanese compositions in the marimba world.

The versatility of the piece is demonstrated in the extreme dynamic range Miki asks for. Because of this, it is standard performance practice to use what are called "duo-tone" marimba mallets. These mallets are made with a rubber core and are wrapped in a type of synthetic yarn such that at the top of mallet, there is a lip that contains only yarn and no core underneath. This is used for extreme softs; the performer can tilt their mallets down and play only on the lips, getting no "core" sound and achieving a very thin, soft sound without very much edge or harshness. These mallets, like most marimba mallets, come in a variety of hardnesses ranging from very hard to very soft. This piece is typically played with hard mallets, the exact amount of hardness depending on the performer's school of thought. Japanese marimbists typically play with a very hard mallet, while American marimbists shoot for a medium hard mallet.

Heider: Laudate Lignum

Werner Heider is a Bavarian conductor and composer currently living in Erlangen, Germany, who developed an interest in Jazz at an early age. He composes prolifically in the Third Stream genre, which is a fusion of Jazz and Classical music. His *Divertimento* (1957) for jazz quartet and small orchestra was recorded by the Modern Jazz Quartet in 1960. He founded the Ars Nova Ensemble Nuremberg in 1968 and conducted it until its dissolution. Since then, he has continued to conduct both contemporary ensembles and major orchestras throughout Europe.[5]

The program notes included with the piece describe it as follows: "The title, Laudate Lignum, translates from Latin to 'praiseworthy wood.' Heider writes that, in his opinion, the marimba is the noblest and most natural of all percussion instruments, and thus the most beautiful. Laudate Lignum is intended to capture Heider's dramatic ideas of knowledge, motion, riot, storm, silence, and 'broken'

[5] Solomon, "Heider – Laudate Lignum."

chant."[6] The form of the piece is free/quasi-improvisational. Not much is written about melodic or harmonic content, and the score is somewhat difficult to come by, being sold almost entirely in Europe. Basically, this piece is quite enigmatic, which is helped by the multiple different implements and styles that the composer asks the performer to use. Robert Paterson speaks on the use of fingers and fingernails that Heider calls for: "Heider indicates that the percussionist should use fingernails as much as possible, but using fingers alone is adequate. This is presumably to provide a firmer attack so the notes will be heard more easily."[7] Fingernails tend to have a brighter start to the notes, while fingers alone are warmer, therefore being a bit softer as well. Heider also calls for the use of mallet shafts, which have a similar attack as fingernails, but since the shafts are much longer and thicker than fingernails, they produce a fuller, louder sound.

Ewazen: Northern Lights

Eric Ewazen was born in 1954 in Cleveland, Ohio. Receiving a B.M. at the Eastman School of Music, and M.M. and D.M.A. degrees from The Juilliard School, his teachers include Milton Babbitt, Samuel Adler, Warren Benson, Joseph Schwantner and Gunther Schuller.[8] He has been on the Juilliard faculty since 1982 and on the school's Pre-College faculty since 1980.[9] His music has been performed all over the world by all sorts of performing forces, including wind ensembles, orchestras, chamber orchestras, and even soloists.

Northern Lights is the first of only two marimba works the composer has written to date, the second being his *Concerto for Marimba* written in 1999 for Marimba and String Orchestra. A reduced accompaniment version is also available upon request. *Northern Lights* was written for and dedicated to marimbist and composer Gordon Stout,[10] who has composed extensively for marimba in his own right.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Paterson, "Sounds That Resonate," 206.
[8] Ewazen, "About the Composer."
[9] Juilliard School, "Music Faculty – Eric Ewazen."
[10] Grimm, "Analysis and Performance," 14.

The piece has 6 distinct sections.[11] The first section is the chorale in D minor that opens the piece. The opening chord progression is i-v-i-IV-i-v, implying the D Dorian mode is being used, which differs from natural minor because of the raised 6th scale degree. The chord progression is quite reminiscent of popular chord progressions in that it only uses three distinct chords in a functional manner. The section finishes with flourishes up and down various modal scales on various pitches toward the low end of the marimba. The second section throws the listener into a completely different world, rhythmically speaking. The tempo kicks up, the rhythm compresses into sixteenth notes, and the energy ramps way up.[12] The third section consists of interjectory material to serve as a bridge into the next section, which is a call back to the first section's chorale.[13] It later begins to synthesize the chorale and sixteenth-note sections into a cohesive whole. The next section takes all of the previously introduced material and mixes it together.[14] The final section draws on material from the opening sections, using the chorale and flourishes from the beginning and the sixteenth notes from the second section.[15] The piece ends with a nice V-I resolution in the key of G major, further solidifying the pop influence seen all throughout the piece.

An interesting stylistic choice employed by most performers of this piece is the difference in striking positions on the bars. It is common performance practice to start a rolled chord hitting the middle of the bars, and then gradually shift to the nodes of the bars, which is where the string holding the bars in place runs through and is the least resonant point on the bar. This aids in decrescendos and allows the performer to experiment with timbre. Hitting the nodes of the bar generally produces a thinner, quieter sound dominated by overtones. The center of the bar is where the richest, fullest sound comes from and is where the fundamental pitch is most easily heard. If a performer wants to utilize a full range of dynamics and timbre, they will often utilize the full space of the bar.

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[11] Ibid. 14-25.
[12] Ibid. 16.
[13] Ibid. 19.
[14] Ibid. 21.
[15] Ibid. 23.

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