

Marimolin Celebrates Past Commissions

By Rick Mattingly

Marimbist Nancy Zeltsman says that one of the things she most enjoys about playing in Marimolin with violinist Sharan Leventhal, after a nearly 20-year break, is “checking back in with ‘good friends’—our favorite pieces from all those years ago.” She cites Robert Aldridge’s “Threedance” and Gunther Schuller’s “Phantasmata,” which will both be performed at Marimolin’s PASIC17 concert, as good examples. “Those are two really extraordinary pieces,” Nancy says. “We realized how surprisingly well they have stood the test of time.”

Aldridge’s “Threedance,” commissioned by Marimolin in 1987, features marimba, violin, and tabla, and appeared on Marimolin’s self-titled debut album. At PASIC, Ray Dillard will play the tabla part. According to Aldridge, “Throughout ‘Threedance,’ the marimba and tabla are set primarily in rhythmic unison, creating a ‘super’ percussion instrument whose pitches are reinforced by resonant rhythmic attacks. This motor drives the violin, whose melodic and improvisational gestures dance around the constant forward motion of the piece. The technique of phasing is used throughout ‘Threedance,’ whereby things fade in and out constantly, reflecting the idea that everything is always in motion and in a different space than it was five seconds ago. Through the use of this ‘doppler’ effect, I wanted to make a piece that evokes movement towards and away from different states of being: primal and serene, joyous and ecstatic, and sometimes reflective.”



“Threedance” (1987) by Robert Aldridge. Sharan Leventhal, violin; Nancy Zeltsman, marimba; Steven Cornelius, tabla. From the album *Marimolin* (GM Recordings).

Schuller’s “Phantasmata,” also commissioned by Marimolin and premiered in 1990, was the title track of the duo’s second CD. “When we went back to the Schuller piece, with its harmonic intricacies, we found that there is still so much to explore in it,” Zeltsman said. “Maybe that’s attributable to our individual growth in all these years, but it’s been very satisfying to find these really wonderful sounds in there, the likes of which I haven’t heard explored in almost any other pieces since then.”

Schuller said of the piece, which was composed in just three days, “The violin and marimba—as so well proven by Marimolin—is a remarkably compatible instrumental pairing, capable of astonishing sonoric and articulative blendings as well as contrasts. Moreover, in the hands of capable players, the traditional roles of their instruments can also be reversed—the violin playing in a percussive manner, the marimba playing in a lyrical, legato manner. Much of the literature for these two instruments—most of it commissioned and generated by Marimolin—has tended to treat them linearly—i.e., melodically, contrapuntally, and



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rhythmically. In ‘Phantasmata’ I have taken a slightly different (and possibly more difficult) approach: richly, even densely, harmonic with both instruments locked in close harmonic embrace much of the time. Also I have probably exploited the very lowest range of the five-octave marimba more than has heretofore been contemplated.

“The work is in four contrasting movements: the first, dramatic and volatile in its gestures and character, notwithstanding its quiet chorale-like ending; the second is more nervous and mercurial, challenging the virtuosic capabilities of the two players. Movement III is a music of utmost stillness, static and inner directed, at times almost coming to a standstill, at other times enlivened by tiny rhythmic flourishes. The movement has a feeling of suppressed intensity, which, eventually unable to be contained, erupts into a massive rhythmic explosion, only to quickly subside again into tension-resolving quiescence. Movement IV is a prolonged cadenza-like solo peroration for the marimba. Beginning in the instrument’s very lowest register, and moving slowly in single lines, the music gradually rises in register, intensity, and harmonic complexity. Eventually, the violin joins in, leading to the climactic apex of the movement. A final and brief march-like Allegro brings the work to a lively close.”

Paul Lansky’s “Six Years Ago, Monday” blends electronics with the marimba and violin. “The tape part creates a sometimes asynchronous backdrop against which the players reminisce and agitate,” says Lansky of the piece.

“Paul has written a lot of music for percussion,” Nancy adds. “It all started with ‘Hop,’ which he wrote for Marimolin in 1993, followed by ‘Six Years Ago, Monday’ in 1996, which hasn’t been heard often, probably due to the fact that Marimolin disbanded soon after it was written. That was followed by ‘Three Moves for Marimba,’ which he wrote for me in 1998, and then came all the rest!

For ‘Six Years Ago, Monday,’ he created a luscious electronic soundscape including sounds of something akin to water droplets, various percussion sounds, deep bells, and warm resonances as a backdrop for the violin and marimba.”

Keeping with Marimolin’s legacy of playing new music, the PASIC performance will also include “Through the Looking Glass,” a 2016 composition by Steven Snowden, a freelance composer based in Boston. According to the composer’s biography, “His work often deals with concepts of memory, nostalgia, and the cyclic nature of historical events as they pertain to modern society. While his musical influences are deeply rooted in bluegrass, folk, and rock, he utilizes non-traditional techniques and processes to compose works that don’t squarely align with any single genre or style.”

The piece was composed as part of a collaboration between Marimolin, Snowden, and hip-hop dancer Duane Lee Holland, Jr. The four artists were interested in examining the question, “What is truth?” Snowden aimed to portray the feeling of being completely overwhelmed with information to the degree that you don’t really know what’s happening or what’s true and what isn’t. For the electronics, he mostly used clips from press conferences and cable news, but he ripped them into little pieces so the listener doesn’t know the context. It fails to make sense anymore, which is meant to reflect the feeling that many people have about today’s information overload.

▶ Tap to play Video



Excerpt from “Through the Looking Glass” (2016) by Steven Snowden, with Duane Lee Holland, Jr., dancer; Sharan Leventhal, violin; Nancy Zeltsman, marimba. (Note: The PASIC performance will not include a dancer.)

Zeltsman and Leventhal were introduced by Aldridge when he invited them to play his piece “Combo Platter” for violin, alto saxophone, and marimba (composed for Zeltsman in 1983) at a concert in October 1985. They founded Marimolin shortly after that and made their formal debut in May of 1986. Over the next decade, Marimolin premiered 79 chamber works, raised over \$68,000 to commission new works, and sponsored a composition contest for eight years that collectively attracted nearly 200 entries from around the world. They appeared at PASIC twice during that time.

The duo recorded three CDs, the first of which, *Marimolin* (produced by Gunther Schuller, 1988, GM Recordings), received wide acclaim, including being named “Classical CD of the Month” in the March 1990 issue of *CD Review* magazine and was nominated for a Grammy award in the chamber music category. They subsequently released *Phantasmata* (1995, GM Recordings) and *Combo Platter* (1994, Catalyst/BMG, now out of print). The latter was named “Disc of the Month” in the June 1995 issue of *CD Review*.

Zeltsman says that spending ten years playing with a violinist in Marimolin “calibrated” her ear in terms of dynamics. “The violin has a really full sound,” Nancy explains. “When I’m blending well with it at any dynamic, I feel I’m playing at levels that allow the qualities of the marimba to shine. Sharan’s max is pretty much where I want the max to be on the marimba in order that the fundamental pitch always remains clear and is not overwhelmed by overtones. It’s a

personal thing that I don’t want to go beyond that; I want my voice on the marimba to be listenable.

“I’m reminded of an incident when one of my students performed Gunther Schuller’s marimba solo ‘Marimbology’ for him,” Zeltsman continues. [Schuller composed the piece for Zeltsman after “Phantasmata.”] “Once, after the student played a very heavy accent, Gunther checked to see if he was playing the right note, as Gunther was hearing a loud overtone at the fifth. The player asked Schuller, ‘When is the accent too loud?’ Schuller replied, ‘When I can’t discern the pitch I wrote!’

“For someone else, the marimba is different; they feel the instrument can withstand a beating, and that’s how some people express themselves. They like to have their ears ‘excited.’ That’s fine. Some pieces in percussion are meant to be jarring because we are capable of huge dynamic ranges. There are contemporary pieces that go from a whisper to a shocking slam. In certain kinds of contemporary music, that’s what the piece is about, so you brace yourself. But that’s not the only way to play in general or to listen to music.

“When I come across players who are sort of blasting away, like they are drumming on a marimba, I don’t feel the sound of the instrument is able to blossom. I was recently judging a marimba competition in Europe that had some great players, but we ended up not allowing a few of the technically advanced players to continue in the competition because they were overplaying the marimba. We were all holding our ears, and it was like, ‘We don’t care how good your technique is if no one wants to listen.’ A lot of marimbists have gotten into playing like they are trying to project into an arena but, to my ear, that’s not playing marimba.”

During the competition, at one point Nancy pulled out her phone and opened an app that measures decibels. She found that some of the marimbists were generating 100 decibels and more. At volumes above 85 dBs for a prolonged period, people are at risk for hearing damage.

“I’m grateful for those years playing regularly in Marimolin for how it shaped my perceptions. I don’t think there are many percussionists who basically dropped out of the percussion world for a decade,” Nancy says. “I just played in the chamber music world for ten years. That’s one thing that makes me different; chamber music is a very satisfying, complete world.”

Zeltsman says that she’s excited to bring Marimolin back to PASIC: “The last time we played there was 25 years ago! So the ‘old-timers’ remember us, but the current generation doesn’t know this side of my work that was so formative for me as a musician and marimbist. From the first hour Sharan and I played together, there has always been a musical connection—a symbiosis between us as musicians that extends to the pairing of our instruments. Our connection is truly one of a kind. It feels like being home.

“Commissioning a lot of music, as Sharan and I have done together, brings with it the risk and reality that you don’t always get great pieces,” Nancy says. “However, on numerous occasions, I found that the ingenuity we mustered together to make something of the less-than-favorite pieces—because of our determination to dig into the challenge, and the exciting way ideas spark as we work together—resulted in some of my deepest growth and knowledge as a musician. Sharing that kind of struggle then naturally deepens what players draw from in playing great pieces like those we’re programming at PASIC.

“As young players form chamber groups, I encourage them to seek out partners whom they admire—and who will kick their butts! Sharan, for example, is phenomenal at rhythm and nuances of pitch—she is first violinist of the Kepler Quartet, who recently completed recording ten breathtaking microtonal string quartets by Ben Johnston—and fluent as a player of numerous classic chamber works with Gramercy Trio and many freelance groups. It’s thrilling to play with people who bring as much experience and diverse strengths as possible. To find players who will match your commitment to the collaboration is something to cherish! An even bigger gift is when the day-to-day work flows easily, and is always illuminating and full of discovery. I wish for everyone reading this to experience moments like it feels for me to play in Marimolin.” **PN**