



# Musings on the Marimba and Its Study, 1997/Part 1

BY NANCY ZELTSMAN

**W**HILE THE MARIMBA, BROADLY defined, is one of the most ancient musical instruments on earth, the modern, Westernized marimba has only been around for about eighty years. During that time, passionate advocates have pioneered distinct advancements for its image and performance tradition. Even so, the marimba is still a fledgling instrument, relatively uncommon to concert, jazz and pop stages.

There is the sense, however, that it is beginning to emerge. The agent for this change is the staggering number (hundreds, maybe thousands) of players drawn to the marimba today in contrast to much sparser interest when I began to specialize on the instrument twenty years ago. There are a few dozen people today—compared with only a few twenty years ago—who (at least among percussionists) are known internationally as marimbists. Most of these professionals are young—in their thirties or forties. As they carve out individual careers, they are also joining in the common cause of advancing the instrument.

The marimba has traditionally been studied at the college level within the context of training someone to be a “well-rounded percussionist.” Being a truly well-rounded percussionist has never been a more daunting goal than it is today. The global village created by electronic media has led to a heightened awareness of world music and attendant performance techniques. The Percussive Arts Society promotes a liberal view of all that is encompassed by percussion. It is now arguable that a well-rounded percussionist ought to be versed in much more than the traditional battery of Western European orchestral percussion instruments that are predominantly emphasized in college, university and conservatory percussion programs. Educational restructuring is inevitable.

The natural alternative to studying all the instruments is specialization on particular instruments or in certain aspects of percussion playing. The specialized

study of marimba is beginning to appear as one such branch. It makes sense to me that the marimba be regarded either as one of the instruments played by a traditionally trained concert percussionist or as an autonomous instrument. Of all the percussion instruments, I believe the marimba is the one most capable of standing on its own.

I couldn’t obtain a bachelor’s degree in marimba in the early ‘80s; I know because I tried. Instead, my degree was in percussion. In the early ‘90s, several institutions in the U.S. and Europe began offering graduate-level degrees in marimba. (The same may have already existed in Japan.) The majority of percussion departments and/or academic administrations, however, seem reluctant to follow suit on the grounds that it is irresponsible to train students in an area that does not correlate to the professional job market. This should not be an issue.

In the face of such controversies, I am particularly thrilled that the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where I teach marimba, set a milestone. In the fall of 1997, Berklee began to recognize marimba as a specialty area under its percussion principal—thus offering, in essence, the first undergraduate degree in marimba in U.S. history (to my knowledge).

In a celebratory mood, my objective in Part 1 of this article is to take stock of the marimba’s status in the music world and share some personal observations, reflecting on my fifteen years of performing solely as a marimbist. As someone who holds extremely rare positions teaching marimba exclusively, in Part 2 I’ll try to inspire some review and discussion of current views on teaching percussion with the hopes that it will enable us to usher better educated and more highly motivated musicians into the twenty-first century.

PART 1: MUSINGS ON THE MARIMBA  
The distinctive sound of the marimba is recognizable today by the masses. It ap-

pears frequently on movie soundtracks, television and radio. Virtuoso marimba playing is piped in as background music in such common settings as supermarkets and public waiting areas, thanks to Dave Samuels’ tenure with the popular jazz/fusion band Spyro Gyra.

But despite the familiarity of its sound, most people don’t know what a marimba looks like, how it is played, or even its name. It’s challenging to describe a marimba to a non-musician. “It’s like a giant xylophone,” I usually begin, realizing that their image of a xylophone may be that of a child’s one-octave toy glockenspiel—the kind with rainbow-colored metal bars and one supplied hammer, which is a far cry from the five-octave instrument I play. Even musicians who know what a marimba is, but haven’t encountered anyone who specializes on it, may view it as a mere novelty.

Often, this relates to the marimba’s beginnings in this country as a vaudeville instrument usually employed for amusing, light entertainment. One reason the marimba caught on as a novelty is that the act of playing it is almost dancelike;



Nancy Zeltsman, age 3, with toy glockenspiel



J.C. Deagan, Inc. ad in *Popular Mechanics*, April 1936

the large physical motions involved are easily appreciated by even a non-musical audience.

An English-born concert clarinetist, John Calhoun Deagan (1852-1932), arrived in the United States in 1879 and, within a decade—succumbing to his sideline interests including the science of acoustics and instrument design—revamped early European versions of the glockenspiel and xylophone. Deagan subsequently built up his own company, which in turn manufactured the first Western marimba in the early twentieth century (certainly by 1918). By that time, the xylophone was commonly used in popular bands and orchestras and in vaudeville shows.

Red Norvo (born Kenneth Norville in 1908, now living in Santa Monica, California) played the xylophone, vibraphone and, by age 14, the marimba. Norvo was the main person responsible for bringing the mallet instruments from the world of vaudeville into the world of jazz in which he was a prominent, respected and innovative contributor.

Clair Omar Musser (born 1901, living today in North Hollywood, California) and Vida Chenoweth (born around 1930, who now spends much of her time in the South Pacific working as a linguist) made enormous contributions, too numerous and varied to adequately credit here, in the realm of concert music. A few that stand out are Musser's promotion of the marimba through the organization of large-scale marimba ensembles aimed at popular appeal; Musser's part-time position as a specialized marimba instructor at Northwestern University's School of

Music in the latter half of the 1940s and early '50s; and the manner in which Chenoweth's artistry, musicianship and care with her repertoire resulted in her transcendence of public skepticism about the marimba as a serious medium for expression. In response to her landmark recitals in the late '50s and early '60s, critics remarked that she had accomplished for the marimba what Segovia had for the guitar.

The activities we currently pursue for the advancement of our own careers and the marimba itself—that is, the avenues that define a career as a marimbist—were all engaged in by Deagan, Musser, Norvo and Chenoweth: recitals, concerto appearances with orchestras, jazz club appearances and concerts, touring, special concert projects, transcriptions and arrangements,

commissioning and encouraging new repertoire, marimbists composing for the instrument themselves, recording, instrument and mallet developments, advances in four-mallet technique, refinements in mallet independence, and teaching marimba.

Since there is virtually no call for marimbists, it is up to each of us to carve out a niche for ourselves. To accom-

plish this, we navigate our own course through the aforementioned avenues. It requires a *lot* of ingenuity, energy, patience, perseverance and entrepreneurship—commensurate with how *little-known* the marimba is—but the payoff is the satisfaction that comes from new projects and approaches that make valuable contributions to the young marimba's growing heritage.

The majority of entrepreneurial energy in my career thus far was channeled into my eleven-year (1985-1996) partnership with violinist Sharan Leventhal as the duo Marimolin. Fueled by our determination to establish a repertoire for marimba and violin where virtually none existed, our efforts spawned hundreds of compositions, including a couple of dozen that are widely performed around the world

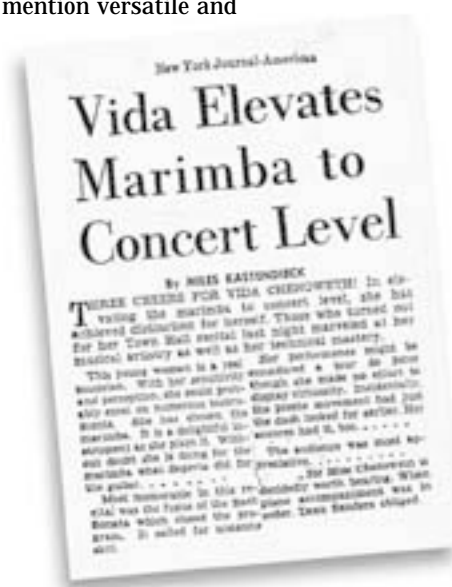
today, as well as heightened respectability for the marimba in the realm of chamber music. No one was crying out for Marimolin to come into existence; we just conceived the idea, worked tirelessly (often at a financial loss) on its behalf, and eventually made something of a mark.

There are more “twenty-something” marimbists at colleges, universities and conservatories presenting marimba performances today, including concerto appearances and ambitious solo and chamber music recitals, than at any other time in history. It's difficult to imagine the impact this generation will have. I am optimistic that many of these young players will succeed as soloists or in self-formed groups, perhaps by initially seeking out such opportunities as roster support offered by foundation-based, statewide or regional arts agencies (which might, for instance, organize performances in schools, elderly homes and hospitals). Depending on a player's repertoire, work possibilities might also include salon parties, coffee houses, nightclubs, weddings, street fairs and restaurants. Ultimately, this type of exposure will lead to greater acceptance of the marimba on the concert stage, as it did for the classical guitar, an instrument with a similar evolution in this century.

For the time being, the freshness of the marimba is an asset. If I approached a presenter who had never booked a marimbist for a general audience, my main selling point would be that the marimba is unusual and provocative, not to mention versatile and



J.C. Deagan, c. 1917



Published January 15, 1962

visually appealing. In a way, I hate to stoop to these descriptives, but it's a way to get my foot in the door. The presenter may realize that he or she can effectively sell the same points to a prospective audience. My goal, once hired, however, is to lure listeners into the music and the recognition that the marimba is a wonderful vehicle for it—and to cause them to forget that it was novelty appeal that brought them to the concert.

If, in another scenario, I contacted a presenter who had recently showcased a marimbist (an event that we'll assume, for the sake of argument, was a tremendous success), would the presenter be

more or less likely to want to hire *me* in the near future? At present, the answer is probably "less likely." In this case, the fact that the marimba is seen as a novelty instrument would work against me. The tides might begin to turn, however, if this presenter was approached by ten or twenty accomplished marimbists, a situation that would make it difficult to dismiss the marimba as a novelty and would compel the presenter to make critical assessments of the relative merits of those marimbists on the basis of their repertoire and musicianship.

A "career as a marimbist" is, for the most part, a contradiction in terms. Of

the people who consider themselves marimbists, very few make a living solely by performing and teaching marimba. Many fine marimbists also freelance as percussionists, teach general percussion programs, or are involved with other sideline work that is (or is not) related to the marimba or in the field of music. The level of artistry—and advancement for the instrument—achieved by each player may be inhibited by these career-juggling acts, but moderate advancement is better than none at all.

Distinct schools of playing now pervade the marimba field. These reflect the opinions and preferences of a handful of

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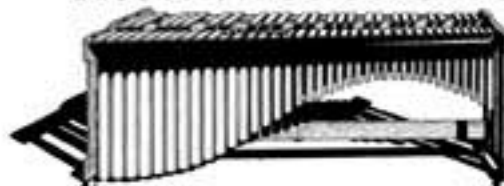
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leading players on such topics as which four-mallet grip ought to be used, how technique ought to be approached, and mallet choices. Different methods provide interesting and useful guideposts to young players who find comfort in following a particular one, but they carry the inherent danger of placing inordinate focus on technique over musicianship. Each marimbist may need to choose a four-mallet grip, for example, but might prefer the sound concepts currently associated with a different school and, on top of that, might have his or her own ideas—not represented by any current philosophy—about, say, producing certain articulations. It would be prudent to bear in mind that each school has been around a relatively short time and therefore shouldn't be seen as the final word. We should strive to more openly share approaches, be open to the virtues each may offer and, *relying on our ears*, continually experiment, even if this initially confuses young players—and older ones!

Today, several companies produce professional-calibre marimbas. The differ-

ences between these makes, aside from cosmetic issues, are varying bar widths and lengths, and resonator materials and configurations that are regarded by each company as central to its trademark timbre. The perceived benefit to performers is the selection available and the extent to which the competition between companies inspires each to keep pace with the others' subtle improvements. The downside, however, is that players may need to be prepared to quickly adjust to differently spaced keyboards.

In the bigger picture, the lack of bar standardization keeps the marimba tethered in the realm of folk instrument. It is unthinkable, for instance, that pianism would have risen to the heights it has if pianists had to be prepared to adapt virtuoso—or even elegantly simple—repertoire to varying keyboard layouts. I'm not versed in instrument building, but I'm optimistic that each company could remain a distinct force in the market even if they cooperated with one another to create a standardized marimba keyboard. The most important thing to happen to

the marimba—and for marimbists—in the last few decades is the expansion of our repertoire. Players around the globe have encouraged composers to write for the instrument. I know firsthand the rewards inherent in acquainting composers with the marimba. Working with a composer to evolve a performance practice—and, on some occasions, seeing something of yourself reflected in the final score—is extremely gratifying. When composers are able to grasp how to write idiomatically, or when marimbists compose pieces themselves that explore especially clever, idiomatic techniques, the result may be music we particularly enjoy playing because it lays well.

On the other hand, “unidiomatic” writing sometimes offers refreshing surprises and rewarding challenges. It forces us to find creative solutions that stretch and build our techniques in ways we might not have otherwise have experienced. It also charts more territory in the expressive range of the instrument and opens the instrument to greater flexibility.

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absolutely essential to the instrument's future. The piano, for example, isn't viewed as a great instrument just because it's a great instrument, but because Beethoven wrote his thirty-two sonatas for it, and so on. If there were fifty concert programs'-worth of great marimba music—music that transcends the instrument—people would hire marimbists in order to hear that repertoire. They would be curious to hear particular performers' interpretations of favorite pieces.

While it's clear that we need to embrace new works written for our instrument, we should also be discriminating. It isn't essential to learn *every* new work for marimba just because it came into existence. I believe it's important to be open-minded to music of many different styles. My personal programming criteria is that I must at least *admire* a piece, even if I don't *like* it at first; sometimes genuine affection grows as I come to understand it better. My ultimate goal is to feel that I can play each piece from the heart. Repertoire that moves the player has the greatest potential of moving the audience—which, in turn, holds the greatest potential of advancing the marimba.

Transcriptions are a marvelous means of expanding our repertoire's scope. Since transcriptions can draw upon the entire world of existing music, they offer players a chance to make a statement about their personal aesthetic. A goal of mine with transcriptions is to create something that stands with dignity as a ma-

rimba piece—something that bows to the composer's original version but that also, in the marimba version, might illuminate something new in the music.

The very act of seeking out potential transcription material provides fantastic sight-reading experience, broadens one's knowledge of music and hones one's musical sensibilities. It enables us to take a crack at some truly great music that, let's face it, is rare in the pool of choices generated for marimba thus far.

Every marimbist who presents a well-prepared, heartfelt, musical performance—at *any level*—to a peer, a few friends and relatives, a church gathering or a recital audience is helping to educate the public and promote the marimba. The ultimate goal, as the marimba comes into its own, is that we strive to become the most intelligent, expressive musicians possible. Ironically, the best way to serve the instrument is to transcend it.

*Part 2 of this article will appear in the December 1997 issue of Percussive Notes.*

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