Commissioning New Music

BY NANCY ZELTSMAN

The majority of my contributions to the literature for marimba have been in the realm of chamber music. Marimolin, the marimba and violin duo I established with violinist Sharan Leventhal that existed from 1985–96, premiered nearly 80 pieces, raised close to $68,000 from various grant sources toward commissioning composers, recorded three compact discs (which supplied premiere recordings of 21 pieces), and sponsored an annual international composition contest that attracted almost 200 entries in its eight years. My hope is that some of our experiences with commissioning will provide useful ideas about ways to approach it.

There are several reasons why I would encourage classical players to collaborate with composers whose work they admire. There is a special reward in knowing that you helped to bring a piece of music into existence. Also, I have found that being able to talk to composers and ask for clarifications of details in the score has provided me with insights into understanding the clues left in scores by other composers with whom I cannot speak, I haven't met, or who are deceased. In addition, extra media attention is often paid to an event that includes a world premiere.

Most composers relish the opportunity to collaborate with performers, and with good reason. In addition to being able to explain the various idiosyncrasies of our instruments, we can provide composers a window into what we find really enjoyable to play. This will vary from player to player. But smart composers know that music which is truly appealing to performers is music that will be played more often.

A frequent first step in the collaboration process is a show-and-tell session with composers to introduce them to the marimba. First I hand them my "Memo to Composers—brief guidelines on composing/notating for marimba," consisting of three pages of information answering composers' most frequently-asked questions (e.g., What is the range of your instrument? How wide an interval can you play in each hand?). Being able to send these written guidelines to composers I cannot meet with personally has been particularly helpful.

The live "show-and-tell" demonstrations include my performing ten to twenty excerpts of my favorite marimba parts. It has proven extremely helpful for composers to be able to watch me play at close range and see the scores I have found most satisfying to play. Some potential hazards are easily understood when a composer sees some of the wrist/arm/body positions inherent in certain moves on the marimba. For example, minor thirds, which seem relatively harmless when plunked out on the piano with two fingers, can result in some harrowing wrist shifts (across natural and accidental notes) on the marimba. Other than that, and a few other cautions having to do with odd stretches, I have often told composers that marimbists can pretty much handle whatever they can play on the piano using any two fingers from each hand.

ANDY RYAN

When Sharan and I formed Marimolin in 1985, we knew of no existing pieces for violin and marimba, except the first piece we performed together: Robert Aldridge's "Combo Platter" for violin, marimba and alto saxophone, which I had commissioned in 1983. The first step we took was to make a list of composer/friends whose music we liked, and whom we knew well enough that we felt comfortable asking them to write a piece for free. Their only payment was the promise that we would perform the composition.

Luckily, performances are attractive bait for most composers. We also had some very talented friends. Sharan and I self-produced three to four concerts each year in Boston over our first five years together. Our programs often consisted entirely of premieres. Anyone who has experienced the particular thrill of giving a work its first performance, if for no other reason than that it is a landmark event, can imagine the level of challenge in doing entire programs of premieres. But we were very focused on building a repertoire, and this was the best way to do it. Financially, we were lucky when we broke even. It was more important to us that Marimolin was gaining an audience and a reputation.

As we became better known, composers we didn't know very well began to ask if we would play pieces they wrote for us. At first we said yes to almost everyone. However, we were soon busy enough that

we needed to be more selective. We established the policy that we would *consider* performing anything composed for us.

We also began to write grants to commission works from composers. Many agencies require applicants to document a history of regular performances over a certain length of time before they are eligible to apply. Grants for commissions most often supply no funding to performers toward their work with the composer, their time involved with learning the music, or the time involved with administering the grant. Usually, all the grant money goes to the composer. Several of the organizations still in existence from which we received commission funding are the Fromm Foundation at Harvard University, Meet The Composer/Reader's Digest, and the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation at The Library of Congress.

Were the pieces by composers who were paid a lot of money ($5,000 to $10,000) better pieces than the ones written for us for free? Most of the time they were. And of course, by and large, they were from more experienced composers, who gave the event(s) more prestige. But some of my favorite Marimolin pieces were composed for little or no commission fee. (By the way, it is relatively common to use the term "commission" whenever you ask a composer for a piece, whether or not the composer receives a fee for writing it.)

In 1988, we began to sponsor the Marimolin Composition Contest. The prize money was a modest $600, from our own pockets, plus the promise of a premiere performance. It was just enough to encourage eager young or lesser-known composers. The contest also became a way to handle the pieces submitted to us randomly throughout the year; we told everyone that we only considered unsolicited works submitted to the contest. This way, we could review everything during one time period each year (early summer). We typically received about forty entries each year. Despite the tremendous work involved in thoughtfully judging that many pieces (and writing back to everyone), the contest was a fascinating project. (For one thing, the mailman always got a kick out of all the foreign countries from which we received packages!) It was a means of discovering and helping to promote some wonderful music by people we didn't know and might never have met.

The biggest risk involved with commissioning new music is that you won't like the piece someone writes. But it is an important risk to take in order to help expand the literature for percussion. Composers and performers (interpreters) are dependent upon each other. Composers rely on performers to bring their music to life in a manner that is sonically pleasing and musically meaningful. Performers depend on composers for music that challenges and inspires.

Some composers I've known have acknowledged this symbiotic relationship in touching ways. Some are particularly open-minded and not afraid to admit surprise at sounds or results they didn't anticipate. Many will welcome suggestions of minor changes. Most are deeply appreciative and grateful for the efforts performers put into learning their music. Some show a deep humility, realizing that their work is for naught unless it electrifies a performer who will, in turn, deliver the excitement inherent in the music to an audience. Some composers can be wonderfully nurturing and encouraging toward the performers in whose hands the success of their piece rests.

One of the most interesting examples of this was an experience Sharan and I had with composer/percussionist William Kraft at the final run-through of his "Encounters X," which we were to premiere the next day at PASIC '92 in New Orleans. The run-through had gone particularly well, and I said, "If only we can play it like that tomorrow!" Bill swiftly replied, "It doesn't matter how you play it tomorrow. The important thing is that I found out it can sound like that!"

Nancy Zeltsman is a marimba performer, recording artist, teacher and author. She was one of twelve top international players featured at The World Marimba Festival in Osaka, Japan in August 1998. She has released a solo CD, *Woodcuts* (GM Recordings), and expects to release her second solo CD, *See Ya Thursday* (Equilibrium), at PASIC '99. Zeltsman has taught marimba at The Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music since 1993 and presented numerous marimba master classes across the U.S. and abroad. She is Associate Editor of Keyboard Percussion for *Percussive Notes*. PN