

## FOREWORD

by Nancy Zeltsman

### WHERE DID THIS IDEA COME FROM?

Zeltsman Marimba Festival, Inc., founded in 2001, is an annual, two-week summer event that occurs in varying locations. It brings together 40 to 50 marimba-playing participants from around the world in a seminar environment. A series of public concerts celebrates its world-class faculty, with the aim of encouraging a wider appreciation for the marimba as a concert instrument. ZMF's board and I already had in our collective mind that we might someday take on additional special projects, to be determined, as offshoots of the festival.

At the end of 2003, just before winter break, I had lunch with percussionist Nicholas Tolle (then a student of mine at The Boston Conservatory). We were discussing the shortcomings of the repertoire for marimba when Nick blurted out, "Someone should commission a bunch of intermediate-level marimba solos by serious composers."

In an instant, I recognized the significance this could have for the repertoire, for marimba players, and maybe even the future of the instrument. "ZMF could do it," I offered, absently, while coping with an internal avalanche of amorphous possibilities and ramifications. I already imagined this taking on huge proportions. I knew it would have greater impact if it did.

And so, through Zeltsman Marimba Festival, Inc., Project Coordinator Shawn Michalek and I launched ZMF New Music in October 2006. Its goal: to foster the creation, performance, publication, and recording of 24 intermediate-level concert pieces for solo marimba. Each composition is three to six minutes in length, scored for a marimba with a range of up to five octaves (extending to the same low C of a cello).

The 24 new works are collected in *Intermediate Masterworks for Marimba*. Of these, 16 were commissioned works from some of the world's most esteemed composers, and eight are winning entries of our own international composition contest. They are published in two volumes of twelve pieces each. We are honored for the collection to be issued by the internationally respected firm of C.F. Peters, which dates back to 1800 and published piano and chamber music of Beethoven, as well as his First Symphony.

The entire collection was premiered and recorded by the eight faculty members of Zeltsman Marimba Festival 2009 at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. Both volumes of published scores and the double compact disc on Bridge Records were released by the end of 2009.

### "HERE, THESE ARE FOR EVERYBODY!"

It came to me early on that the premieres should be shared. The seven marimbists I invited to join me are all performers who are dedicated to contemporary music and repertoire development, and whom I greatly admire for their musical intelligence and clarity of personal voice: Ivana Bilic, Thomas Burritt, Jean Geoffroy, Beverley Johnston, William Moersch, Gordon Stout, and Jack Van Geem.

I had a hunch that their various predilections would align well with the array of anticipated pieces. Match-making who-would-premiere-what was great fun for me. I'm grateful to these friends for going along with this and for their dedication in bringing these works to life.

We chose to release volume 1 on the same day as the Gala premiere concert (with volume 2 and the CD only a few months later). We waived the usual "term of exclusivity" (by which a commissioning body often has the sole rights to new works for a specified period).

The idea was to get the pieces into many players' hands quickly: ZMF 2009's faculty members (named above, plus myself) are all active teachers who would rapidly disseminate the music to their students. Immediately releasing the books for sale would enable all students, teachers and professionals to dig into them as soon as possible.

#### “WHAT PIECE SHOULD I PLAY NEXT?”

Most of the substantial solo and chamber works for marimba are extremely difficult—technically and musically—and predominantly in a contemporary musical language. They may include complex rhythms, unfamiliar elements and instructions in the score, and rapidly changing notes.

Meanwhile, off in another corner, are many catchy, pattern-based compositions comprised of simple, repetitive tunes and chord structures, usually in steady, even rhythm. They sound completely natural on the marimba, and some are wonderful works—even cornerstones of the repertoire. Percussionists are drawn to their “grooves.”

Many students grow up on the latter. It gets their hands moving and builds coordination. It's fun. But such an exclusive diet limits growth as a musician, and it's difficult to find your way from the latter to the former.

I was fortunate to have teachers who thoughtfully steered me to recognize the possibilities in myriad styles of pieces. This diversity widened my curiosity and provided the foundation on which I developed my musical judgment. So much rides on a teacher's choice at the critical moment when a student is eager for a next-piece suggestion. It could open another window into the world of music or launch them in a new direction.

These pieces could also soar in the hands of advanced players or professionals and stimulate fresh programming ideas. In fact, presenters of major concert series may feel more confident about promoting concert marimbists at major concert halls if they can offer audiences programs featuring more prominent composers such as these.

Since none of the commissioned composers are marimba players, they may offer us more broad-minded perspectives. They come from every genre of contemporary music, including popular and jazz backgrounds. Some are influenced by music of other cultures. Some have made very interesting use of space in their new compositions—territory not always comfortable for percussionists.

#### SHORT STORIES

Essentially, these pieces are beautiful short stories, each an opportunity to delve into one style—one writer's world—and soak it up in a just few pages. And then ... you can try another! The breadth of styles represented here is impressive and was intentional: Shawn and I hoped for this to be a bouquet of many approaches, flavors and paradigms. As a player's repertoire grows, especially in terms of stylistic representation and knowledge, so does the player.

As Jack Van Geem points out, “Composers' visions include new sounds and ways to variegate these sounds to create rich emotive textures. They include new sets of musical logic that teach us new ways of thinking. They expand us enormously by giving us music we must grow into.”

In describing to the commissioned composers what kind of pieces we sought, I cited Robert Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood* (*Kinderszenen*) as a model. I played many solos in that collection as a student pianist when I was ten years old and was delighted to hear Vladimir Horowitz perform its famous *Reverie* (*Träumerei*) on a recital he gave in his 80s.

I believe *Intermediate Masterworks for Marimba* succeeds in offering music of inherent depth that one could strive to play artfully—and which may speak to minds and hearts—over many years.

## HEADING UPHILL

To our knowledge, the scope of this project is unprecedented. My stalwart collaborator was Shawn Michalek: Vice President of Zeltsman Marimba Festival, Inc., my personal assistant at ZMF, a composer, marimbist, and wearer of many other hats. It took nearly three years for us to get a handle on how this might work and muster the nerve to go forward.

ZMF New Music was financially predicated on the idea of a “joint commission,” wherein a number of individuals pool resources, most often to obtain a single composition. We greatly expanded on this idea in terms of number of pieces and necessary resources. To further complicate the risk, fundraising took place concurrently with music being written so that a finished product could be achieved as quickly as possible.

Given all the interlocking facets of the project, developing a plausible timeline was daunting. Equally challenging was concisely and convincingly describing the intricate construct to potential sponsors. Ultimately, we were thrilled by the leap of faith and the affirmation of shared vision embodied in the contributions we received from close to 200 varied entities, representing many more individuals. All the major supporters are named below.

Additional generous contributions of a different kind came from the composers who submitted works to ZMF New Music’s Composition Contest. Their prize would be a premiere performance, publication, and recording, all in company with works by our commissioned composers. Over a period of 18 months, we received 150 pieces from 20 countries and selected 21 pieces as finalists. The eight winners were decided in July 2008 by a distinguished panel—William Kraft, Jack Van Geem, Amy Knoles, Peter Prommel and Orlando Cotto—along with Shawn and me.

Careful review was given to many of the works by both the faculty and participants of ZMF in 2007 and 2008. Shawn and I spent much additional time with the submissions. We often respond to rather different things in music, or scores, which turned out to be a real asset; it reassured me that every piece received thoughtful consideration. Lengthy discussions about certain pieces served to clarify our hopes and standards for the collection.

A complementary division of labor developed quite naturally. Shawn received, catalogued, and initially reviewed all the composition contest pieces; logged all the donations and kept the books; wrote the lion’s share of grants; maintained the web site; sent out all the e-mailings; and designed the flyers and ads. I communicated with the commissioned composers, the performers, key supporters, and our publicist; reviewed every composition contest entry; computer-engraved eight of the pieces; and did the final editing and proofreading of the music and text for the publications. Total number of emails between us, and hours meeting and on the phone? Countless.

## RAISING THE BAR

We asked the composers to write an “intermediate” piece, which is, of course, a subjective term. In my experience, an intermediate player can conquer an isolated challenge (like a big reach or a complex rhythm), but not a series of tasks, one after another, that are challenging in a lot of different ways. My ideal is for students to feel comfortably challenged without being discouraged. If I could practically sight-read a piece and immediately ‘get’ anything quirky, it was a good sign that the former would be the case.

But I discovered, as the pieces came in, many were *not* readily sight-readable. On the phone with Steve Mackey one day, holding the receiver between my chin and ear, and struggling to play some of his first draft for him, I said, “This is actually pretty tricky!”

Steve responded, “I figure it’s for the intermediate-level player of the year 2050.”

And what is wrong with that? The bar is raised with every generation of musicians. This collection might be instrumental in raising that (marimba) bar! To that end, we must cultivate students' musical imagination, encourage their explorations, deepen their range of expression and uncover the characters, colors, and nuances they may never have considered. When players begin to strive for higher musical ideals, technical advancement will easily follow.

If these works are challenging to this generation, they likely will be appealing and well suited to the next. In the interim, I hope players will see the title of the book (which, incidentally, was coined by Cayenna Ponchione) and think, "If *this* is 'intermediate,' I've got work to do!"

## FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

This is a sophisticated and stunning collection of pieces. The composers range in age from 18 to 83, hailing from across the U.S. and a dozen other countries: Canada, Belize, England, France, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Israel, China, Japan, Malaysia and Cambodia.

We greatly admire the world of ideas encompassed in the works of the commissioned composers: Robert Aldridge, Louis Andriessen, Carla Bley, Chen Yi, Fred Hersch, Anders Hillborg, Betsy Jolas, Lyle Mays, Steven Mackey, J. K. Randall, James Rolfe, Gunther Schuller, Paul Simon, Steven Stucky, Chinary Ung, and Errollyn Wallen. And we are grateful for the impressive contributions from the contest winners: Jude Carlton, Ed Haddad, Darren Jones, Gaetano Lorandi, Osnat Netzer, Kaori Okatani, Alvina Tan and Derek Tywoniuk.

I predict that several pieces in each book will quickly become "hits" that everyone will want to play. Some time down the road, I suspect there will be a second wave—possibly a third—of certain pieces finding sudden popularity. That speaks to the depth of this collection and the debt we owe the writers represented here.

Over the years, my experiences working with composers have helped me enormously to grow as a musician. (Incidentally, I'm told this works both ways; they learn a lot from us too.) And so, we included "Notes to the Performer" in the books (whenever they were offered) for advice directly from the composer. The "Program Notes" and composers' biographies are suitable for concert programs.

Of course, wonderful messages await in the scores themselves. Many concepts are revealed through different approaches to notation you will see here. In that way, this collection offers a rich, old-school view of the world of music—with some of the most amazing musical minds of today leading us down the path to ever-deeper levels of expression as musicians.

Choosing to be a marimbist carries with it the opportunity to be a pioneer. (How cool!) My mission has been to elevate the level of artistry in marimba performance—to increase the instrument's stature. The gateway to achieving those goals is repertoire. I believe that *what* people play is as important as *how* they play it. We have needed much more substantive and quality music to cultivate a more savvy, competent next-generation of musicians whose vehicle for expression happens to be the marimba. My driving ambition throughout this project was for this collection to help alter the entire complexion of the repertoire.

As I hand this off to you, dear reader, my greatest hope is that this music provides endless hours of enjoyment and enrichment. Most great classical works have a back-story; specific performers or patrons directly requested, commissioned, or inspired their creation. In that tradition, ZMF New Music provided a conduit through which marimba enthusiasts joined together to produce a varied and valuable collection of music for the instrument. These books are a fantastic testament to the camaraderie, dedication, and passion of so many marimba enthusiasts!

My passion for, and obsession with, this project buoyed me through the many hours of work. It took over my life; but I will also miss it. It was a fantastic learning experience, and also tremendous fun—in large part because of sharing the journey with Shawn Michalek. Shawn and I made Every Single Decision About This Project together. *Shawn: ZMF New Music would never have happened without your tireless commitment and work. Your sound judgment and integrity is a remarkable compass. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.*

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Nancy Zeltsman is founder and Artistic Director of Zeltsman Marimba Festival, Inc., and teaches marimba at The Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music. She has premiered over 125 solo and chamber works for (or including) marimba. Nancy is featured on seven marimba CDs, either as a soloist or in duos with Jack Van Geem (marimba) or Sharan Leventhal (violin, as Marimolin: 1985-1996). She has performed and presented master classes across the U.S. as well as in Europe, Japan and Mexico, and authored a marimba method, *Four Mallet Marimba Playing: A Musical Approach for All Levels*.



Photo: claudiahansen.com

Shawn Michalek and Nancy Zeltsman, July 2009

## THANKS

Nancy Zeltsman and Shawn Michalek wish to thank the many generous contributors to ZMF New Music; *you* made this possible! Our gratitude also goes to all the commissioned composers, everyone who submitted a piece to the ZMF New Music Composition Contest, Gene Caprioglio and Héctor Colón and the team at C.F. Peters Corporation, Nicholas Tolle, Cayenna Ponchione, Jack Van Geem, Steven Swartz, Linda Golding, Becky Starobin at Bridge Records, Bruce Davies, Lyle Mays, Samuel Z. Solomon, Mike Truesdell, and Jamey Haddad.