

Nancy Zeltsman

The Power of Nuance

By Rick Mattingly

It was a standard question, one that Nancy Zeltsman frequently asks of new students as a first step towards assessing their backgrounds and beginning to plan their subsequent musical journeys. But the answer she received from a freshman who had arrived from Arizona to specialize on marimba at Boston's Berklee College of Music was far from what Zeltsman expected when she asked the student to name her favorite marimba players.



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Video/Audio

"I don't know any marimba players," the student replied. "Don't you have any marimba CDs?" Nancy asked. "No." "Have you ever been to a concert by a marimbist?" "No." "What kind of concerts *have* you been to?" "I've never been to a concert." "Have you ever seen *anyone* play the marimba?" "Well sure," the student replied. "On YouTube." "Okay," Zeltsman said, slightly relieved. "Who did you see?" "I dunno. Just some other kids who were playing pieces I was working on."

That exchange, in Nancy's own words, "blew my mind." But it opened her eyes in regard to where some of the current generation of students' world is located. "It's on YouTube," Zeltsman says. "We all know that there is brilliance on YouTube as well as a bunch of noise. But I'm not sure that some students know how to get to the brilliant stuff. Here's a girl who has just arrived to major in music,

she has never been to a concert, and never heard a professional performer. It was not from lack of interest; she just didn't have the chance to see and hear things before coming to Berklee, and didn't know what to seek out. She had only heard people play who were as experienced as she was.

"I started lending her CDs," Nancy recalls. "Every week I let her borrow a different marimba CD to check out so she could hear a variety of players and learn about repertoire and different playing styles. At first, she liked only the most easy-listening pieces, but that gradually started to expand. At one point I suggested she go hear the Boston Symphony. She came in a week later and said, 'You are going to be so proud of me! I got tickets to hear the Berklee Orchestra!' And I said, 'Well, that's nice, but it's not the same as hearing the Boston Symphony,' and she said, 'Why not?' Then she came to hear a recital by one of my top marimba students at The Boston Conservatory, Rachel (Xi) Zhang. Rachel played a lot of contemporary music that was challenging listening but utterly captivating. Afterwards, this



PHOTO BY LIZ LINDER

Nancy's Recommended Mallet CDs

These recordings offer soulful playing in a variety of musical styles and go in some very creative directions. They would add up to a great introduction to the instrument for people who haven't heard many mallet CDs (and might provide some new suggestions for those who have). Some of these include chamber playing with great instrumentalists (too numerous to list here). There are certainly many great marimbists and albums not represented here; this is just a start.

Artist	Title
Pedro Carneiro	<i>Ukiyo</i>
Orlando Cotto	<i>Caribeños</i>
David Friedman	<i>Air Sculpture</i>
Jean Geoffroy	<i>J.S. Bach: [Violin] Sonates BWV 1001, 1003, 1005</i>
(or Geoffroy playing any Bach)	
Tatiana Koleva	<i>No Sugar Added</i>
Joe Locke	<i>Beauty Burning</i>
Fumito Nunoya	<i>Red Dragonfly</i>
Sinske	<i>That's Marimba!</i>
Julie Spencer	<i>Ask</i>
Mutsumi Tsuzaki	<i>M X Piazzolla</i>

Berklee student looked dazed. She got it! That's when it clicked for her that all performers are not at the same level.

"I have to tell you that she has become one of my favorite students," Zeltsman says, with obvious delight. "She is a sponge, and she's a blast, and I can't believe how far she's come. It feels like she's absorbed everything I've ever said to her. At first, she was playing a lot of ostinato pieces, which I made her promise to play only with a metronome because she had time problems. Then I had her play a Boccherini flute concerto with a pianist. I demonstrated for her how, in this classical style, a melody has to sound very smooth and sort of balletic, and she would mimic me until the phrases began to flow naturally, her own way. By the end of her freshman year, she played a groove piece on a concert with absolutely steady pulse, without a metronome, and the Boccherini with elegant style. I was near tears at that concert. How did this girl get all of this? She needed somebody to put it in front of her. But not many people you put that in front of could digest it all. That was one of the coolest things that has happened for me as a teacher."

That episode also illustrates Zeltsman's primary concern as an educator and a performer: focusing on music over technique. It is reflected in her book, *Four-Mallet Marimba Playing*, in which she states in the introduction, "It is impossible to grow as a musician without playing a lot of music." Accordingly, the book contains 50 musical etudes, 18 solos appropriate for recitals, auditions, or juries, and examples from the solo and chamber-music repertoire for

marimba. But there are very few technical exercises in the book's nearly 200 pages.

"Some approaches to teaching are based on, 'Okay, let's get your technique together and *then* we'll play some music.' That always seemed strange to me, I guess because of how I was raised," Nancy says. "My approach to teaching is based on, first, being thoughtful about repertoire choices, and then, as soon as you start a piece, trying to figure out what your real goals are for it. I believe that technical issues are best considered in service of musical goals. Of course, it's tricky to start pushing toward lofty goals for a piece that you might be crawling through, sight-reading. Nevertheless, I try to get students to dream about where they want to take a piece from the beginning so that, ideally, *all* their playing feels like music-making.

"Another dilemma is how to get students thinking of grander ideas about music and expression when they don't think that they know enough to think that way yet. I'll ask, 'What kind of spirit does this piece have? Does it have a light mood, a complicated mood...?' I try to get them thinking about the colors of the notes, the feeling it evokes. That's why we play music, because it evokes complex feelings. Some music is just kind of happy or sad, but the stuff we *really* respond to is much more complicated. It's what we can't put into words.

"When I'm working with students who don't know how to dig for something deeper, I'll tell them, 'You actually do respond to something in this piece, so build on it and trust that you can say something more meaningful.' Then, everything else falls into place. If they get a character in mind, that affects the sound quality, and therefore the touch they are going to use, and therefore what kind of stroke they are going to use and the dynamic balances. At that point, all of their decisions about how to play the piece are in the service of a grander goal, and that goal is coming into better focus."

Although Zeltsman will sometimes steer a student towards a particular interpretation of a piece—perhaps because she has performed it herself and knows it well, or she has had conversations with composers about their goals for particular works—she is open to her students' own ideas about how a piece can be played.

"It's really great when you question how students do something, thinking that you are then going to tell them how it should be, and instead they say, 'Well, I was really thinking about it like this...,' and they proceed to spell out this whole scenario of how they think the piece should be played. That's exciting for me, and I almost always cheer on their own idea."

Nancy cites a time when Fumito Nunoya was studying with her and had started to learn a piece that was required for a competition. "He played it for me one week, and he played it well, but I wasn't impressed with the piece itself. So I wasn't excited when he asked to play it for me the following week," Zeltsman admits. "But I soon found myself completely transfixed. When he finished, I said, 'What happened to this piece?!' Fumito replied, 'Ah! I have a *story!*' He had devised an involved narrative that went along with this music. Once he had a storyline, everything made sense

to him—and to me! Of course, I didn't have any idea of what his story was when I heard him playing, but it gave the music a flow in some mysterious way. We may never know what someone's personal story behind a piece is, but it's almost a foolproof way to give a piece an organic trajectory."

Another way that Nancy has helped open up students to the expressive possibilities in music is by paying attention to their personalities. "I might say, 'I saw you act really goofy the other day, and it was so funny! Now, in this piece of music, this next phrase is actually kind of goofy. So what can you do to bring that out by your touch, your sound, and your phrasing?'"

"Learning to tap into a creative spirit often comes with being exposed to a lot of influential music, as with the Berklee student; or making up a story to go with a piece, like Fumito did; or by making connections to the music on a personal level. I can use any or all of those three paths to help people figure out how to make these connections for themselves and go for something deeper than just 'target practice'—playing the right notes.

"So many people are excited about playing the marimba these days," Zeltsman says with a mix of amazement and satisfaction. "At Berklee, you've been able to declare vibraphone your principal instrument for years. More recently, you have also been able to declare marimba your principal instrument. We actually have about equal numbers of marimba principals as vibraphone principals now. A lot of people just love playing the marimba, generally in a classical context with written music. But I think it's strange that what draws many people to the instrument—the earthy sound, the magic of a slab of wood resonating—often gets forgotten once they get mallets in their hand and start realizing how hard it is to hit these targets. Their focus turns to just getting the notes. The sound that initially seduced them ends up way down their list of concerns. Of course, maybe some people love to play marimba because it's a blast to wield mallets. Maybe their frontline drum corps

experience reinforced that direction, which is fine. But I try to get them to combine that with some color.

"In striving for this higher musical goal, I sometimes find myself shaking my head like, 'No, that's not it.' Even if students are playing really well, I can sense when they're primarily engaged in what they are doing rather than what they want to hear. The latter involves being totally engaged and focused on the sounds you're making and having a clear intention of an atmosphere you want to create. Often-times I'll say, 'Okay, you were only thinking about what you were *doing*, right?' And they'll say, 'Yeah, actually I was.'

"You can practice in stages," Zeltsman suggests. "For instance, there might be some lick that's a crazy configuration, and you have to just think about what your hands are doing. So you focus on the awareness that you are now working on a technical thing. Then you gradually change the balance until you are able to just hear what you are doing without thinking about your hands."

Zeltsman first came to prominence in the mid-1980s with the marimba/violin duo Marimolin with violinist Sharan Leventhal. The team was very active for 11 years, until 1996, and released three CDs. Nancy also recorded three solo CDs (*Woodcuts*, *See Ya Thursday*, and *Sweet Song*); recorded William Thomas McKinley's marimba concerto with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project; released a duo marimba CD with Jack Van Geem titled *Pedro and Olga Learn to Dance*; and presented recitals and marimba master classes across the U.S. and Europe, as well as in Japan and Mexico.

Since 1993, she has taught marimba in positions that were created for her at Berklee College of Music and The Boston Conservatory, where she has been Chair of the Percussion Department since 2005. She has been Artistic Director of Zeltsman Marimba Festival (ZMF) since 2001—an annual two-week seminar held in a different location each summer. She is the author of the method book *Four-Mallet*

"Encore Mallets enable me to bring out the full, deep tones I love most about the marimba."

—Nancy Zeltsman



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PHOTO: MARINA YEREMINSKAYA

“We play music because it evokes complex feelings. It’s what we can’t put into words.”

Marimba Playing (Hal Leonard) and editor of *Intermediate Masterworks for Marimba* (C.F. Peters) 24 marimba solos presented in two volumes, commissioned through ZMF with support from over 200 contributors. Nancy holds a degree in percussion performance from New England Conservatory, where she studied with Vic Firth.

Her involvement with music began at age five when her parents signed her up for ballet and piano lessons. After a year, her mother asked her, “If you can only continue with one of these, which would you choose?”

“I chose piano,” Nancy says, “and I have joked since then that that was the moment when I became physically unfit for the rest of my life. But I think I already felt a connection with music.”

Nancy continued piano lessons, describing herself as a “pretty serious classical pianist.” During her last several of years in elementary school, she became accompanist for the school chorus and school shows. Although she knew that she was a musician at heart, she wasn’t convinced that piano was “her” instrument. Then, near the end of her elementary school days, the band director from the junior high she would be attending sought her out.

“Her name was Goldie Marrs, and she said, ‘I’ve been wanting to meet you because your grandfather is my father’s best friend, and I’ve heard about you. I’m going to be your band director next year. You could take up percussion very easily because you know the grand staff, so you can read treble-clef xylophone parts and bass-clef timpani parts.’ She went on to tell Nancy that her husband, Donald Marrs—who would eventually be Nancy’s high-school band director and who she describes as “one of the most important teachers of my life”—taught a summer band program nearby in Parsippany, New Jersey. Goldie suggested that Nancy could try playing percussion over the summer, and if she liked it, she could join Goldie’s junior high band in the fall. That intrigued Nancy, and she signed up.

“By the end of the first day at the band camp, I had played timpani and was absolutely hooked,” Zeltsman says. “That’s it; I’m a percussionist.”

Countless stories exist about band directors dumping the least talented kids into the drum section, so why did Goldie Marrs encourage an accomplished pianist to pursue percussion? It turned out that there was more to Marrs’ interest in Nancy than the connection to Zeltsman’s grandfather. Goldie and Donald Marrs had a son named Stuart, who was majoring in percussion at Indiana University (and is now percussion director at the University of Maine in Orono). Nancy suspects it might have been Stuart’s urging a couple of years earlier that led his mom to visit the el-

ementary school, find the best pianist, and convert her into a percussionist. That had worked out well, so Goldie did it again two years later with Nancy, and although Zeltsman didn’t immediately focus on marimba, she was on the path that would lead to her eventual career.

Nancy began studying privately with Robert Ayers—a Juilliard graduate who eventually founded Ayers Percussion, a rental firm in New York. “He was an amazing private teacher,” Nancy says. “I would walk away from every lesson with my eyes bugging; he turned me on to something so cool every time.”

When Nancy was in tenth grade, due to her extensive piano background, Ayers suggested that she needed to work with a mallet-percussion specialist. He recommended xylophone virtuoso Ian Finkel.

“I kept studying timpani and percussion weekly with Bob,” Nancy explains, “but my dad would drive me to New York City, which was a little over an hour’s drive from where I grew up in New Jersey, and I would have a two-hour lesson every other week with Ian.”

Zeltsman vividly recalls Finkel’s studio. Three of the four walls had floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with alphabetically filed music. Facing one of those walls was a xylophone; facing another was a marimba; facing the third was a vibraphone.

“Ian had me study each of them as an individual discipline,” Nancy says. “A typical assignment would be an entire violin concerto on xylophone, six pages of David Friedman’s book *Damping and Pedaling* on vibraphone, and six pages of chordal guitar music for four mallets on marimba. I would have to come back in two weeks and play all of that—and he never let me repeat an assignment once in two years. It was a ridiculous amount of music to learn, but I got better and better at sight-reading and pretty fearless about learning anything.”

Nancy’s high school had a xylophone and vibraphone that she could practice on, so her parents bought her a marimba. “Ian got me interested in taking each one very



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seriously, but I certainly wasn't going to specialize on xylophone, because that was his thing, and for many years I really didn't like the vibraphone. Between Ian instilling the idea of specialization, and the reality of the instrument I had in my house, things pointed toward the marimba."

Zeltsman notes that Finkel never had her work on technical exercises; all the time she spent with him was devoted to playing actual music. "I occasionally run across students who are anxious for me to turn them on to the 'magic' exercises that are going to make everything fall into place," Nancy says. "Sometimes I'll ask a student, 'What are your goals for this semester?' and the reply will be, 'I want to work on my technique.' My answer is, 'How about if we work on a piece of music, and you can build technique as we go?'"

"Personally, I hate technical exercises and don't have time for them," she says. "It's hard enough to find time to play and learn music, so why would I want to spend a chunk of every day playing boring patterns? I advocate recognizing technical exercises that exist within the difficult passages of the pieces you are working on. The tricky things that come up here and there in pieces are far more challenging than a lot of exercise patterns, not only because of the sticking or some technical challenge, but because a piece introduces context. Maybe there's a tricky sticking; I'm pretty obsessed with stickings and how they relate to phrasing. Maybe the passage also needs to be played *pianissimo*, which gives it a musical context that ultimately makes it more difficult than if you were just trying to punch the notes out."

Finkel taught her to play with four mallets using "traditional" cross grip, which was employed by most players at that time. "I never even saw anyone hold four mallets before I met Ian," Nancy recalls. "And then I still didn't see any four-mallet playing for awhile, aside from David Friedman and Dave Samuels, who I kind of followed in their New York days."

As other grips became popular and widely used, did she ever experiment with them?

"Never," she replies. "The main reason is just that I feel 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' Having met a lot of players who use different grips, and who are phenomenal with Stevens grip and Burton grip and different variations on both of those, I've never seen anything that made me feel that there was something I wanted to get at that I couldn't do with my grip. As I had the opportunity to observe the virtues of other grips and what they were best suited for, they didn't fit with my playing style."

"A lot of students tell me that the thing they notice most about my playing is my sound. My approach developed a lot during the years I was playing with Marimolin. Composers would designate that Sharan play with a variety of articulations and coloristic devices on violin and I would think, 'Okay, she has all these different ways to put a spin on what she's playing; I want to do that too!' In mixed chamber music, you encounter instruments on which sound is produced differently than your own. It's fun to cross-fertilize how you each make sound. A couple of decades later, I would say I'm even more obsessed with ar-

ticulations, different stroke weights, dynamic nuances, and so on."

Nancy cites the Marimolin recording of "Threedance," in which composer Robert Aldridge sought to join marimba and tabla to create a "super-percussion instrument."

"Across dizzying meter changes, all the players have constantly changing dynamics," Nancy explains. "Various kinds of marimba attacks and strokes—ranging from sharp and strident, to less loud but full and clear, to soft and 'cushiony'—work hand-in-hand with the dynamics to simultaneously provide changing characters and colors. One place the marimba finally ties in with the violin, as opposed to the tabla, is at 8:20 where we play a series of low-to-high unison lines. There, I love the opportunity to match the different characteristics of the violin across registers. Likewise, Sharan matched the last note of each phrase so that her violin note has the same 'envelope' as a marimba note in terms of the attack, length, and how it fades."

Another piece on which the marimba and violin articulations are well matched is Marimolin's recording of Steven Mackey's "Feels So Baaad," on which Zeltsman and Leventhal are joined by Mackey on guitar along with two percussionists. "The piece showcases the violin and marimba as a team, mostly in traditional melody and accompaniment roles," Nancy says. "At 3:50, we team up to play the background rhythm part, blending our sounds and matching dynamic contours. As it crescendos, the initial attacks are also carefully matched. The coda also gives us a chance to blend instrumental timbres." Along with her marimba performance on the track, Nancy boasts that she contributed the sound of "snow shovel on brick" at the 1:25 spot on the recording!

As Zeltsman looked for ways to incorporate a variety of articulations on marimba, she became convinced that her grip was serving her well. "With traditional grip, you mainly hold the mallets in the 'back' fingers," she explains, "so you can greatly vary the pressure you use with the 'front' fingers. You can hold the sticks really tight or super loose, which you can't really do with any other grip. So I feel that my hands are pretty free, like they're modeling clay in terms of how I'm stroking and making different colors. The years with Marimolin challenged me most and really solidified what I'm interested in. I like nuance; I'm not interested in playing super technical and fast. To me, it's more interesting to play something that has a simple, unusual spin on the sound than playing something more spectacular or dazzling. It's a quiet thing that I hope draws people in."

Zeltsman never pressures students to switch from using a grip they are already comfortable with. "Maybe with one out of a hundred students I might suggest that they give traditional grip a try, if whatever grip they are using doesn't seem to be working for them," she says. "For instance, people with really small hands sometimes have trouble with Stevens grip because they are holding the mallets at the very end, and therefore don't have very good leverage. Other times I will show students who use a different technique a cool articulation or coloristic thing, and they are intrigued to try it with traditional grip. But that's not

always the case. Canadian marimbist Anne-Julie Caron, a Stevens-grip player with phenomenal facility and technique, figured out a way to do every coloristic thing I suggested to her when she studied with me some years back, so that's great!

"Ultimately, you should go with whatever grip makes the mallets feel comfortable in your hands. Sometimes I'll show students traditional grip, and after a couple of weeks they'll say, 'I'm not feeling this.' Fine, then you're done with it. It's not going to work for everybody. People cite Joe Locke as that rare vibist who uses Stevens grip, but it isn't really Stevens grip. Joe spent a short time with Leigh Stevens many years ago when Joe was looking for the best way to hold sticks. Joe didn't have enough time with Leigh to get it 'textbook' right, but he developed it into what can only be called the Joe Locke grip. I don't know if anyone else uses it, but it certainly works for him. I think it's great when people invent their own modifications to grips to 'custom fit' themselves.

"My work with Ian showed me that traditional grip was amply adaptable to any challenges that might arise; I might try something different with one finger or turn my wrist a different way. There was far more focus on how to adapt music. For example, he taught me which notes to drop from a chord that had too many notes to play with four mallets, or how to creatively break the chord so the chord color would be preserved."

One of the guitar pieces that Finkel introduced Nancy to was "Sonata, Op. 77" by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, which she recorded some 30 years later. "The second movement of that piece is a good example of the sound world I really like to live in, explorations with *rubato*, and the fact that

there is a lot of music that adapts beautifully to marimba by classical composers other than Bach," Nancy explains.

Back when Zeltsman studied with Finkel, very little instructional material or repertoire existed for keyboard percussion instruments, compared to the amount of material that is available today. Is there a virtue in adapting and learning pieces originally written for other instruments, as opposed to strictly learning music that is idiomatic to a mallet-keyboard instrument?

"Yes!" says Nancy. "Amid pieces composed for guitar, harp, piano, cello, flute, etc., you will find some really great music that works beautifully on marimba. Most marimba music was composed in the last several decades, so it's great to look at older music. Studying music from different periods, and in different styles, is a great resource to draw upon in expanding your range of musical expression.

"Music adapted from pieces written for other instruments might not be inherently idiomatic, but it can still be very successful. The same is true of a lot of music that *is* written for marimba. Some of it is idiomatic and some of it isn't. A lot of times, the idiomatic music is composed by marimba players. Some non-marimbist/composers have really thought through the mechanics of playing and the idiosyncrasies of the instrument in order to make everything lay well for performers. But a lot of composers haven't. Instead they write what they imagine will *sound* beautiful coming from the voice of the marimba, even if it isn't idiomatic.

"For example, 'Threedance' posed an interesting technical challenge of extremely fast shifts between wide intervals, including alternating ninths and seconds. I developed a method of quickly closing the intervals, relying partly on gravity to let the mallets fall closed, and then quickly catching them for the second.

"I don't mind at all when composers write in a non-idiomatic way; they are giving us a vehicle to help stretch what the instrument can say. Many times, the technical challenges are well worth it."

Reflecting on a career spanning nearly 30 years, Nancy says that her interest was always in learning a lot of new pieces. She has premiered over 125 solo and chamber music works—most of them commissioned by her—including compositions by Paul Simon, Michael Tilson Thomas, Gunther Schuller, Carla Bley, and Louis Andriessen.

"In recent years, as I have less time to devote to learning new music, I'm feeling that, yeah, there are pieces I have a special connection with because I've lived with them for a few decades," Zeltsman says. "So I don't feel as driven to play as many new pieces as I used to.

"In terms of pieces I feel I'm really identified with, 'Merlin' by Andrew Thomas is one of my favorites and, I feel, a landmark piece. It's challenging and I sometimes shy away from it, but I really enjoyed playing it several times in the last year, as 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of the first time I played it. 'See Ya Thursday' by Steven Mackey is another signature piece that's dedicated to me. Gunther Schuller's 'Marimbology' and Paul Lansky's 'Three Moves



PHOTO: CLAUDIAHANSEN.COM

for Marimba” were both dedicated to me, and premiered by me. I recorded ‘Over There’ by Carla Bley, ‘Amulet’ by Paul Simon and ‘Mindwalk’ by Lyle Mays as part of the *Intermediate Masterworks for Marimba* double-CD. Jack Van Geem and I were the featured marimbists for the premiere and many subsequent performances, including one at PASIC 2003 of Michael Tilson Thomas’ ‘Island Music,’ his 35-minute masterpiece for two featured marimbas, two ‘tutti’ marimbas, and two percussionists.”

Recently, Nancy has been developing a program to be called *sotto voce*. “That term means ‘under voice’ or ‘under the breath,’ and it will reflect the kind of pieces that really interest me the most now: softer pieces that are full of nuance,” she explains.

One motivation for the program is that, four years ago, Nancy suffered a problem with her hearing. “I now have a slight hearing loss in one ear, and I became very sensitive to loud volumes,” she says. “I wear musician’s earplugs a lot when I teach.”

But a bigger reason behind the new program is that, at this point in her life, she wants to concentrate on the music she loves the most. “I’ve always been conscious about repertoire choices being representative of your knowledge about music, your taste, your personality, your values. Lately, though, I’ve been experimenting with going in a new direction. I’m not worrying so much about the implication of every repertoire choice I make; I’m just figuring out what I *really* like to play. Some people might think it’s all too soft and slow, but it’s what I feel like playing right now.

“A lot of the pieces I’ve been drawn to are sort of groove pieces and jazz influenced pieces,” she explains. “Even though I didn’t pursue being an improviser, I was fundamentally very affected by jazz. My love of playing pieces with a deep groove—not so much ostinato pieces or minimal pieces, but pieces with cool, funky bass lines—has been reflected in my repertoire for years. In addition, I’ve always valued works in a contemporary language, ones with interesting forms, harmonies and rhythms, atmospheric effects, and colors.

“A lot of the music I’m currently playing is simpler in some ways—maybe what some would call ‘easy listening’ compared to some of the major contemporary works for marimba. I used to feel that a program should show the entire range of musical languages I relate to but, for now, I feel that I don’t need to tell you all that. I just want to play from what feels like my center.”

One of the pieces that will be included in *sotto voce* is the first movement of Daniel Levitan’s “Marimba Suite #2.” She has already made a video of the piece, but it does not show Nancy playing. Instead, the music is heard behind photos taken by Nancy’s mother, Martha, who was a nature photographer. Those photos will be projected when Nancy performs the piece live.

“This is a great example of the quiet, nuanced playing I’m interested in now,” Zeltsman says. “This piece came out of a period about a year ago when I took a year off from doing ZMF. I was kind of burned out on all fronts and needed to juggle a bit less for awhile. There was a stretch



PHOTO: MICHAEL PAXON

After a performance of Michael Tilson Thomas’ ‘Island Music’ at ZMF 2011, with close friends / ZMF peeps: L to R: Dane Richeson, Rachel (Xi) Zhang, Jack Van Geem, Mike Truesdell, Brian Calhoon

of time when this piece was the only one that drew me in—where I could forget myself. So I'm really attached to it. In a broad sense, the piece is about beauty in simplicity—which is the same theme that ran through my mother's photographic work, as a whole. A lot of her photos are much more dramatic than the ones in this video, but for this particular piece I chose images depicting things that are peaceful and genuine, like walking in the forest and seeing a little bird or a curlicue fern—appreciating beauty in simplicity."

At one point in the video, Nancy reads a poem over the music: "Plainness" by Jorge Luis Borges. "In a broad sense, simplicity is what this poem is about, too," Nancy says, quoting a section of the poem: "This is the best that can happen...not to be wondered at or required to succeed, but simply to be let in, as part of an undeniable Reality."

"It's about being able to feel truly comfortable with people," Nancy says, softly. "Isn't it nice when you are in a setting where you don't have to work at anything? You're just accepted. That's another version of beauty in simplicity."

Music that fits the *sotto voce* concept and that also appears on a video is Nancy's adaptation for marimba and clarinet of three movements from Olivier Messiaen's "Poemes pour mi," a set of songs for soprano and either piano or orchestra. "I first heard it performed at Tanglewood in 1975, just before I was a senior in high school, on what was probably the first concert of contemporary music I ever heard," Nancy recalls. "Messiaen himself played piano! Later I realized what a historic event that was, and I still recalled the evening well. I always remembered those pieces for soprano and piano. I chose three movements that I felt would work very well for clarinet and marimba."

"The third piece seen in the Messiaen video, movement VI, 'Ta Voix,' shows one of the things I usually caution composers against writing. I typically tell them, 'Pretty much anything you can play with any four fingers on the piano will work on marimba; just go easy on parallel thirds, as the interval shifts are tough on the wrists.' But I loved this Messiaen piece so much that I chose to do the thirds anyway! All three are really beautiful pieces and a little bit understated. I'm very happy with the way the video performances turned out."

The video clips alternate from showing the musicians in the studio to showing them in a concert setting. That music and those videos were edited by Steve Rodby, longtime bassist and producer for the Pat Metheny Group.

The clarinetist is Michael Norsworthy, a colleague of Zeltsman's on the faculty of Boston Conservatory. "I really love the combination of clarinet and marimba," Nancy says. "We decided to do two video projects—the Messiaen pieces and a work by Shawn Michalek—as our first projects together. Usually, when you document a duo, it's because you have already worked together. One of the things Michael and I first

shared with each other was a feeling that we were falling behind the times by not having released performance videos of ourselves. So we decided to start with that. We will follow our debut on these videos with our concert debut in Boston in January of 2014."

The other piece Zeltsman and Norsworthy created a video for is Shawn Michalek's "Tinaja/2006/banagram." Is there a story behind the title? "Those are the three movement titles; the composer refused to give it an overarching title," Zeltsman says, laughing. "Shawn was a master's marimba student of mine at Boston Conservatory, and after that, he was a master's composition major there. He attended the first festival I put together, which was in Princeton in 2001 and, when ZMF became an annual event in 2003, he was my main assistant every summer until 2010. We shared equally in running the *Intermediate Masterworks* project, so we've logged a lot of hours and special times together. I was grateful Shawn wrote this piece for me with clarinet. It has never been performed live. Michael and I made a studio project out of this, so this video is the world premiere! It's a quirky piece with unusual challenges, but I think people will find it fun. The end of the video has a short clip of Shawn talking about the piece."

Yet another piece that fits into the *sotto voce* concept is Zeltsman's own composition, "Black Velvet," which was inspired by Nancy's black Labrador Retriever, Mochi. "When he was a puppy, he slept like a velveteen bundle in our laps, but grew to a mighty 85-pounder who could take off



Performing at PASIC 2009

PHOTO: WARREN LAEVER

on a leash with me flying behind him like a kite,” she says. “Mochi was extremely opinionated about music; he particularly liked Debussy and jazz ballads – or so it seemed because that’s when he would stay in the room, get comfortable, and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. With other music, he’d get up and leave, somewhat disgruntled.

“I wanted to compose a piece he would like to nap to. And so I wrote every note, over many sessions, while he was curled up contentedly. I was trying to get to what I imagined might be an ideal musical language for dogs. Sometimes, while he was fast asleep on his side, all four, big paws would move, like he was dreaming of happily running. The music at 3:41 is my imagined perfect soundtrack for a dream about heroically chasing down a Frisbee in a giant field.”

Mochi can actually be heard on the recording. “I recorded him sleeping on a bed, with a delicious, light spring breeze floating over him. At the 3:00 mark, there’s a lovely little snort – a momentary startle! I perform the piece as a solo sometimes but, for me, this version is far better. It’s interesting to get sucked into his very slow breathing as a separate pulse overlaid over the *rubato* pulse of the piece.

“The marimba part exemplifies my love of deep, fundamental-rich sounds and wide-interval voicings,” Nancy adds.

“I’m entering a new way of looking at repertoire, which has been somewhat of a struggle, because I think reper-

toire choices are so critical,” Zeltsman says. “With my students, I am looking for their repertoire choices to reflect their interests, personalities, and their niche as a player. I’m doing that myself, too. I feel like I’m going in a little bit of a radical direction....” Nancy trails off, looking for the right explanation, but then realizes that the answer is simple: “Because I can!”

SELECTED NANCY ZELTSMAN DISCOGRAPHY

Solo Marimba

Woodcuts, 1993

See Ya Thursday, 1999

Sweet Song, 2005

With Marimolin (Sharan Leventhal, violin; Nancy Zeltsman, marimba; plus guests)

Marimolin, 1989 (nominated for a Grammy; received “10/10” rating in *CD Review Magazine*)

Marimolin: Combo Platter, 1995

Marimba Duos with Jack Van Geem

Pedro and Olga Learn to Dance, 2004

With Boston Modern Orchestra Project (Gil Rose, conductor)

William Thomas McKinley: *Marimba Concerto*, 2010

PN

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Nancy Zeltsman: The Power of Nuance

Video

Daniel Levitan’s “Marimba Suite #2,” 1st movement

Three movements from Olivier Messiaen’s “Poemes pour mi”

Shawn Michalek: “Tinaja/2006/bananagram”

Audio

Robert Aldridge: “Threedance”

Steven Mackey: “Feels So Baaad”

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco: “Sonata, Op. 77,” II. Andantino, quasi canzone

Nancy Zeltsman: “Black Velvet”

Mexican 4-Octave Marimba Music

Video: MidAmerica Nazarene University marimba ensemble performing “Las Chiapanecas”

Integrating the Front Ensemble with Battery Exercises

Audio Examples

Check out our digital edition: www.pas.org/publications/percussivenotes/notesonline_copy1.aspx

