

Musings on the Marimba and Its Study, 1997, part 2

BY NANCY ZELTSMAN

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PART 2: THE MARIMBA AND ITS STUDY

The time is ripe for many more colleges, universities and conservatories to create a position for and hire a part-time specialized marimba teacher. At many schools, the current percussion professor *is* something of a marimba aficionado and, in these instances, an additional marimba teacher may not be necessary. In either case, more focus on the instrument is needed, not only to address the growing interest in the marimba today but also to improve the training of all percussionists.

At Berklee College of Music, all percussion students, including those who have declared drumset or hand percussion their principal instrument, are required to take two semesters of mallet "labs" (a classroom situation with a maximum of eight students) or private marimba study. For the first of these semesters, students frequently elect to take the Beginning Mallet Lab (which I teach), geared toward students with a rudimentary ability to read music, minimal familiarity with the keyboard, and little or no prior experience playing mallet instruments. In one semester, it introduces them to two- and four-mallet technique, scales, arpeggios, sight-reading, written pieces in various styles, touch and tone, phrasing and dynamics, rolls on marimba, dampening and pedaling on vibraphone, and beginning jazz theory.

If they're encouraged to have fun with it, they'll find themselves opened up and inspired to think more creatively. Because marimba is my principal instrument, it comes naturally to me to try to impart a sense of fun and reveal the relevance the course has to the students' musical lives. The impact this course has had makes me inclined to think that mallet basics ought to be stressed much more often as a fundamental necessity in all percussionists' training.

Specialized marimba teachers at more

schools could also have an enormous positive effect on the countless number of orchestrally-oriented percussion majors who came to the field via playing drumset as kids. A late start on the mallet instruments leaves many students feeling daunted by the catch-up work they need to do. On one hand, the presence of a marimba teacher and its specialized study might be intimidating to such a student; on the other hand, the student's "demons" need to be squarely faced. A marimba teacher could oversee extra emphasis where students need it.

The well-rounded percussionist who *is* an accomplished mallet player would also benefit from a specialized teacher. Instead of being satisfied that the student has performed the Creston "Concertino," some Keiko Abe pieces and a Bach violin sonata, a specialized teacher might encourage the student to dig deeper into more unusual, challenging and even self-developed repertoire. This might foster a sense of adventure in students that could ultimately affect their career path.

There are many scenarios, therefore, in which a specialized marimba teacher

could be a tremendous asset besides the obvious one—a marimbist would be most qualified to teach the aspiring virtuoso players showing up at some schools today. These talents could be truly ignited by the presence of a role model with whom to brainstorm, not only about musical and technical issues, but on all facets of building a career.

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Initially, there might be challenges in restructuring percussion departments to integrate the marimba teacher, but many strategies are possible. These could



Zeltsman teaching a beginning mallet lab at Berklee College of Music.

range from students studying with the percussion and marimba teachers on alternate weeks, to students receiving an extra lesson on marimba once or twice a month. At The Boston Conservatory, students decide, one semester at a time, how they want to divide their fourteen lessons between the percussion teacher and me (the marimba teacher). An alternative to offering private marimba lessons would be to bring in a marimbist once or twice a month to meet with small groups of students who are at approximately the same level. It can also be valuable for students at various levels to perform for each other in a masterclass setting.

We not only need more marimba teachers, but more institutions in the U.S. that allow students to major in marimba. The Boston Conservatory (my program), The Peabody Conservatory of Music (William Moersch's program) and Yale University (Robert Van Sice's new program) are three schools at which a student can currently receive a graduate-level degree in Marimba. In Europe there

are probably even less comparable offerings, while more exist in Japan—even undergraduate degrees from a few schools.

The performance practice of the marimba has risen to a sufficient level of sophistication that, if students want to study it, they deserve to be encouraged. I question the rationale that it doesn't make sense to teach them because there's so little precedent for a successful career as a marimbist. College students commonly study myriad areas that hold uncertain futures. Just as English Lit. or Philosophy majors, for instance, must be creative in reckoning their academic training with a career path in the mainstream job market, a marimbist can also be inventive in assembling a career. The more players are encouraged to develop the marimba to the highest artistic level, the more doors will open for marimba players; a job market can be built.

The rewards of studying music are in doing something that you love. When students have a passion for what they're studying, there are two possible out-

comes: both positive. Either their determination will enable them to carve out a niche for their specialty, or they will go on to another field having been enriched by years of disciplined and engrossing study.

In the meantime, it's no less ethical to foster marimba specialists than it is to train excessive numbers of orchestral percussionists. The prospects of a marimbist who is prepared to be creative in carving out a career in music are not necessarily less promising than those of percussionists who naively believe that just because they are qualified, they will land one of the scarce orchestral positions.

It would greatly improve the odds of success for those aspiring to follow an unusual pursuit, such as making it as a marimbist—or those with more typically marketable skills, such as general percussion expertise—if they received far more exposure to the realities of the professional music world. Teachers could help their students enormously by investing a lot more time and effort as



guidance counselors.

Thankfully, it is becoming increasingly common for college-level institutions to offer, or even require, courses on career skills or the business of music. One virtue of these courses is that they introduce performers to many facets of the music business that might have been unknown to them. It's no secret that more performing musicians are being trained in all walks of music than will ever find work as performers, but their training may still be an asset in a music-business career. A satisfying and successful career is often composed of many pieces. To begin to put the puzzle together, it's tremendously helpful for students to have a

lot of ideas thrown at them.

I would propose percussion department restructuring that would acknowledge different focuses and career directions. Students wouldn't necessarily be "percussion" majors; rather, they could opt to major in something more specific. Currently, within Berklee College of Music's percussion department (which I'll use as an example since it's a program with which I'm intimately familiar), students can declare their principal instrument as drumset, hand percussion, vibraphone, or concert percussion. (As mentioned earlier, a student can declare a focus on marimba under the latter heading.) The following sug-

gestions of distinct areas of specialty use some of Berklee's structuring as a model. Some departments might expand on these, while others wouldn't offer all of these options. I would like to see students have the option to declare their major instrument as one of the following.

1. *Percussion*. Percussion majors would be preparing to be orchestral and chamber musicians, just as clarinet majors would. A majority of students would probably choose to be percussion majors, especially if they felt uncertain about the specific direction they'd like to go. Many would probably stick with this category; it would encompass the largest scope. I wouldn't suggest many changes from the

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way percussion is taught today, except that the percussion major—as well as my proposed “solo percussion” major—would occasionally take marimba lessons with a specialized teacher.

2. *Solo Percussion.* The solo percussion major, like a piano major, would focus on solo and chamber repertoire, following in the footsteps of such performers as Steven Schick, Beverley Johnston and Evelyn Glennie. Just as a piano major is often required to participate in chorus in order to receive a modicum of large ensemble experience, the solo percussion major, as well as the marimba major, might occasionally be assigned to play with the school's orchestra or wind ensemble. The solo percussion major would be focusing on a wide variety of solo material, more intensively than the percussion major, and to the *exclusion* of studying orchestral excerpts (except perhaps in the form of informative overviews).

3. *Marimba.* Peripheral courses beneficial to the marimbist might be pianistic techniques, body-movement workshops, history of keyboard music, arranging or acoustics.

4. *Vibraphone.* Traditionally, specialization on vibraphone has meant specialization in jazz, but a focus on classical or contemporary music (as in the work of Emmanuel Séjourné or Brian Johnson) is also possible.

5. *Hand Drums.*

6. *Drumset.*

7. *Electronic Percussion.*

In my imagined percussion department, students would also have the option to declare a split major, such as marimba/percussion, percussion/drumset, solo percussion/hand drums or vibraphone/marimba. A marimbist, for example, may also aim to work as an orchestral and chamber percussionist. A percussionist may want to feel secure in his or her drumset playing, perhaps to enhance the possibility of getting show work. Aspiring solo performers may also love hand drumming and want to incorporate world musics into their repertoire (e.g., Amy Knoles). A jazz player may love to play both vibes and marimba—and recognize their intrinsic differences.

I would recommend that the curriculum of any of these areas of specialty mandate some exposure to every other area mentioned. For that reason, I think it would be perfectly responsible of insti-

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tutions, whose aim is to provide a solid basic training, to offer these categories at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level.

Restructuring percussion departments in this manner would certainly present some administrative challenges at first. For example, customary jury requirements would need to be revamped. Ensemble auditions and assignments would be more complex as any department in a position to offer most of these areas of specialty would have a hierarchy to consider; for example, an orchestra section would primarily be drawn from the percussion majors but would occasionally draw from the pool of solo percussion and marimba majors. There might also be a logistical challenge at schools with limited space for solo percussionists to set up large, multiple-percussion setups, but accommodations could probably be arranged.

Acknowledging the area of specialty puts things into perspective. It is one thing to require that a drummer get acquainted with mallet instruments for two semesters (as is the case at Berklee), but quite another that the would-be marimbist is required to study timpani, snare drum and accessories for a full four years (or longer). The beginning study of mallet instruments is providing drummers with peripheral information to improve their drumming; there is no expectation for them to become professional mallet players. The would-be marimba specialist, however, is expected to pursue percussion as if preparing to be a professional percussionist, which I find to be an unfair and possibly counterproductive expectation.

Allowing students to specialize in what interests them most excites and mobilizes their inner resources to the benefit of their general training. Larry Bethune, Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Berklee College of Music, said of that school's philosophy, "If I teach you what you already like first, then you'll trust me, and you'll come with me." Declaring specific areas of focus, I believe, would encourage students to take a keener interest in understanding how the skills they're acquiring relate to the professional world. The flipside is that these divisions would also force teachers to teach better.

Regarding the manner in which marimba—specifically—is taught, I'm con-

cerned about the tremendous focus placed on technique. It makes me very nervous when I encounter students caught up in such issues as the mechanics of movement, shifting or interval changing. It's a dead giveaway that a person is more concerned with *how* they're playing—all the motions going into it—than the *sound* coming out. Some players, for instance, equate playing *forte* with a certain amount of force they're using, regardless of the hardness of mallets they're using or the appropriate balances of notes in a particular context. The most frequent criticism I have of marimbists is that they aren't really listening to themselves.

In my teaching, I'm reluctant to isolate elements of technique. I like to emphasize the total musician who happens to be playing the marimba. For example, I believe that one's sticking choices should always spring from considerations of phrasings, articulations and the subtle pulsings of the music, rather than what configurations would make a clever technical exercise for four mallets.

One reason I continue to play with and advocate traditional grip is that, in my experience, technique appears to be less an issue with traditional grip than with Musser/Stevens grip (or variations thereof). But my advocacy of traditional grip stops short of insisting that my students switch to it. I frequently hear that other teachers demand that students who play with some form of cross-grip switch to some form of Musser/Stevens grip, or that students who don't use the latter feel discriminated against or disrespected. Of course, once there are more schools at which marimba study is possible, it will be easier for students to find support for the grip that best suits them. Ultimately, we need to remember that technique is just a means to an end.

To really further the marimba, or any aspect of percussion for that matter, we need to move away from the goal of turning out well-rounded percussionists in favor of training well-rounded musicians. We need to dig into theory and world music history. Getting into arranging and composing can give performers outlets for personal expression. While we're contemplating educational restructuring, factoring in some form of improvisation experience will help stem the fear and mystery with which many classical musicians regard playing without music.

These are lively musical times in which we live, and the marimba, in particular, is beginning to enjoy a depth and variety of interest that even J.C. Deagan could not have dreamed possible. It's a thrilling time to be a dreamer, because the fantasies I propose in this essay are actually possible and, in some cases, becoming actual.

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Nancy Zeltsman thanks Russ Girsberger at the Percussive Arts Society for his research assistance, and Steve Mackey for tirelessly being a sounding board.

Nancy Zeltsman performs with the marimba duo Madame Rubio and is known for her collaboration with violinist Sharan Leventhal in the duo Marimolin, who premiered over 75 pieces, released three compact discs and sponsored eight composition contests. Zeltsman has released a solo CD, "Woodcuts," on the GM label, and teaches marimba at the Boston Conservatory and the Berklee College of Music.

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FRED HOEY (1920-1994)

Fred Hoey's start in the music industry came at an early age upon winning the 1936 National Rudimental Drummer Competition. His illustrious career in the field of music as an author, clinician, and authority in the world of percussion afforded him many opportunities. In the mid 70s, Fred Hoey launched the CB 700 line of drums and percussion. This unique line was designed by Hoey to service the educational percussion market in a comprehensive way. As Vice President of Sales for C. Bruno in the early 1980s, Hoey created the Gibraltar brand name of drum hardware and initiated its first designs. The mid 80s brought Hoey to oversee the Riemer, Inc. San Antonio Distribution Center where he participated in product design, development, and sales direction. Throughout his career, Fred Hoey remained active as a prominent Southwestern performing percussionist. He also wrote several drum methods for distribution by Mel Bay Publications. He was a charter member of the Percussive Arts Society and an educator whose influence on percussionists continues with the PAS Fred Hoey Memorial Scholarship.

LARRIE LONDIN (1943-1992)

Larrie Londin was a popular session drummer for pop, country, and jazz artists. A member of the Detroit-based Headliners in the mid-60s, Londin was one of the first white musicians signed to Motown on its V.I.P. subsidiary label. As a session drummer, he played on a number of Motown hits by such artists as Marvin Gaye, the Supremes, and the Temptations. In addition, Londin toured with Chat Atkins, Jerry Reed, Glen Campbell and Elvis Presley including Presley's last two concerts in 1977. Following those tours, Londin began concentrating on studio work, recording with Waylon Jennings, B.B. King, Dolly Parton, Joe Cocker, Linda Ronstadt, Olivia Newton-John, Barbara Mandrell, Randy Travis, Reba McEntire, George Strait and many others. Mr. Londin received the "Most Valuable Player Award" for 1978, 1979 and 1980 from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences; was voted "Best Drummer" for 1984 and 1986 by the Academy of Country Music; and was designated "Country Drummer of the Year" in 1985 and 1986 by Modern Drummer magazine. His influence on percussionists continues with the PAS Larrie Londin Memorial Scholarship.

