

Exploring the Marimba Repertoire

By Adélaïde Ferrière

I've been involved in creating arrangements since the beginning of my percussion studies – fascinated by the keyboard and classical repertoire that I played for a long time as a pianist, and continued to play alongside my career as a percussionist. My first original transcription was Jean-Philippe Rameau's "Egyptienne." The idea for it came when I was developing a new concert program: one that would enable audiences unfamiliar with marimba concerts (in France, at any rate) to discover the marimba's sound, but also to develop a different way of listening to pieces that are well known to the general public.

I feel this balance has often been a winning combination in recitals: mixing tradition with renewal; adaptation with original writing. The goal, of course, is continuing this research by opening up to more contemporary repertoire, and particularly by having a hand in contemporary creation, in order to foster an appreciation of different aesthetics – to push even further the reflection and ever-changing virtuosity of so-called "classical percussion."

In my PASIC 2024 Showcase Concert, "Exploring the Marimba Repertoire," this theme is still very much present, but my focus is on the work of today's percussionists in the field of composition, with three pieces created in the past two years,

each of which adds yet another stone to the edifice of both our pedagogical and concert repertoire.

The first of those is Michael Burritt's "Blue Smoke," a veritable tunnel of rhythmic and harmonic patterns linked in modern poetry: a piece that I'm sure will become indispensable. It awakens the warm sound of the marimba and takes on the inspirations that can be found in American music: repetitive, swirling, and timeless.

"Vermillion Bird," by Heng Liu, illustrates a tale featuring one of the four creatures of ancient Chinese mythology: a link with the forces of the cosmos and the ancient stars. Representing Emperor Yan and the seven southern constellations, Liu says, "It is the totem of fire, also the worship of the sun." A sense of magic can be felt and heard throughout this delicate, sunny work, marked by the richness of the timbre, magnificently highlighted.

Finally, "Elyl & Tap" by Emmanuel



ADÉLAÏDE FERRIÈRE

Séjourné, the only French work on the program, combines the ancestral sound of the marimba with a prerecorded electronic accompaniment, enabling percussion to carve out a place for itself in today's music. The power to decompartmentalize aesthetics wins over a younger audience. Paying tribute to legends Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays ("Elyl & Tap," their names in reverse), the piece is an ode to freedom with undeniable energy and virtuosity. Resolutely pop, it is festive, playful and highly imaginative.

For the classical part of the program, I will highlight one of my favorite activities, as I first mentioned: arranging for marimba. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre" have become regular features on my programs. But one of my greatest sources of inspiration is and always has been the Baroque repertoire. Like many young students, I began by transcribing Johann Sebastian Bach's suites and sonatas, including, of course, his famous "Chaconne."

One frustration remained with the latter, however: the marimba's harmonic dimension and possibilities were attractive but not altogether satisfying to me when transferring the original violin music to the marimba. Unfortunately, we still can't imitate the sustain of the bow, and I missed this intensity on the instrument.

The project to arrange Ferruccio Busoni's version of Bach's "Chaconne" hatched after discovering pianist Hélène Grimaud's magnificent live version in 2014. I put the project on hold at the time, only to return to it in 2021 and see it through to the end with a recording project in Paris. At the time, I thought that "Rhapsody in Blue" had been my greatest challenge, but the "Chaconne" proved me wrong.

Re-transcribing Bach's genius and Busoni's madness in this infinitely harmonically charged score was a tedious exercise, but the detour was worthwhile. This work is simply grandiose, majestic, and immense. It also enabled me to rethink my work on the weight (of strokes) and

phrasing on the marimba, to get as close as possible to this massive and round sound image, to make the different voices distinctly audible.

Another Baroque composer who fascinates me is Antonio Soler, who in the 18th century revisited the famous Spanish dance of the "Fandango" for harpsichord. It is a veritable trance of three-beat measures that follow one another for ten minutes over almost only two chords, entertaining a furious and fearsome left-hand continuo.

One of the major challenges of this piece was to respect the musical text, which was written in an extremely pianistic manner, with a theme in the right hand and accompaniment in the left, requiring great endurance from the bass and virtuosity from the lead singer. A few dazzling arpeggios took up a good part of my time, as the technical difficulty is pushed to the extreme. The "Fandango" also has the quality of being timeless, unique, almost "rock sounding." The Baroque era is one of the richest in the history of music, so varied are the aesthetics.

Finally, there is George Frideric Handel's "Passacaglia" from the *Suite in G*, HWV 432 for keyboard, one of the world's most famous themes, and the subject of numerous remixes and inspirations. Having initially discovered it in its keyboard version, I felt that something was missing to bring it to life and restore its integrity on the marimba. That's when I came up with the idea of trying Johan Halvorsen's adaptation of the work via his "Impossible Duet" for violin and viola. This immediately caught my interest and aroused my curiosity, giving me the impetus to create another cross-interpretation — an "arrangement of arrangements" — similar to my approach with the "Chaconne."

I've also always felt quite close to the idea that Baroque and Classical works should continue to live on and surprise the public via transcriptions. Many performers of various instruments propose these rewritings, pushing virtuosity and welcoming into their own repertoire the music they've fallen in love with. Let's not

forget, too, that the marimba was not part of musical creation in Bach's time, but if it had been, I'd like to think we could have original pieces written for the instrument. We marimbists are, after all, an integral part of the keyboard family.

That's why I think it's essential to work on adapting repertoire today, also as part of a pedagogical apprenticeship, counter-balanced of course by work on our original repertoire. The one goes hand in hand with the other, and being a good musician also means having this versatility, this apprehension of pieces, which becomes all the more acute with the variety we offer. It also means breaking away from the vertical aspect expected of percussion instruments, and making them poetic, singing, and lyrical.

I personally leave open the door to composition in the future as well, as it increases the writer's imagination even more, and gives him or her a full understanding of the instrument.

One thing I haven't mentioned yet is my work with images, which is one of the many ways to introduce our work to the audience. Here, almost the entire program exists in audio recordings, but also as music videos, available on YouTube, so as to be able to showcase the instrument in the best possible conditions and offer a more complete artistic spectrum.

The publisher Edition Svitzer not only published the new works by Burritt, Liu, and Séjourné, but released two digital albums of marimba music including those works, in which I was lucky to participate. The artistic direction of a series of corresponding videos is quite unusual: superb locations in Denmark include an old sugar factory and a huge water tower.

When creating content for my personal projects, I've always been guided by the influence of each piece and finding a location that lends itself to the spirit of the composer and the guiding line of the work. It all started with "One Study" by John Psathas, whose preface notes the imitation of an unstoppable engine for seven minutes. My first thought was: "Why not an airplane?" The rest was a succession of

intuitive moments at various locations, and above all, the very good fortune of having the agreement of the directors of the various places where I was able to organize filming.

Video is also essential, in my opinion, for getting to know other professions. Musicians often work with musicians, and percussionists even more often with other percussionists. On video shoots, I've met some incredible people and discovered another way of making music, and sharing it in other ways than simply performing live.

The craziest of all, of course, was my last visit to PASIC in 2019. Having previously visited New York City several times, I thought I had to do something there as part of my trip to the U.S. At the same time, I was recording "Rhapsody in Blue," so an idea gradually fell into place. Playing on a rooftop in November was a crazy idea. The day before the shoot, it was raining; the day after it was snowing. We had a magnificent shooting day with 18 degrees (64 degrees Fahrenheit) and sunshine all day long and, above all, a memory that will never leave me. Only a few days before I performed the first live version in Indianapolis!

I can't wait to see you again for a new edition that promises to be as grandiose as ever. Long live PASIC 2024!

VIDEO

"One Study": www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-yprHSOvKNU&t=100

"Rhapsody in Blue": www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5vIQ5pQTEU&t=112s

Additional video clips available at www.adelaideferriere.com/en/clips

Adélaïde Ferrière was hailed as "a phenomenon" by the newspaper *Le Monde*, and *Le Figaro* said that she "embodies the arrival of percussion at the forefront of the classical music scene." In the 2024–25 season, Adélaïde will be making her debut with the Orchestre National de France at the Festival Présences, the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra, the Geneva Chamber Orchestra, the Brno

Philharmonic (in the Czech Republic), the Istanbul State Symphony Orchestra, and as associate artist of the Orchestre Dijon Bourgogne. In addition, she will perform recitals in France, Italy, Germany, and the United States. More at www.adelaideferriere.com PN

EVENING CONCERTS

STEFON HARRIS & BLACKOUT

Vibraphonist Stefon Harris has balanced his love of the hard bop tradition with his interests in contemporary jazz, fusion, and Latin idioms. While still in college, he was gigging alongside such legends as Max Roach, Joe Henderson, Steve Turre, and others. Following his graduation, he began leading his own groups, as well as working with such artists as Charlie Hunter, Greg Osby, Jason Moran, and Terrell Stafford. He has drawn praise for his own albums, like *A Cloud of Red Dust*, the Grammy-nominated *Black Action Figure*, and *New Directions*. In 2004, he introduced his Blackout ensemble with *Evolution*, followed by his exploration of Duke Ellington's music on *African Tarantella*. He returned to his Blackout ensemble with 2009's *Urbanus*.

Along with performing, Harris has broadened his scope into education, having held the position of Dean and Director of the Arts Department at the Manhattan School of Music. He also founded the tech company Melodic Progression Institute, with which he has produced several music-related apps. In 2011, he paired with trumpeter Christian Scott and tenor saxophonist David Sánchez for the Latin-influenced *Ninety Miles*. Over the next several years, Harris appeared on albums with Theo Croker, Regina Carter, and Diana Krall.

THE U.S. ARMY BLUES

The U.S. Army Blues, part of the United States Army Band "Pershing's Own," is the premier jazz ensemble of the U.S. Army. After informal beginnings in 1970, this 19-piece ensemble became an official element of the Army Band in 1972. The Army Blues strive to fulfill their mission through public concerts, educational outreach, and the preservation of the tradition of America's unique art form: jazz.

ELECTRONIC/ TECHNOLOGY

DANIEL TATITA MÁRQUEZ Virtual Electronic/Technology Clinic/Performance Robotic Drums

Robotic Drums merges music, technology and robotics. These impact robots go beyond being simple instruments; they are also research tools to explore the foundations of robotics and machine learning. Its ability to perform with precision, explore complex patterns, and operate continuously challenges traditional conceptions of percussion, opening up new possibilities in musical performance. By introducing Robotic Drums into music classrooms, not only is musical learning enriched, but the development of essential technological skills is also stimulated. These systems not only teach music, but also serve as a gateway to understanding robotics and automation principles. Educators can use them to teach fundamental concepts such as rhythm, timing, tempo, and musical expression, while introducing students to the fundamentals of robotics and programming.

Tatita Márquez — musician, researcher, and Marca Pais cultural ambassador — is leader of the Tatita Márquez Group, which fuses musical avant-garde and technology. His 30 publications on candombe and 10 albums explore such genres as candombe jazz and electronic. Winner of scholarships and awards, Márquez stands out for his musical versatility, from jazz to hip-hop and candombe. His recent ANII Innovative Entrepreneurs award 2024–26 reflects his leadership at the intersection between music and innovation in Uruguay.

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