

Expansive Approach to Timbre on Marimba

By Payton MacDonald

I've always been an improviser since day one — since I was 10 years old. When I finished university and started building my career, it was firmly in the contemporary classical realm. This involved improvisation, but I was primarily playing very difficult non-improvised music. For example, I commissioned solo marimba pieces from Charles Wuorinen and Stuart Saunders Smith, whilst playing with Alarm Will Sound and with the New Jersey Percussion Ensemble. That was mostly non-improvised. At that time, it felt like I had a whole, different life as an improviser outside those spaces.

Over the past 10–15 years, I've become deeply involved in a community of improvisers for whom extended techniques are normalized. For us, timbre is an essential and foundational aspect of musicianship and a prominent structural device for composing and improvising alongside rhythm, harmony, melody, and other parameters of organized sound. I'm now doing more improvising than non-improvised music, although I still do the latter with my students in the university. However, the recordings I'm releasing and the performances I'm doing are in the improvised realm, where timbral exploration is integral to the work.

The inspiration for this improvised music draws back to the 1960s with John

Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, the creative musicians affiliated with the AACM, and it continues to present day. Most of these people approach their instruments with great breadth in terms of timbre. They were all trained with standard technique, including a basic understanding on how to produce a “good” sound on the instrument. From there, they developed all sorts of other sounds that are not viewed as “less good,” they're just other sounds that you can make on the instrument. This has connections with John Cage's ideas about

sound as a non-moral compass. We can appreciate any sound for its beauty.

With these ideas guiding me, I proceeded doing things that were very simple, and frankly, not very innovative. Other people had already done them. I started working more with preparations on the instrument: putting things on top of it, putting things between the bars and the resonators, moving the upper manual bars around. Instead of the regular pattern of 2-3-2-3, I might have six notes in a row. They're the same chunks of wood, but by physically moving them around,



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my relationship with the instrument changes dramatically. I do this for a couple of reasons. It makes the instrument feel a lot different. Plus, in a certain way, it instantly erases 400 years of keyboard history. This frees me up to consider the marimba as a kind of multiple percussion instrument rather than a keyboard instrument.

I have also started building all sorts of different mallets. Some ideas were borrowed from things other people had done, like the slap mallets, which Keiko Abe was doing in the late 1970s. Others, I had not seen anyone do, but they weren't very complicated or expensive. I just started attaching things to mallets and covering them. I also built up my six-mallet technique, which enabled me to approach the instrument a little bit differently. I started building large cluster beaters, an expansion of the slap mallet idea.

Historically, in terms of expansive timbre on marimba, other than Keiko's work and one other person, Stacey Bowers, not a lot has been done. Abe-sensei could play the most beautiful Bach. Then she could approach this instrument with unbelievable force and energy, treating it more like a bunch of wooden drums. She used a wide range of mallets and beaters. Bowers wrote études for prepared marimba in the 1970s. He includes a preparation chart, like John Cage's "Sonatas and Interludes," and tells you what to put between the bars or under the bars with specific instructions — for example, a piece of cork or tinfoil.

BEYOND THE INSTRUMENT AND ITS HISTORY/ CHAMPIONS

The thing is, I'm not really a percussionist. I'm a composer and improviser who plays percussion. The percussionists I mentioned comprise a smaller proportion of my influences than the broader contemporary literature: Xenakis, Lachenmann, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Elliott Sharp, Cage, Harrison, Feldman, and so many others — both

their improvised music and non-improvised music. Hearing the Bergamot string quartet play "Grído" (Lachenmann's Third String Quartet), was one of those nights where, 20 minutes later, I was a different person. It changed me and made me understand why people are interested in his compositions. His exploration of timbre is almost unparalleled; the sounds he gets out of string instruments are things I had never heard a string quartet do before. Finally, nature also plays an important role in influencing what I do. I do projects where I'm out hiking and biking and often take time to just sit and listen. There are amazing sounds out there.

NEW SOUNDS AND NOVELTY-SEEKING

To a certain extent, I'm less interested in whether what I'm doing is new or not anymore, because the more pressing question is if what I'm doing, at this moment, is musically viable and musically necessary. Sometimes I catch myself, essentially, practicing in front of people in a performance, where I'm exploring new things, but not really for any good reason. That may not have anything to do with what is happening on stage, especially if I'm working with other people. In that case, it might be new, it might be innovative, but it's probably not great musicianship. So, in that context, I find the quest for something new to be irrelevant.

I'll never forget what Glenn Gould once said when talking about counterpoint: "It doesn't matter who does it first. What really matters is who does it best." Bach wasn't the first contrapuntist, right? But he sure did it awfully well.

I'm always exploring — always trying to broaden my horizons and go places I haven't been. It's how I'm wired. I very much enjoy the process of getting to a place where I almost feel like I'm losing control. That's one indication that I'm somewhere new. Another very good indication is when I'm in a place of discomfort. I constantly seek a Sense of Wonder, something science fiction writers desire. The Sense of Wonder is a feeling and an

experience of something entirely new, unlike anything you've experienced before, which completely changes your worldview. That, to me, is one of the gold standards of great experimental music. It takes me somewhere I've never been before, somewhere new.

In a similar vein, whilst playing I may be hearing something but can't do it. That means I have to build my technique towards it. Technique doesn't always necessarily mean faster. We often think of technique in this very drum corps sort of way: faster, louder, cleaner, right? But technique is more expansive than that: sometimes it means developing a whole new physical approach to the instrument, or other times technique means being able to manage my mind in a way that allows my body and the instrument to connect in new ways.

I very much enjoy being on those frontiers, but sometimes it isn't necessary. Sometimes the best thing I can do is just play a beautiful open fifth and let it resonate and be done with it — with a pair of medium yarn mallets.

An area where I found novelty-seeking to be of particular interest is with social media. With my Instagram account, I noticed that when I put up a short reel of myself moving around the instrument, in a very aggressive, physical way, sort of going crazy with these these "stochastic" mallets I'll get a lot of plays. They're simply yarn mallets with a pingpong ball that I attached to them. It took maybe five to fifteen minutes to make them. When you play with them, the ball bounces around in these weird ways. It's also very visually interesting, because you see so much going on.

When I put up a post of me using just normal medium yarn mallets playing something sweet and tuneful, I *might* get a thousand plays. The stochastic mallets are not inherently better, they're just more titillating to people.

I have felt that little urge sometimes in thinking, "Oh, I haven't had a video that got a lot of hits for a while; maybe I should find something even crazier to do." But to

me, that's kind of a dead-end street. You get diminishing returns with that after a while, and I'm not sure that it would be musically necessary. It doesn't have any musical value; rather, it is just clamoring for attention.

BUSINESS MECHANISM

The fixation on the new is part of this high modernist tradition that we have inherited to some extent as percussionists. It's a beautiful tradition. I love that you can have Braxton and Aphex Twin and Meredith Monk all in the same conversation. But, it also can create this weird pressure where you feel like you always have to produce something new. That way, the critics will get interested and it'll lead to more commissions. There's a whole business mechanism with all this, which I try to eschew and instead focus on what I'm doing musically.

That business mechanism has to do with carving out a place for yourself in this very crowded and, unfortunately, underfunded ecosystem. Ideally, if you create a unique place/space, then that can lead to attention one way or another, which can then lead to commissions. Then more people will go to your concerts, commission you, buy tickets, buy your scores, etc. Of course, we all want gigs; I'm not going to ignore that fact. And we all want to get paid well for those gigs. There's nothing wrong with that. I just want to make sure I'm not losing focus on why I got into this in the first place. After all, if all I cared about was money I would have pursued a completely different career.

LIMITATIONS

There may actually be a limit to the number of things you can do on the instrument. I don't feel that I've hit that limit yet, but I only have two arms and, thankfully, 10 fingers. I can hold up to eight mallets at a time, but it gets kind of clumsy at that point. Six mallets is more manageable. I spend most of my time with four mallets in my hands. The instrument has a fixed range. The bars are

a certain width; the sustain only so long, etc. There are limitations.

For a lot of the repertoire we play, a lot of the composers worked with the performer. I know when Druckman wrote "Reflections on the Nature of Water," he had accomplished marimbists guiding him, and part of the reason that piece is such a joy to play is because it's so idiomatic. It fits quite well under the hands, for the most part. It generally does things that the marimba does well: it's spacious, it's often in a sweet part of the range. I think that's one of the reasons it holds up over the years, in addition to the fact that it's compositionally very strong. All that is to say: we have limitations. There are things the instrument can do and things it can't. There are things our bodies can do, and things they can't. That does dictate some of what I can do when I'm improvising. But I'm always pushing against those limitations, trying to find something new, something different, and hopefully something beautiful and wonderful.

Payton MacDonald is a composer, percussionist (specializing in keyboard percussion), singer, and filmmaker. He explores the frontiers of art in a variety of settings, from Carnegie Hall to remote wilderness locations. He spent his early years drumming along with jazz records, while exploring the Rocky Mountains near his home in Idaho by foot, bicycle, and skis. Eventually he was shaped into a percussionist who plays marimbas, vibes, snare drums, bicycles, plants, pots and pans, and anything else that might produce an interesting tone. Along the way Payton discovered Indian classical music, and he has studied that music for over 20 years. He often dreams up and executes large-scale, ambitious projects, such as his film *Sonic Divide*, which shows Payton pedaling his mountain bike 2,500 miles along the Continental Divide, while performing 30 new pieces of music, or his *Sonic Peaks* project, in which Payton hikes to the summit of hundreds of mountains and creates new music reflecting those

experiences. He has released over 100 recordings. Payton studied music formally at the University of Michigan (BFA) and Eastman School of Music (MM and DMA), as well as with the legendary Gundecha Brothers (Dhrupad vocal) and Pandit Sharda Sahai (tabla). He teaches music at William Paterson University, and tours nationally and internationally as a percussionist, improviser, and composer. **PN**

KEYBOARD

Kana Omori

Keyboard Clinic / Performance

Resonating Roots: Traditional Japan

Reimagined for Marimba

This performance features three original new marimba works that embody the spirit of ancient Japan, its rich culture, and the beauty of its natural landscapes. The clinic will delve into the cultural and musical elements behind these works, offering insight into traditional Japanese music from three distinct perspectives. Kana Omori will perform sections from longer pieces and full-length performances for the others. Each piece will be accompanied by a clinic presentation portion explaining various Japanese ideologies and elements found in these pieces.

Kana Omori is an international marimbist, percussionist, and composer from Japan. She has been awarded several prizes, including the First Prize and Absolute Prize at the International Percussion Competition in Italy. Kana is an associate professor at the Osaka College of Music. She has released seven albums of marimba music, and many of her arrangements and compositions are published by Edition Svitzer. As a soloist, Kana has performed with many orchestras in various countries and has given recitals and masterclasses in countries across Europe, North America, Latin America, and Asia. She is also a faculty member and a composer-in-residence of the Marimbafest, International Marimba Festival and Competition, in Australia.