

Nancy Zeltsman Solo marimba: “drinking water”

By Rick Mattingly

While planning her sabbatical from teaching at Boston Conservatory at Berklee and Berklee College of Music, Nancy Zeltsman thought of the phrase “drinking water.” It seemed to fit as she was selecting music for a new concert program and recording. “A memory came to me. When my father was in his late 90s and woke from a nap, he relished savoring a sip of water to revive himself,” Nancy recalled. It occurred to her “that was exactly what I was doing with this project. I was striving to have that kind of gentle rejuvenation.” So “drinking water” became the name of her program and recording.

Weeks later, she wondered if anyone had ever written music with that title. She searched the name and found “Água de Beber” — which translates to “Drinking Water” or “Water to Drink” — by Antônio Carlos Jobim. “Most of the music I was considering was a bit obscure, and that is one of the less-often-played Jobim tunes,” she said. “So it fit.”

Given that Zeltsman’s career has spanned some 45 years, and in that time she has played a lot of music, why not do what many musicians do after they have been concertizing for many years: revisit pieces they have played in the past? They often find that after not having played a piece for several years, they approach it with a fresh perspective. “I can see it would make sense to play pieces that were written for me and that I have a close association with,” she admits, “but I wanted to do something different. I’ve always been drawn to discovering new music. I wanted to find music that would spark something in me: pieces that I’ve never heard before on marimba. I wanted this program to be an example of how you can find completely different music from what others are playing.

“One of the toughest challenges for musicians is trying to decide what to learn to play next. Students often feel drawn to the pieces in online videos that have some ‘buzz’ around them, or pieces known to be the ‘tough’ ones. You don’t have to feel pres-

sure to learn music that is already being played by others. I encourage students to visit a library with no preconceptions about what they will find. That’s tricky for students who don’t like to



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Nancy Zeltsman

sightread, so instead they copy performances in impressive videos. But someone has already done that. Of course, we learn by copying people we admire, and if a piece really speaks to you, and you feel it would fit well into one of your programs, that's all great. But don't forget you can find your own thing."

Most of the works on Zeltsman's PASIC recital will be ones that she found, adapted and/or arranged, and learned during her fall 2024 sabbatical: "Passatempi" ("Pastime") by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, originally written for piano; "Suite in B minor, LV 65" by Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, originally for harpsichord; "West Virginia Rose" / "The Water is Wide," written/improvised on piano by Fred Hersch; "Star" by Moto Fukushima, originally

pianist sort of tearing through it — it's easier for them to play fast with ten fingers! — but the piece didn't appeal to me as much then. If I had heard the fast recording before seeing the score, I might either not have been drawn to the piece at all, or figured it was too virtuosic to approach with four mallets." But Nancy had seen the score, and saw greater musical potential in it when it was approached at a gentler tempo.

"Another revelation was exploring the Baroque-period piece by Zachow, a composer and organist who had been the sole teacher of Handel. I had an opportunity to consult Joseph Gascho, a harpsichordist and early music specialist on faculty at University of Michigan, about it. Based on what I told him

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for six-string electric bass; an excerpt from "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Paul Simon; and "Água de Beber" by Jobim.

Her PASIC program will contain a few pieces that Nancy has played and recorded in the past including Simon's "Amulet" and "Over There" by Carla Bley, both from the *Intermediate Masterworks for Marimba* collection (the result of a project that Nancy co-led). In honor of the 100th birthday year of Gunther Schuller — a composer with whom Nancy was very close — she will share an excerpt of "Phantasmata" for violin and marimba, dedicated to Nancy's duo Marimolin. The final movement begins with a three-minute marimba solo focused in the lower register that, compositionally, Zeltsman sees as a standout within the marimba repertoire. "Gunther's insistence on the use of soft mallets in the lowest register of the marimba to bring out the fundamental pitches was transformational in my approach to the marimba."

By the time of Zeltsman's PASIC recital, her new album, also called *drinking water*, will have been released on Bandcamp and streaming services, with program notes available on Zeltsman's website. That album will include a few additional new recordings (not on Nancy's PASIC program) by David Friedman, Manuel Ponce, and Joep Straesser.

Given that her program comprises a lot of music that was not originally written for marimba, how did she approach learning new pieces? "First, I was drawn to pieces that struck me as unusual and interesting, and that I felt would hold my interest for a long time, with much to delve into and unravel. Each piece felt like a strong musical world, with interesting or unusual harmonies and forms, that represented many styles, and that would also complement each other within a collection.

"I'm usually drawn to a piece based on sightreading it before listening to a recording," she explains. "Sometimes I would then find a recording that went in directions I didn't particularly like. Actually, that very fact could be inspiring and encourage me to delve into a piece more; maybe I could bring something new to it. For example, the Castelnuovo-Tedesco begins with the marking 'Un poco mosso' — a little motion. I heard a recording of a

stood out to me in the piece, Gascho suggested and encouraged that I could alter the register of some lines, delete or add any ornaments, and possibly even rearrange the movements, and re-meter one movement, all of which I did. I never would have thought of or dared to do most of this on my own, but learning that this was all within acceptable practices was fascinating and drew me in more deeply."

Nancy constructed her marimba version of the Jobim piece by adapting elements of an arrangement she found online by Italian jazz pianist MauColi as a skeleton for the piece. She transcribed the rhythm of the melody as Frank Sinatra had recorded it, added some smooth chromatic chord voicings David Friedman showed her in a couple of bars, and transcribed and inserted a cello solo recorded by Jaques Morelenbaum with a tinge of his wife Paula's rhythmic vocals.

"I feel like I still want to help the marimba find its voice. I would hope that people might hear a piece played on the marimba that wasn't written for marimba, and realize it sounds so natural that it could have been written for marimba. And they may hear the instrument in a new way."

Zeltsman, a PAS Hall of Fame inductee, is no stranger to PASIC. She first performed there with Marimolin in 1988 and has since performed a number of times in solo and duo settings. "This is in some ways an 'unflashy' program. I was pulled toward music with particular types of challenges that interested me. I wasn't guessing at what would be 'audience pleasing' — although it may be — or wishing to be bold. My choices came from wanting to be peaceful and less noisy than most of the world and not being pressured to be cutting-edge. I wanted to share something simple, and perhaps refreshing — like drinking water." **PN**