

Vibraphone in a Digital World

By Dr. Brady Harrison

The vibraphone has a rich and diverse history (100 years!) that follows streams of both jazz and popular music as well as contemporary classical music. While we celebrate the tradition of the instrument and its journey from pioneers in the likes of Lionel Hampton, Milt Jackson, Red Norvo, Terry Gibbs, David Friedman, and Gary Burton to more current artists including Stefon Harris, Joe Locke, and Rusty Burge, among many others, the 100th-year anniversary is a great opportunity to reflect on where the instrument is headed within a changing musical landscape.

From its inception, the vibraphone has been an innovative instrument that bridged the divide between electricity and the world of concert percussion, and as such, it has consistently pushed boundaries. Although this “analog” instrument is often viewed within a traditional paradigm, the modern tools of the digital world are now able to use the essence of the instrument to expand its impact far beyond its traditional musical identity. Even in an increasingly complex musical culture, the traditional aspects of the instrument, such as its portability, its haunting metallic sustain, and its general presence as a traditional percussion instrument, are all contributing factors as to why there is a heightened interest and increased output of new works for the instrument and electronics in recent years. In our upcoming PASIC 2021 performance/clinic, “Vibraphone in a Dig-

ital World,” my colleagues and I seek to demystify the instrument in an electroacoustic context, and offer access to new solo works for the instrument that are both broadly appealing and deeply compelling for a wide swath of listeners and performers. Vibraphone and electronics have a kindred relationship.

NEW DIRECTIONS

To suggest that there is but one direction that current vibraphone repertoire is developing would, of course, be a fallacy. Just as contemporary developments and tastes reflect music into myriad directions, so goes the repertoire for vibraphone. However, one answer to the question of how to reimagine the instrument

while pushing the boundaries of expression extends from its roots and into the digital world. Although there are various ideations of the instrument with respect to range, pickups, MIDI implementation, vibrato mechanism, etc., all of these works are performed on a standard 3-octave instrument combined with a small complement of electronics.

There are many ways to categorize new repertoire for the instrument, yet one differentiating aspect of the works in the world of electroacoustic music tends to be the relationship between the instrument and performer. During “Vibraphone in a Digital World,” the four performers championing these new directions of electroacoustic vibraphone each have a

Brady Harrison, Von Hansen, Alex Wier, Victor Pons
Saturday, 11:00 AM

distinctly different approach, aesthetic, and relationship to the repertoire.

BRIDGING THE OLD AND THE NEW

Steven Snowden's collection of works for keyboard and electronics, "Long Distance," draws on a time long before today's commonplace use of satellite-connected smartphones or even the internet, reinventing the analog sounds that once belonged to the largest web of electronic communication in the world: land-based telephone network lines. In Victor Pons's performance of the movement "Atlanta, 1972," the vibraphone exists as a close extension of the analog phone sounds that sparked the work's inspiration. The composer was able to access recordings made by early hackers of the wired phone network, known as phreaks (the "ph" is borrowed from the prefix for phone), and these recordings are manipulated to provide the fixed media for the piece.

Of the work, the Snowden writes: "I first learned about phone phreaks a couple of years ago and was immediately fascinated by their tenacity and boundless curiosity. By hacking the inner workings of payphones, building small electrical devices, or even whistling repeated tones at specific frequen-

cies, they were able to manipulate this analog technology to connect with others in faraway places or simply listen in on the pops, clicks, and hums produced by the machinery of distant networks. These sonic identifiers were unique to each of the thousands of long-distance networks, and (luckily for me) it was quite common for phreaks to make high quality reel-to-reel recordings of what they heard. All electronic sounds used in this piece come from these recordings, and each movement is based upon the unique sonic qualities of calls from payphones in various locations in the U.S. in the 1970s."

A DEVELOPING TEXTURAL RELATIONSHIP

"Where Light Escapes You," a work for vibraphone, kick drum, and two upside-down under loudspeakers, written by Indianapolis-based percussionist and composer Jordan Munson and performed by Alex Wier, aims for a very different aesthetic and follows a different approach in its treatment of the vibraphone. An evolving sonic landscape, featuring vaguely tonal elements with low synth bass tones, permeates the work, which uses speakers to create sympathetic vibrations in the snare drums. This creates a technological dia-

logue that emerges from the interactions between machine and acoustic instruments.

Munson describes "Where Light Escapes You" as "a work influenced by those remote places where true darkness and silence exist. All at once tranquil and urgent, these environments offer up a deep knowledge of the space around us, hidden within the absences."

PREPARED VIBRAPHONE MEETS MBIRA AND EDM

Von Hansen's "Loops for Vibraphone and Electronics" is a short, two-movement work that will be performed by the composer. It presents a different approach to the physical aspects of the vibraphone as well as its relationship to machine. Whereas Munson's work uses electronics to influence the acoustic sounds of the instruments on stage, Hansen's work involves preparing the vibraphone and integrating these into the evolving digital soundscape that is propelled by a MAX patch.

"'Loops' is an exploration of repetition at varying time scales," Hansen says. "Movement 1, 'Anything Worthwhile is Perishable,' uses randomized echoes and manipulated repetitions to create a lush soundscape. Several notes on the vibraphone are 'prepared' by placing

Arizona State University

various metallic objects on the keys. The buzzing this creates mimics the mbira, a traditional African instrument associated with the Shona people of Zimbabwe. This movement starts with an mbira solo, and the scale used by the performer is based on the traditional Nyamaropa tuning of the mbira.

“Movement 2, ‘Gr@w£ix’ (‘Grawlix’), uses loops in a similar way to DJs and other live performers. Material is played, recorded, and played back while something new is recorded on top of this loop. This process continues any number of times to stack material and create the effect of multiple players from just one person. The material of ‘Gr@w£ix’ is inspired by electronic dance music fused with a contemporary percussion style. The term ‘grawlix’ refers to a string of typographical symbols (such as %@\$&*!) used in place of an obscenity, especially in comic strips.”

VIBRAPHONE AS AN EVOLVING VOICE

Using a similar treatment as Hansen’s work but with different effect, I will be performing my work “Electroacoustic Etude #4: Examen in Metals,” which uses prepared vibraphone with pitched metal

sounds. At times, the instruments stand in stark contrast to the electronics, and at other times they are part of the electronic signal path. Within the framework of the piece (see Example 1), the performer is charged with creating an individually written response to a specifically designed set of questions based on the process of an Examen – a Jesuit meditative ritual of self-reflection.

Using this individually crafted prose, the performer is then charged with using a composer-provided template (Example 2) to produce a play-along recording that accompanies the work, and combine this with both real-time processing and spoken word. This has the effect of blurring the distinction between what is real (live sounds) and what is imaginary (the playback), and in this way, the piece calls on the player to wear many hats, functioning as performer, content creator, and producer.

“Examen In Metals” falls outside the traditional influences of concert vibraphone repertoire and finds inspiration in the early electroacoustic works of Hans Werner Henze (“Prison Song”), Lou Harrison and John Cage.

Following are excerpts from the work’s performance notes:

“I wanted to create a work that would require the performer to make some deeper relationship to the human condition, since I have always felt that this gives some greater relevance and meaning to music to better understand why and how it is that we sometimes find meaning in it.... To further develop the voice of the performer, both literally and figuratively, the work requires the performer to do a number of things to develop some sense of ‘voice’ with this work. Firstly, I supply them with some very specific directions, and require the performer to go through the process of an examen, which is typically thought of as a Jesuit practice of daily reflection that involves five main parts.”

In this way, the vibraphone serves as an extension of the human voice via uniquely digital means. Although an Examen is typically thought of as a reflection and as raised emotional awareness with respect to a particular day, it can be applied to any length of time, such as a season, year, four years in a school program, or a similar milestone, etc., with the last step of the process being developing an eye toward a better tomorrow. Although I never anticipated it when I originally wrote the piece, the PASIC

Example 1

①
(Notes of Total Erasure)

Example 2

200

2021 premiere of the work could not be any better opportunity to reflect back on the last year-and-a-half, with an eye toward the future of our humanity, coupled with a look at new directions in emerging music for vibraphone!

CONCLUSION

All of the performers will take some time to discuss their piece and explore their unique performance topics, and we look forward to taking questions near the end of the session. I hope that whether you are an enthusiast, student, professional, mallet specialist, tech guru, or just want to hear some cool new music for the vibraphone on its centennial, you will join us for “Vibraphone in a Digital World.”

SOURCES

Score examples Copyright © William Brady Harrison

Brady Harrison's eclectic career blends performance and teaching. He is Head of Percussion Studies at Xavier University's new School of Arts and Innovation in Cincinnati, Ohio, and also teaches for the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music Preparatory Department. Harrison is Principal Timpanist of the Lexington Philharmonic, Percussionist with the Louisville Orchestra, and has also served as Principal Percussion for four seasons with the Lyrique en Mer Festival in Belle Ile, France. His strong interest in new works and chamber music have led to collaborations with many composers, including John Luther Adams and George Crumb. He has performed across the U.S., Europe, and India as a soloist, orchestral musician, and with his flute and percussion chamber duo, Psonic Union. He can be heard on the Telarc, Mode Records, and Vienna Modern Masters labels. **PN**

Education Sessions

JUSTIN BUNTING

You Are Your Own Teacher: Building Successful Practice and Time Management Skills Day and Time

Most musicians have experienced practice sessions after which they feel worse than when they began. Morale, motivation, and for educators, student retention can suffer. A concrete plan for time management and practice sets up any musician for increased success. All musicians are told to practice, but are many times not taught how to effectively do so. Too often, he or she equates shutting themselves in a room with their instrument for hours at a time and cranking out notes as equivalent to musical success. This clinic gives easy-to-implement tips regarding such topics as: how to evaluate your own playing, how to structure a practice session, keeping a detailed practice log, how to practice slowly and musically at the same time, and setting goals, as well as touching on performance anxiety and time management. (See Justin Bunting's related article in an upcoming post on the *Rhythm! Scene* blog.) (Can we put a link to RIS?)

NORMAN WEINBERG

Developing Subtlety and Nuance for Percussionists Day and Time

This clinic will offer the percussionist a detailed methodology for going beyond “playing the ink” when performing with non-pitched percussion instruments. The clinic will discuss the concept of developing a “great touch” on percussion instruments. It will offer a comprehensive process that includes detailed, critical listening and modeling of some of the finest musicians in the world; developing musical intuition; and making musical decisions of phrasing, tonal quality, dynamics, timing, stroke, roll type, etc. The goal of the clinic is to demonstrate how one can cultivate the ability to breathe personality into a passage by making artistic decisions based on the consideration of all musical parameters. During the clinic, there will be five short examples of applying the process to performances on snare drum, tambourine, triangle, and cymbals. The performers will discuss the “how and why” of decisions that were made and how the process influenced these decisions.

JASON MARSALIS

100th Anniversary of Vibraphone Day and Time

This session will cover the history of the vibraphone.

Electronic/Technology Session

HEATHER SLOAN

Using Digital Tools to Enhance Research and Win Grants Friday, 4:00 PM

Digital methods can greatly enhance academic scholarship, expand the reach of independent research and creative work, and inspire new areas of inquiry. Participants will get an overview of digital tools such as interactive multimedia story maps, network analysis, virtual tour apps, digital timelines, and many others. Topics will also include finding the right tools for your research questions; project charting and scoping; leveraging small, low-cost efforts into larger projects; tips for finding and applying for digital arts and humanities grants; data management plans and other sustainability considerations; ethics in digital work; and strategies for successful digital collaboration. No prior experience with digital tools is necessary. Participants will receive abundant resources for guiding continued exploration. Session information can potentially benefit many areas of percussion work, including education, scholarship, performance, composition, arts administration, and advocacy.