

THINKING SONGS

Around 2005, I was approached by percussionist Eric Beach (now of So Percussion) about writing a marimba solo; he then proceeded to organize a consortium of some of the strongest marimba players in the U.S. (himself included) to commission the piece - 16 players in all.

While I play the marimba lumina (an electronic marimba I began working with around the same time I was contacted by Eric), my way of playing that instrument is strongly affected by its design (it uses magnetic fields; the mallets are essentially antennae) and has little or nothing in common with concert marimba technique. I found writing for the marimba very challenging. The instrument's tone is beautiful but varies greatly depending on register; there are numerous techniques for holding the mallets, each with its advantages and drawbacks. When composing - particularly for a solo instrument - I strive to write something that is both idiomatic and new, and never have I found this task more daunting than for the marimba. An aficionado (but not myself really a player) of African marimbas of many types and kinds, I grappled with transferring some of those techniques to the Western instrument; I also became increasingly interested in finding a personal approach to voice-leading, facilitated by the instrument's transparent sound. It took me 10 years to gradually find ways for myself to compose for marimba, and the bulk of the piece in its final form was written in 2015.

The five movements can each be played on their own. The first, *Dance*, exploits timbral possibilities through the use of different mallets, an idea further explored in the fourth movement. The melodies are influenced by Chopi timbila music from Mozambique, but references to ouaraba, a dance from Burkina Faso, and to Jamaican dub are also integrated into the piece.

Lamento fulfills the traditional role of the slow movement. The title might evoke descending melodic lines, but the movement is actually rather chordal and consists of undulating chromatic figures whilst retaining the somber atmosphere associated with the lamento tradition.

Four-Part Invention may quite possibly be the most technically demanding piece ever written for marimba. My main influence here was the voice-leading of J.S. Bach, whose works are often transcribed for marimba, although the maximum number of parts in Bach's inventions was three. But obviously my melodic and harmonic language is entirely different. The melodies are actually very basic - essentially scales - but overlap in complex ways to generate a music that is both constructivist and expressive. I ask the player for some rather impossible things, for example to play different dynamics with two mallets held in one hand. And as is so often the case when boundaries are pushed, the seemingly impossible somehow comes within reach.

Scherzo is a study for prepared marimba, using a pair of small Chinese cymbals and some jingles to alter the instrument's sound. The possibilities of glissandi are likewise explored. Obscure references to waltz rhythms are very much intentional.

Two-Part Invention again explores voice-leading, but from a different angle. I return here to my passion for interlocking melodies and shifting accents; a polymetric, choreographic approach I developed for drum-set playing is applied to the marimba here. But since marimba players habitually hold four mallets, complex melodic and intervallic structures can be introduced into the polyrhythmic mix. Like every so often in my music, it's impossible to tell whether we are in some imaginary African avant-garde world or still firmly rooted in the West.