

# Percussive Notes

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# Extended Vibraphone Techniques in Deane's 'Dis Qui Etude'

By Joshua D. Smith

Christopher Deane's "Dis Qui Etude" (2004) for solo vibraphone was commissioned by and dedicated to Robert Parks, then a doctoral candidate at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. The title is a play on the word "disquietude," which means "anxiety or agitation." Throughout the piece, Deane requires a vibraphonist to convey a sense of angst through the performance of fragmented thirty-second notes, repeated five-note groupings, and cluster chords performed at a rapid pace.

## SPECIAL PREPARATIONS

Special preparations for this piece center on the construction of special wooden mallets, which are made from wooden paint stirrers. With these mallets, a performer must strike the vibraphone in a normal manner, as well as bow the edges of bars, strike the bars with various sides and edges of the mallets, and perform cluster chords. Deane used the word "etude" in the title because he thought of this piece as a "first study in the use of these multi-faceted mallets."<sup>1</sup>

## PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Deane chose to use wooden paint stirrers in this piece so that a performer could use mallets with a shape that would enable the cycling among striking notes in a normal manner, bowing notes in rapid alteration, and striking with various edges of the mallets. Deane's inspiration to use wooden paint stirrers came from the wooden mallets commonly used with Tibetan singing bowls—instruments used in ceremonies for meditation and relaxation. By rubbing wooden mallets around the rim of a Tibetan singing bowl, a sustained tone is produced. Deane wanted to replicate this wood-on-metal contact sound through the use of wooden paint stirrers on the vibraphone. The corners and sides of the wooden paint stirrer serve as viable striking surfaces while the flat face of the stirrer provides a large plane that a performer can rub across the edges of vibraphone bars, thereby exciting the bars in the same manner as a bass bow.

The materials involved in mallet construction include wooden, five-gallon paint stirrers, rubber stoppers,<sup>2</sup> padding such as moleskin, and masking tape. It should be noted that five-gallon paint stirrers are to be used, as opposed to one-gallon paint stirrers. Paint stirrers used for five-gallon paint containers are thicker, wider, and more durable than those used for one-gallon containers, and they will better serve as vibraphone performance implements. Additionally, the length of the finished mallet should be approximately 18 inches, which is shorter than the five-gallon paint stirrer in its original 21-inch form. Therefore, one will have to remove approximately three inches of the original paint stirrer before constructing the rest of the mallet.<sup>3</sup>

Each mallet consists of a portion to bow across vibraphone bars and a portion with which to strike the bars in a normal manner. One half of a rubber stopper glued near the top of one side of the wooden stirrer serves as an alternative to the mallet head of a standard vibraphone mallet.<sup>4</sup> Down the length of the opposite side of the wooden stirrer, a strip of moleskin covered with masking tape serves as the portion that is bowed across the vibraphone bars. Successful bowing can also be achieved with the unaltered wooden face of the paint stirrer, without additional moleskin or masking

tape. Deane experimented with these various forms of padding in an effort to reduce the initial contact sound of the wooden face touching the vibraphone bar.

Deane's goal was for a performer to use mallets that were unique, homemade, and that could functionally provide a wide spectrum of performance options.<sup>5</sup> An illustration of the side and bottom views of the completed mallets is shown in Figure 1.

From the onset, "Dis Qui Etude" delivers a feeling of uniqueness, due to the opening notes being played with the bottom, or butt ends, of the mallets. Optimal sounds are produced by dropping the butt ends of the mallets onto the vibraphone bars and immediately catching them after contact has been made. In the printed music, Deane visually separates notes that are played with the rubber stopper from notes played in an alternative method by placing the two sets of notes on separate staves. In mm.1–2, as illustrated in Figure 2, notes that are played with the butt end are shown on a top staff while notes performed in a traditional manner are shown on the bottom staff.

The first time Deane calls for bowing is in m.14. As shown in Figure 3, Deane calls for a bowing motion with an articulated cessation of sound, which is indicated with an "x" symbol in place of the notehead. One can easily accom-

Figure 1

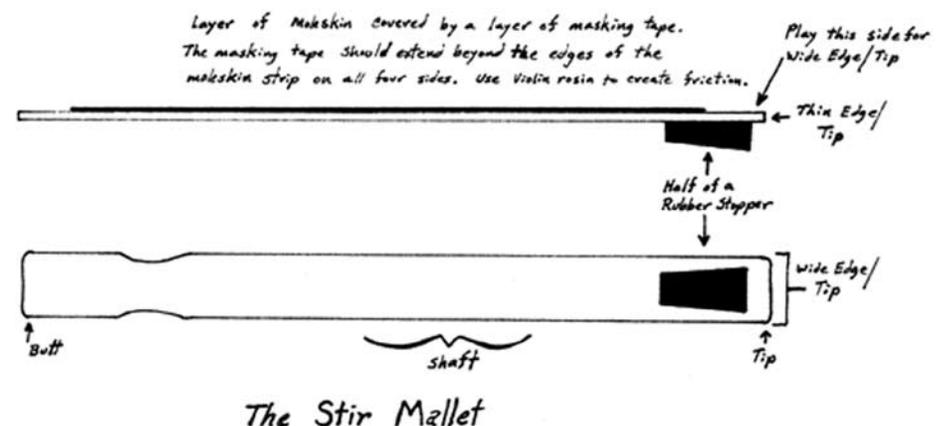


Figure 2



plish this technique by using his or her thumb as a stopping point along the bowing plane of the mallets.

While in m.14 Deane presents bowings mixed with stopped sounds, there are instances

in this piece where Deane requires the bowed notes to resonate. Deane notates these bowing methods in an identical way to the notations used in "Mourning Dove Sonnet." Since the mallets used in "Dis Qui Etude" are consider-

ably shorter than contrabass bows, a performer must press the mallets against the vibraphone bars with enough force to excite the bars quickly. Otherwise, one will run the risk of running out of room on the mallets before the bowed sound is fully produced.

Figure 3



Figure 4

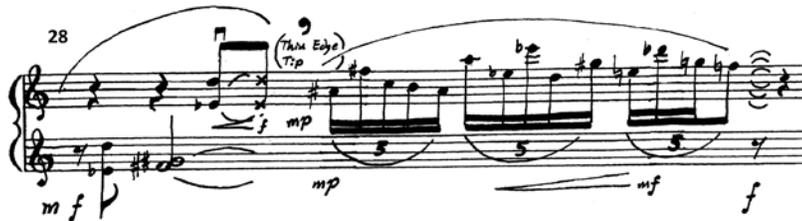


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

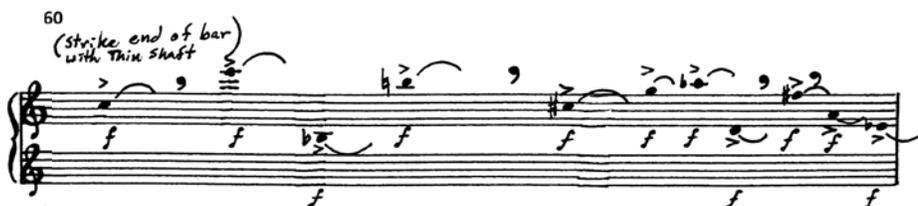


Figure 4 illustrates m.28, where Deane calls for the performer to play the bars in the normal playing areas with the "thin edge tip" of the mallet, which is the upper corner of the paint stirrer. By striking the bars in this manner, one can produce a more articulated sound, as compared to the sounds produced from bowing or striking with the rubber stopper. Deane first establishes this sound in conjunction with repeated five-note groupings. By introducing this articulated sound coupled with dense rhythmic groupings, Deane creates a musical gesture that properly serves the anxious character of the piece.

To further contribute to the agitated character of this piece, Deane calls for the performance of cluster chords with the long edge, or shaft, of the wooden paint stirrer. This is accomplished by turning the mallet sideways in one's hands and striking the vibraphone bars with the full length of the mallet edge. This first appears in the second portion of m.29, illustrated in Figure 5. Here, Deane notates the cluster chords with emphasis on the lowest note to be played, and with an arrow pointing up, indicating where the remainder of the wooden shaft should be positioned. This performance technique stands in contrast to the music that surrounds it and further contributes to the disturbed spirit of the piece. Throughout this piece, the performer must have full command of the ways to properly manipulate the mallets through striking or bowing the vibraphone bars, as well as how to quickly and effortlessly transition between these techniques.

In m.55, the performer is directed to shift the striking portion of the mallet from the "thin edge tip" to the "wide edge tip." One can easily achieve this technique by turning his or her hands over while playing, which will alter the striking surface from the corner to the wide tip, or top, of the mallet. This shift dramatically changes the sonic properties of the notes being played. This section of music is illustrated in Figure 6.

As the piece comes to a close, Deane introduces three additional performance techniques. The first appears in m.60, where the performer is required to strike the outside edges of vibraphone bars with the thin shaft of the mallet, illustrated in Figure 7. This technique produces a

very thin sound, as the upper harmonics of the note ring more prominently. This sound stands in contrast to the sound that results from striking the middle of the bars, as is required earlier in the piece. Through this performance method, a vibraphonist is able to articulate sounds that have dynamic presence while lacking the timbral depth that comes from the presence of the fundamental frequencies of the note.

In m.61, as seen in Figure 8, Deane exploits the shape of the mallets by requiring the performer to produce a one-handed trill. This is accomplished by holding the middle of the mallet and “see-sawing,” or rocking the mallet so that the “thin edge tip” of both ends strike the two pitches indicated. By using the mallets in this way, Deane achieves a double-note sustain with only one mallet.

The piece concludes with the performer scraping the bar ends at a 45-degree angle with the “thin edge shaft” of the mallet, which begins at m.62, illustrated in Figure 9. This technique is similar to bowing the bars, in that one must slide a portion of the length of the mallet across

the edges of the bars. However, differences exist between this technique and the bowing techniques found earlier in the piece. By positioning the mallet at an angle of 45 degrees, as opposed to a 90-degree angle, one is not able to produce the same amount of volume when sliding the mallet across the bar edge. Equally, the markedly smaller section—the “thin edge shaft”—that bows across the bar does not allow for as much volume as does the wide face of the mallet, which is used earlier in the piece. As a result, the sounds produced by this performance method are faint and ethereal.

Deane presents these notes in opposition to the music that exists in the beginning of the piece. Through this ending, Deane is able to produce a musical sensation of calm from a work that predominantly conveys a musical sense of unrest and tension.

Christopher Deane treats extended performance techniques with such creativity and effectiveness that he successfully showcases a voice of the vibraphone that is both interesting and musically rewarding for both performer

and listener. It is my continued hope that the information presented in this article and the previous two (*Percussive Notes*, February 2009 and April 2009) will compel percussionists to explore Deane’s writings with a greater understanding of the techniques required for successful performance.

“Dis Qui Etude” by Christopher Deane

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## ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Deane, interview by author, Denton, Texas, April 22, 2008.
2. The solid rubber stoppers used are commonly referred to as solid #4 (size number, measuring one inch tall by 25/32-inch wide) rubber stoppers, and are typically used to plug bottles, pipes, or scientific laboratory vials and beakers.
3. The dimensions of the completed mallet should be 18 inches long, 1 1/16 inches wide, and 1/4 inch thick.
4. This stopper should be glued 3/8 inch down from the tip of the wooden stirrer.
5. Christopher Deane, interview by author, Denton, Texas, April 22, 2008.

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Figure 8



Figure 9



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