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Extended Vibraphone Techniques in Deane's 'Mourning Dove Sonnet'

By Joshua D. Smith

Christopher Deane has contributed to solo vibraphone repertoire with works that are regarded as staples in the genre. Deane's compositions for vibraphone consistently expand the technical and musical potential of the instrument. Performance of Deane's vibraphone works requires grips and specific performance techniques that are departures from standard performance practices. It is only fitting to begin a discussion of these techniques on the 25-year anniversary of Deane's popular vibraphone work "Mourning Dove Sonnet" (1983). The impetus of this article is to present explanations and solutions for performance areas in "Mourning Dove Sonnet" that require extended performance techniques, in addition to presenting some of Deane's insights on the piece.

"Mourning Dove Sonnet" is Deane's second published composition and his first for solo concert vibraphone. In this work, Deane requires a performer to employ standard performance techniques as well as progressive procedures such as bowing of the bars with bass bows, producing harmonics of certain notes, and bending the pitches of bars. Deane states that the impulse to compose for such a variety of performance techniques and playing implements arose from the very nature of the vibraphone bars. "The bars themselves produce a very static sound: tonally crystal clear. The choice for different playing implements and techniques becomes paramount when the desire is to compose a vibraphone piece with timbral interest."¹ This attitude led Deane to compose what he calls "an art song without words...a song for the vibraphone comprised of many techniques amalgamated into a linear expression."²

It is worthy to mention the influence that the compositions of George Crumb had on Deane's work. Deane expressed that *Madrigals, Book I* (1965) by Crumb was a revelation in that it "opened the door to the thought of the vibraphone as an instrument containing many modes of expression: an inner voice waiting to be found."³ In this piece, Crumb calls for the

production of harmonics and pitch bending, and is the first time in published music that vibraphone pitch bending appears. Where Crumb utilized pitch bending and the production of harmonics sporadically in *Madrigals, Book I*, Deane composed for these techniques throughout "Mourning Dove Sonnet." Crumb has referred to "Mourning Dove Sonnet" as "one of the greatest vibe pieces I've ever heard... Astonishing piece."⁴

During summers between 1982 and 1989, Crumb and Deane taught together at Bowdoin International Music Festival at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. It was during one of these summers that Deane performed "Mourning Dove Sonnet" for Crumb. Upon hearing this performance, Crumb stated that Deane was the "Paganini of the vibraphone."⁵

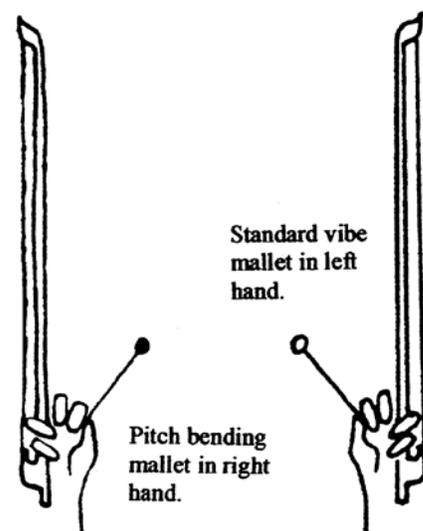
BOWING

Throughout "Mourning Dove Sonnet," Deane uses bowing as an integral part of the harmonic and melodic language, rather than including the technique as simply a sound effect or novelty, and this is one way that Deane expands the technical and musical potential of the vibraphone. The most compelling aspect of "Mourning Dove Sonnet" is that the vibraphonist must hold a combination of two bass bows and two mallets at the same time. Because of the need to manipulate both a bow and a mallet in each hand, the best choice of grip for a performer of "Mourning Dove Sonnet" is the Musser (Stevens) grip. With this grip, a performer can hold bass bows with his or her pinky and ring finger while holding the other mallet with his or her remaining fingers, as illustrated in Figure 1.

By using the Musser (Stevens) grip, a performer can keep the bows and mallets from touching each other, thus gaining full independence over each implement. Due to the need for independence and control, it is best for a vibraphonist to use bass bows rather than cello or violin bows, which are too small for use in this adapted grip technique.

Deane uses standard bowing indications

Figure 1



(up-bow and down-bow) for notes that are to be bowed. However, in the performance notes, Deane states that these indications are only suggestions, and the direction of the bow is left up to the performer and his or her specific needs.⁶ Concerning specific bowing techniques, it is best to place the bow perpendicular to the outer edge of the vibraphone bar at an angle of 90 degrees. This angle will offer the greatest success in exciting the bar to a point of maximum vibration and resonance.

HARMONICS

Deane includes multiple instances in this piece where the performer is required to produce a harmonic on given pitches. In the performance notes, Deane writes, "When bowed harmonics are asked for, touch the bar in the very center, very lightly at the time indicated by the rhythm. Practice will allow the hand to leave the bar with the harmonic still sounding."⁷ While bowing, this finger contact in the center of the bar from the other hand disturbs the antinode, which is the point of maximum amplitude of vibration for the bar.⁸ In contrast to the same technique used on a guitar string

or violin string, which produces a pitch one octave higher, the pitch produced on a vibraphone bar sounds two octaves higher than the written pitch. As with bowing, Deane uses harmonics in a melodic fashion and in a way that enhances the unique character of this piece.

DEAD STROKES

Dead strokes on a vibraphone bar occur by pressing the striking mallet on the bar and keeping it there after the initial contact. Striking the bar in this fashion effectively disallows the bar to resonate, thereby deadening the sound. Deane primarily uses dead strokes to articulate the termination of a bending pitch, as illustrated in Figure 2. Deane notates dead strokes with a (+) either above or below a note-head.

PITCH BENDING

Deane uses pitch bending throughout “Mourning Dove Sonnet” as an integral part of the melodic language. Deane states that the driving force behind placing such a focus on pitch bending came from the actual “song” of the bird called a mourning dove, which has a distinctive call that ends with downward bends of the final pitch (sounding like “oo-ah-cooo-coo-coo”).⁹

Concerning the creation of “Mourning Dove Sonnet,” Deane states, “I had all of the ideas together, but realized the piece had no soul, no direction. I was sitting outside and heard this extremely gifted mourning dove calling in a tree next to me. I went inside and wrote down the pitches. From then on, the song of that

mourning dove was always in the piece in some form or fashion.”¹⁰ Deane replicated the song of the mourning dove in his music, which is discussed later in this article.

Pitch bending on a vibraphone requires the use of a mallet made of hard rubber or hard nylon. With this type of mallet, a performer can press against a vibraphone bar at its nodal point (where the suspension cord runs perpendicular through the bar) and move, or slide, the mallet away from the nodal point, thereby bending the pitch downward. This movement away from the nodal point should occur after the bar is struck in a standard playing area with another vibraphone mallet.

In the performance notes of “Mourning Dove Sonnet,” Deane offers suggestions to assist one in achieving the pitch bending technique. Specifically, Deane recommends that a performer experiment with a variety of paths with which to move the bending mallet across the vibraphone bar.¹¹ It is important to observe that due to different manufacturers and physical properties of vibraphone bars, not all bars respond in the same manner to a certain path of movement from the bending mallet. In Figures 3 through 7, various paths of movement for a bending mallet are offered as possibilities. Note that all paths of movement begin at the nodal point, which is indicated by an X.

Concerning the contact angle of the mallet being used to bend a pitch, one should begin to press the bending mallet onto the vibraphone bar at an angle ranging from 55 to 70 degrees. This increased angle will allow one to press with enough force to bend the shaft of the mallet while pushing or pulling the mallet head away from the nodal point, which is illustrated in Figures 8 and 9.

Deane states that “pitch bending can be one of the most demanding technical aspects of the piece.”¹² When utilizing and refining the pitch bending technique, be aware of the challenges that exist with such a performance method. Specific challenges deal with the choice between two types of mallets—those made of

very hard rubber or those made of a harder material such as plastic or nylon. Because of the nature of pressing a mallet against a bar to bend a pitch, and with the risk of a traditional birch, maple, or cedar mallet shaft breaking, a mallet with a rattan shaft should be used. Rattan is more flexible than birch and can withstand the force and stress of being bent as it is pressed against a vibraphone bar.

INTEGRATION OF PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES

Through Deane’s pervasive inclusion of these techniques, he produces a work that speaks with an imaginative dialect and a fresh voice, resulting in an enhanced aural experience for both the performer and listener. Deane cast the music of “Mourning Dove Sonnet” into an A-B-A’ form, framed the B section with transitional material, and ended the piece with a coda. The three large sections can be divided into sub-sections according to new, returning, and fragmented quotes of thematic material and motives, as well as the presence of extended performance techniques. For example, Deane articulates the first of these sub-sections in m. 11, where bowed harmonics are required for the first time. This bowed harmonic technique is repeated in the music that follows and is even incorporated into a descending line that occurs in mm. 20–32. This articulation of the beginning of a sub-section with a new performance technique is just one example of Deane’s compositional use of extended performance techniques.

The song of the actual mourning dove that Deane heard when composing this work is found in m. 123, and can be seen in Figure 10. In this literal transcription of the dove’s call, the starting pitch, b’, is clearly the primary pitch, as it functions as both the dominant of c’, as well as a *tonal magnet* that seems to pull the “bent” c’ down a half-step to the b’. In this example, Deane uses pitch bending to indicate direction of focus, or more specifically, to focus a listener’s attention toward primary pitches

Figure 2



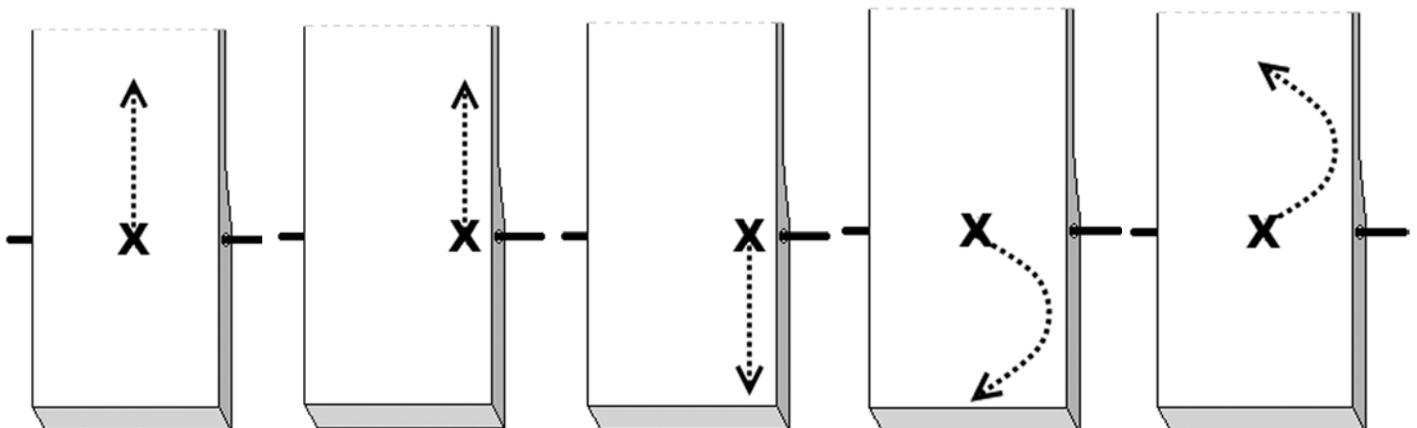
Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7





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B section, which serves as another example of Deane articulating formal structure through the inclusion of extended performance techniques.

An additional technical challenge is found in mm. 108–111 where Deane presents an augmented version of the motive from m. 38, but indicates that it should be bowed. Since, at this point in the piece, the performer is holding two mallets in his or her right hand, there are two performance options. The first is that the performer can drop the two right-hand mallets during mm. 103–104 and replace them with a bow. The second is that the performer can pick up a bow with his or her inside fingers (middle and ring finger) while still holding two additional mallets. While this second option might seem intimidating at the onset, with practice and proper finger placement, it can be a viable solution.

CONCLUSION

Christopher Deane has contributed to solo concert vibraphone repertoire with works that reflect both his creativity as a composer and his ingenuity as a performer. Deane has not only built upon various extended performance techniques from composers such as Crumb, but also contributed to vibraphone performance with techniques of his own invention.

Deane states that, as a composer, he is consistently driven to expand the appreciation of the vibraphone as a serious concert instrument.¹⁴ By integrating extended performance techniques into his compositions, Deane effectively contributes to the voice of the vibraphone by showcasing unique features of the instrument. Deane states that “the strength of any instrument lies in its unique features, of which the vibraphone has in abundance.”¹⁵ As a composer, Deane treats the vibraphone’s unique features with maturity and depth, and in a way that expands the instrument’s technical and musical potential.

Deane’s sophisticated treatment of extended performance techniques ensures that they are not perceived as superfluous or gimmicky. As a result, these techniques do not just enhance the character and purpose of his solo vibraphone works, they define them. Through intelligent structure and effective integration of these extended performance techniques, Deane’s solo concert vibraphone works stand out among a virtual ocean of literature, and demonstrate how he has contributed to the genre with repertoire that highlights a voice of the vibraphone that is fresh, imaginative, and progressive.

“Mourning Dove Sonnet” by Christopher Deane

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ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Deane, interview by author, Denton, TX, March 20, 2008.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Deviney, Chris. “Interview with George Crumb,” *Percussive Notes*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1990), p. 62.
5. George Crumb, telephone interview by author, March 18, 2008.
6. Performance notes, “Mourning Dove Sonnet,” Christopher Deane, 2002.
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8. Guy Oldham/Murray Campbell, C. Greated, “Harmonics,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 30 January 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
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15. Ibid.

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