

The Quest for Solo Vibraphone Repertoire

By Joshua D. Smith

I was giving a vibraphone lesson recently when a student asked me, “Can you recommend any good solo repertoire for concert vibraphone?” Realizing the term “repertoire” meant something of more substance, value, and worth than simply all the “literature” available, my mind went blank after listing my 10 to 12 favorite solo vibraphone pieces. This opportunity, though, served as the impetus for my research aimed at finding not just quality repertoire, but rather all the solo vibraphone pieces that are available in print. What better way to make an informed decision than to have a list of all your options?

I hypothesized that a list of solo vibraphone pieces would crest at a total number considerably smaller than, for example, a list of solo marimba works. My reasoning stemmed from the multitude of recitals I have attended where marimba was the only instrument featured, akin to a solo piano recital. My predictions were correct. At the printing of this article, the Siwe *Guide to Solo and Ensemble Percussion Literature* registers 740 solos for vibraphone and 1,830 for solo marimba. It is important to note the Siwe list also includes method books and the like, some of which are not appropriate for a solo recital.

Further research uncovered a distinction between works that are jazz in nature and those that are classical in their presentation. While classical concert vibraphone does shine through in a handful of early compositions, thanks to the efforts of Milhaud, Bergamo, and Crumb, a great deal of attention and popularity was garnered early in the instrument’s history in the arena of jazz performance. This popularity is well earned considering the talent level and vision of pioneers like Lionel Hampton, Milt Jackson, and Gary Burton. This study makes no attempt to separate vibraphone from the jazz idiom, but rather includes jazz-oriented works to highlight the vast array of options and resources available to those wishing to delve deeper into the field of solo concert vibraphone.

METHODOLOGY

The bulk of my hands-on research consisted of cataloging solos available from publishers with an Internet presence, as well as those available from “warehouse” stores such as Steve Weiss Music and Percussion Special-

ist. I avoided works available from individual composers/self-publishers since technological advances continue to make this entrepreneurial endeavor easier than in times past. Seeing as there continues to be an increase in this population, I did not want to inadvertently exclude works from our ever-growing community of talented and successful composers.

The results given in this article are limited to printed solos available from online publishers and distributors. Furthermore, since solo vibraphone repertoire is my focus, I excluded from my list method books, solos containing the generic label “mallet solo,” transcribed works from string instruments, and works written for marimba or xylophone with the publishers’ or composers’ suggestion that they could “also be performed on vibraphone.” Instead, I focused on works expressly written for the unique sonic options available on vibraphone.

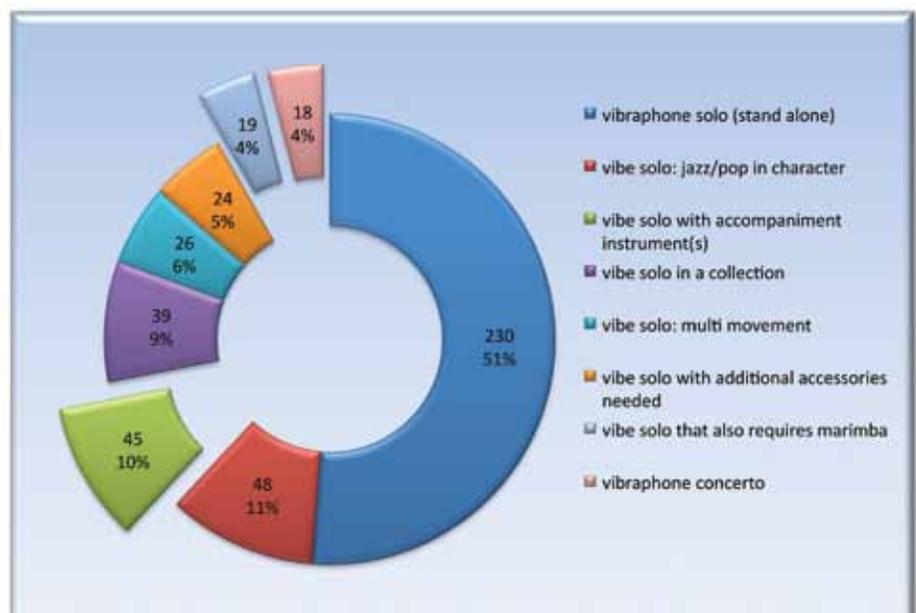
While jazz performance should in no way be discounted (or ignored) when choosing performance repertoire, my results do not represent solos available in “lead sheet” format, where chord voicing and melodic improvisation are at the discretion of the performer. My findings do, however, include solos that are jazz or pop in nature.

RESULTS

Searching and scrolling through the websites of 57 different publishers and distributors from 14 countries, I found 449 printed solos available for vibraphone. This total number includes concerti, solos sold in a collection (such as “Mirror from Another”), solos requiring additional elements (e.g., accessory percussion, soundscape) and solos with various forms of accompaniment (e.g., piano, choir) where the vibraphone remains the featured instrument.

While most online sellers include between one and seven vibraphone solos in their catalogs, several websites reside at the top in terms of the bulk of their offerings. Steve Weiss Music leads the pack with 72 available solo works (16% of the total), followed by Mostly Marimba at 37 works (8.2%) and Svensk Musik (Sweden) and C. Alan Publications each offering 34 works (7.5%). Really Good Music offers 30 pieces (6.6%), and it should be noted that these are all jazz/pop-oriented works. HoneyRock offers 27 pieces (6%), including the most prize winners from various PAS Composition Contests. Both Edition-Peters and United Music Publishers (UK) offer 16 works (3.5%), with Editions Francois Dhalmann (France) offering

Figure 1: Classifications of 449 vibraphone works



15 works (3.3%). Finishing out a top-10 list is MalletWorks with 14 works available (3.1%).

TRENDS

In an attempt to catalog trends of popularity and/or frequency, I also searched through a 10-year swath (1998–2008) of recital programs submitted to pas.org. My findings produced the following pieces and number of inclusions on recitals: selections from “Trilogy” by Tim Huesgon appeared on 53 recitals, “Mourning Dove Sonnet” by Christopher Deane appeared on 34 recitals, and Ney Rosauró’s “Concerto for Vibraphone” appeared 27 times.

Additionally, by ranking mallet solo findings on the Steve Weiss website by “most popular,” the list becomes ordered first with “Mirror from Another” by David Friedman, followed by Huesgon’s “Trilogy,” then “Suomineito” by Nebojša Živković, Deane’s “Mourning Dove Sonnet,” and “Music of the Day” by Bill Molenhof.

The accompanying chart (Figure 1) illustrates classifications of the 449 solos. Data shown in each segment represents the number of solos in that class, along with their respective percentage of the total. I chose to make a distinction in three classes that require additional instruments for a performance (e.g., piano, choir, wind band, orchestra), yet remain on the list because they are vibraphone-centric works.

REFLECTION

It is obvious that statistics of popularity and frequency are confined to only programs actually submitted to pas.org. Likewise, reality dictates that sales of pieces do not equate to number of performances. This data is included simply to reflect trends that are tracked through available Internet resources.

In the same spirit, the complete findings in this survey do not reflect quality of compositions, nor do any of these findings place one piece above another in terms of “recital worthiness.” My aim is to encourage performers and instructors alike to program vibraphone literature with the same freedom and gusto as is commonly done with concert marimba. At this point in percussion history, with so many quality and diverse compositions available, there is every reason for vibraphone to be thought of as a featured instrument, and not simply another inclusion on a recital.

Joshua D. Smith is an Assistant Professor at Bethel University in McKenzie, Tenn. He received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of North Texas, a Master of Music Performance degree from James Madison University, and a Bachelor of Music Education degree from the University of Kentucky. Smith’s teaching career includes both university and public school experience. **PN**

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