

# Rockin' Marimba

BY MARTHA CIPOLLA

Everybody knows that mallet instruments serve a specific purpose. Like many other musical instruments throughout history, they find themselves pigeonholed into certain musical genres. The xylophone is a vaudeville throwback. The vibraphone equals jazz. And, despite its relative youth, the marimba is deeply entrenched in a classical tradition. Today, however, some players are expanding their horizons and diving into the less conventional territory of rock 'n' roll.

Some of these players, such as Vessela Stoyanova of Boston's up-and-coming art-rock band Fluttr Effect, favor the ease of electronic instruments, such as the Marimba Lumina (Stoyanova's pick) and the MalletKAT. These instruments are basically mallet-controlled synthesizers, and they boast of portability, ease of amplification, and a widely varied sound palette. This approach enables the marimbist to play with aggressive drummers and soaring distorted guitars without worrying about being heard.

Other players favor the acoustic approach, and they are faced with both logistical and aural hurdles. Not only do they have to fit seven- and eight-foot instruments onto five-foot stages, they also have to find a way to be heard, which means being particular about miking techniques and fellow musicians.

This slow groundswelling of marimba in the mainstream is not entirely new. Frank Zappa, who famously penned "The Black Page," an ink-covered, virtuosic workout for drums and melodic percussion, made much use of the xylophone, played by both Ruth Underwood and Ed Mann. And

"Moonlight Feels Right," a song by Atlanta band Starbuck, which features a marimba solo played by Bo Wagner, was a major pop hit in 1976.

Now, however, the sound of the marimba, as well as other members of the mallet family, is more prevalent in pop culture. One major milestone for the instrument was Thomas Newman's 1999 soundtrack for *American Beauty*. Newman, whose scores often delve into world music, favors unusual percussion instruments. Partially



Erin Jorgensen



Tj Thompson

due to his experimentation, the post-*Beauty* entertainment world is replete with mallet percussion.

Most of the mallet instruments heard on commercials and pop records are synthesized, as they are on Justin Timberlake's "Let's Take a Ride" from the Grammy-winning album *Justified*. Some, though, are very real. Both No Doubt and Barenaked Ladies employ xylophones on various recordings, and songstress Patty Griffin uses a resonant, exposed vibraphone on multiple tracks of her 2002 album *1000 Kisses*.

With this exposure, and the increasing ubiquity of pop culture, it isn't any wonder that mallet players should be tempted

beyond solo and chamber literature by the siren call of the rock gods. Many of these players are still students. None of them are even close to being household names. But they are all quietly staking their claims in uncharted terrain, employing varying methods and producing varying results.

Erin Jorgensen, of Seattle, Washington, plays marimba in a few different pop-rock settings. Her interest in French music got her started on this unconventional path, and she adapts songs for marimba and

voice—she does both the playing and the singing—as well as for larger, more complicated instrumental combinations, which are combined with eclectic multimedia productions and collectively titled *The French Project*. Jorgensen also performs in *Reversion*, a guitar-marimba duo with Brett Netson, acting as the bass player for Netson's introspective, melodic rock.

Meanwhile, on the opposite coast, Tj Thompson is preparing his senior recital, half of which

will feature rock marimba. Thompson, who is in his final semester at Boston's Berklee College of Music, also sings while he plays, and though he has only two rock performances under his belt, he sees the future of the marimba in what he is doing.

"It's not so much about marimba and rock," Thompson said. "I want to bring [the marimba] more to the forefront of all things popular. I think it's an instrument that needs more attention. It's incredibly versatile and you can use it in so many situations that people don't use it in."

The biggest obstacle these musicians face is not creating a style, as Thompson points out. The marimba, as well as other mallet

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instruments, can be adapted to an array of styles with just a bit of tweaking. The obstacle is volume. How can a quiet, acoustic instrument be amplified enough to compete with drums and electric guitars—especially when said instrument is several feet long?

Overhead microphones work in some situations, but not all. Mallet miking is done from above the instrument in order to pick up the sound of the attack; otherwise, all the audience will hear is a wash of sound. However, using two to four microphones along the length of the instrument poses some problems. If the mics are turned up enough to catch all the notes, there’s a good chance they will catch other notes as well—those of your bandmates.

When playing with overhead mics, it is imperative that your fellow musicians have the finesse to play reasonably softly without sacrificing feeling and tone. You should also place the marimba as far away from the drumkit as possible, to avoid feedback from the high overtones of the cymbals.

A more effective option is using pickups on your instrument. The major drawback to this is the cost; pickup systems’ prices are not unreasonable by any means, but at more than \$1,000, they may be a stretch for students and starving musicians of various stripes. The pickups themselves are attached to one node on every bar, and they come on a removable railing, enabling players to continue to transport their instruments with ease.

Victor Mendoza uses K&K Sound’s vibraphone pickup system, and he is very clear on the distinction between using the pickups and going *au naturel*.

“[With the pickups], it’s a different color, and you learn to work with it. You cannot try to think of it as imitating the sound as if it’s a vibe, because it’s not,” he said. “Creating a sound with pickups—the contact mic is right on the bar, but the sound of a vibraphone is air being moved, not just the resonance of the bar.”

When playing with a full-on electric band, however, pickups may be the only way to be heard. K&K’s systems allow for effects processing and level controls, comparable to those available to other electric instruments, like guitars and basses. So that

distorted marimba you’ve been fantasizing about? Well, with pickups, it’s a possibility. Jorgensen has been using K&K’s marimba pickup system for nearly a year now, and she can’t imagine playing without it. Like any other electronic system, it’s all about figuring out what the technology can do.

“If you use an amp it changes the sound a lot, and you have to modify the way you play,” Jorgensen said. “But if you’re playing without amps at all—use a direct input—then it’s closer to the acoustic sound.”

With the advent of miking technology, mallet players can play anywhere that other musicians play. There is a point at which Mendoza switches to the MalletKAT, for the sake of electronic effects. And there is a

point at which a marimbist might have to do the same, for the sake of logistics and space. (Even though using the KAT means missing out on the fun of disassembling and reassembling a marimba several times a week!)

Regardless of the amplification system used, or the exact style of music played, or even the ultimate musical goals of the player, it is worth taking notice of this growing trend. And if you’ve ever thought about it—or if you’ve never heard of it before, but you think it sounds like fun—you should check it out. You never know what might happen.

**Martha Cipolla** graduated from Berklee College of Music with a dual degree in Marimba Performance and Music Business. She is now a Boston-based freelancer specializing in percussion, writing, and copyediting. **PN**

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