

Effective Transcriptions: A Discussion Regarding Technical, Musical, and Practical Approaches  
for the Modern Marimba

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Effective Transcriptions: A Discussion Regarding Technical, Musical, and Practical Approaches  
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## Abstract

As a young solo instrument, the westernized marimba displays a wide range of musical possibilities. Since the early-twentieth century composers have transcribed music for marimba as a way to expand the repertoire. However, there are many different styles of transcribing and not all of them are successful on this instrument. The technical capabilities and limitations of the marimba need to be considered of the utmost importance when shifting music to the new medium. In this case, the issue of sustaining sound on marimba is discussed as a primary issue.

As one of the greatest transcribers in music history, Franz Liszt represents a key figure in how successful transcribing can be done. His transcriptions are broken down into partitions and paraphrases. Paraphrases are free arrangements of an existing work and the partitions are arrangements that maintain a high fidelity to the original score. These partitions take into account the language of the new medium and place the original composer's voice above the new transcribers. These transcriptions of Liszt are used as a case study to compare to marimba transcriptions.

A good example of a marimba partition is Kevin Super's arrangement of Astor Piazzolla's *Tango Suite* for guitar duo. He maintains the original score and does not add any new passages to give the sense that he is trying to diminish Piazzolla's original voice. The addition of the vibraphone is discussed here as a way to overcome the issue of sustain. Another example is Leigh Howard Stevens' arrangement of the *Sonata in g minor* by J. S. Bach. This partition is slightly different in its approach and shows a higher level of the transcriber's voice in the new piece in terms of extended and virtuosic techniques.

A different approach can be taken with the Bach transcription in which the natural tendencies of the instrument are utilized. Taking out the extended techniques and changing other

aspects like tempo and tremolos can place a higher importance on Bach's original and can ensure that the marimba is making the music speak as best as it can.

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# **Effective Transcriptions: A Discussion Regarding Technical, Musical, and Practical Approaches for the Modern Marimba**

## **Introduction**

Any discussion revolving around the “westernized” marimba is a highly opinionated one. It is a relatively young instrument, only joining the symphony orchestra in the mid-to-late twentieth century, which means that the canon for marimba is still taking shape, particularly since the instrument continues to change. Included in this ever-evolving canon is the highly influential genre of transcriptions. Transcriptions are important for the marimba, because they expand the repertoire and allow performers to play music from earlier generations. They also allow performers and composers to experiment with new techniques and new timbres on the instrument. The main goal of this paper is to discuss how physical and technical capabilities and limitations should affect different types of marimba transcriptions. In order to avoid an extensive amount of personal views, this paper is organized into four main sections covering historical performance practices on marimba and, comparatively, transcription practices for piano.

In the first area I will consider the history of the marimba in western classical traditions. This discussion will center around early composers, performers, and venues from the early twentieth century until present day, with a focus on early development. Section two will briefly look at some of the technical capabilities and challenges of the marimba in order to guide the final discussion about transcribing and writing for marimba. This section will focus mainly on the standardized instrument itself, the standardized grips, and the main issue of sustaining pitch.

In section three, I will address the different types of transcriptions, in particular the goals of transcriptions. I will look at transcriptions and arrangements by Franz Liszt for solo piano in order to better explain these goals and methods of transcribing. I will argue in this section that a transcription must have a definite goal in mind in terms of its application. When moving a piece of music to a new medium, there are many musical and technical hurdles to jump over in order to make it “playable.” It is important to maintain a clear sense of the new medium’s language and capabilities in order to achieve those goals.

In the final section I will examine several transcriptions for marimba that I feel provide good examples of the technical challenges of transcribing for the instrument. This discussion will be designed as a guide for those who may be interested in transcribing or composing for the marimba in the future.

The transformation of the marimba from a simple entertainment spectacle to a serious solo instrument occurred over the course of the twentieth century, guided largely by a few important composers and performers. These four sections will work to create the narrative of why there are so many transcriptions for marimba and use examples to ultimately identify the successful and unsuccessful approaches to transcribing for the marimba, using the Liszt examples to help categorize the types of transcriptions that we see.

## **I. The History of Marimba: Performance and Literature**

The history of the marimba is unlike most modern orchestral or solo instruments that westerners know today due to its foundations in Latin American and African musical traditions. This is not an instrument that was developed in Europe and integrated into ensembles, but rather



an instrument that traveled to the west through ethnomusicological study. It gained popularity through use in vaudeville productions during the early twentieth century and was accepted as a prominent solo instrument by the late twentieth century through technological and musical innovations like more refined instruments and new, large-scale solo works.<sup>1</sup> In this section, I will focus on the marimba's western history from the early twentieth century to the present.

Perhaps the most well known name in the study of marimba from the early twentieth century is percussionist Clare Omar Musser, who was a pioneer in designing new marimbas and developing early mallet technique. As a student of Permin Burger and Philip Roseweig, Musser is best known for organizing large marimba symphony orchestras as well as expanding the range of the instrument and coming up with what is traditionally noted as the first four-mallet grip<sup>2</sup>. His marimba ensembles played originally on what were called marimba-xylophones, which had the warmer, resonating quality of the marimba in the low register and the sharper, articulate quality of the xylophone in the high register. For his 100-piece orchestra's performance at Carnegie Hall in 1935, Musser designed the four-octave King George Marimba, which was based on a new system of tuning and gave the marimba an overall warmer timbre in all registers.<sup>3</sup> Percussion historian and performer Rebecca Kite describes this new system of tuning in her *Grove Music Online* article:

Marimbas were tuned with octave tuning, bringing the fourth harmonic (two octaves above the fundamental) in tune with the fundamental, giving an improved warmer bass sound. Xylophones were tuned with quint tuning, bringing the third harmonic (an octave and a fifth higher than the fundamental) in tune with the fundamental, creating a brighter sound.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Kite, "Marimba," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press* (2013): accessed January 11, 2014,

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2250160>.

<sup>2</sup>Marg Holmgren, "Clair Omar Musser and the Marimba Symphony Orchestra," *Percussive Notes* 16 (1978): 20-21, accessed January 10, 2014,

<http://publications.pas.org/archive/pnv16n3/articles/pnv16n3.20-21.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Holmgren, "Clair Omar Musser and the Marimba Symphony Orchestra," 21.

<sup>4</sup> Kite, "Marimba," *Grove Music Online*.

This is the first instance in which the nuance of timbre is being brought to the foreground of concern for this instrument. Up until the King George was developed the marimba and xylophone were inseparable, but this new system of tuning assured that the marimba would have its own voice apart from the xylophone in the future.

Repertoire was the most significant problem facing Musser and his orchestra. No pieces existed for such an unusual ensemble, and even fewer composers wrote original pieces for 100-to-300 piece groups. The marimba was still considered a novel instrument, and Musser's performances, despite their extensive touring and widespread fame, were viewed mainly as simple entertainments and spectacles. Musser arranged most of the music for the groups, and these arrangements were usually opera overtures, symphonies, or other instrumental works. The group played everything from Wagner to Chopin and Dvořák to Elgar.<sup>5</sup>

Although by the 1940s the new marimba instrument had gained popularity among players and audiences, no major body of solo repertoire yet existed for the instrument. While Musser had written several etudes and preludes for solo marimba, there were no large-scale works composed for marimba and orchestra. In 1940, Guggenheim Award winning composer Paul Creston set the first marimba concerto with orchestra in ink after being approached by conductor Frédérique Petrides and percussionist Ruth Stuber.<sup>6</sup> This first original concerto work for marimba speaks very well to the technique and form that marimba works would have for the rest of the twentieth century. The outer movements are both performed with two mallets and contain long passages of constant sixteenth notes, while the middle movement features a chorale-like texture with sustained rolls requiring the newly developed four-mallet grip. This design of

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<sup>5</sup> Holmgren, "Clair Omar Musser and the Marimba Symphony Orchestra," 21.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Hixson, "From Whence Came Paul Creston's Concertino For Marimba and Orchestra, Opus 21?-An Interview with Ruth (Stuber) Jeanne," *Percussive Notes* 14 (2010): 22, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://publications.pas.org/archive/pnv14n1/articles/pnv14n1.22-23.pdf>.

juxtaposed fast rhythm and sustained rolls stood as the go-to formal and stylistic language on marimba for countless years to come.<sup>7</sup>

Ruth Stuber, the student of the renowned xylophonist George Hamilton Green, premiered the work on April 29th, 1940 at the Orchestrette Classique at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.<sup>8</sup> Though Creston's approach to the composition was of the utmost seriousness, the reviews show that critics were still unsure about the true stature of the marimba on the big stage. Louis Biancolli of the *New York World Telegram* praised Ms. Stuber's performance as "slick" and "suave" but quipped that the marimba essentially "plays itself" and everything just "sounds right." Irving Kolodin of the *New York Sun* described it as "music usually heard from instruments of this type," and Howard Taubman of the *Times* commented on Ms. Stuber's virtuosity and her "fluffy yellow gown."<sup>9</sup> Two of the three reviews mention at some point the individual sound of the marimba, whether be the warm quality or the more sustained, legato sound. In general, these reviews describe the instrument's different and new quality of sound in terms that resonate with its new tuning system and timbre.

Another notable early work for solo marimba is a combined concerto for marimba and vibraphone (and orchestra) composed by Darius Milhaud in 1947. As the first piece that required the mastery of the four-mallet technique throughout, this composition continued the technical work begun by Creston.<sup>10</sup> As with the Creston concerto, this piece contains two highly rhythmic movements surrounding a slow, chorale-like movement. Unlike the Creston, though,

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<sup>7</sup> John H. Beck and James A. Strain, "Percussion music," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press* (2012), accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2225030>.

<sup>8</sup> Hixson, Shirley. "Paul Creston's Concertino For Marimba and Orchestra." p 22.

<sup>9</sup> Hixson, "Creston's Concertino" p 23.

<sup>10</sup> Lesnik, Igor . "Milhaud's Concerto for Marimba, Vibraphone and Orchestra." *Percussive Notes*. Vol. 35, no. 3 (1997): p 58. Accessed January 10, 2014. <http://publications.pas.org/archive/jun97/articles/9706.58-60.pdf>

the middle movement here is played on the vibraphone, which is a metallic keyboard whose bars sustain for much longer than the wood bars of the marimba. Altogether, we see progress between these two pieces in the forms of technique (consistent four-mallet use) and timbre (addition of vibraphone).

One of the next great advocates in the development of the marimba is Japanese composer and marimba virtuoso Keiko Abe (b. 1937).<sup>11</sup> Though she was not the first successful marimba soloist, she has certainly been the most influential due to her contributions as a performer, composer, and commissioner of new music. In her early career as a percussionist, she was involved with playing Japanese folk songs and other marimba trio arrangements until she realized the potential for a greater musical expression with the marimba. While she became a popular marimbist in Japan, the company Yamaha was working on creating a new style of the instrument and sought her out as a consultant.<sup>12</sup> The result was arguably the greatest technological advance in the instruments short life: the 4½-octave Yamaha design and, most importantly, an extended, 5-octave marimba.<sup>13</sup> This new range from C<sub>2</sub> to C<sub>7</sub> opened another world of possibilities in color and timbre, and it provided a consistent and polished sound for composers and performers to work with. Abe uses this new style of marimba in some of her early works like *Wind in the Bamboo Grove* and *Variations on Japanese Children's Songs*.<sup>14</sup>

With the marimba now becoming a more versatile and overall more capable instrument, Abe took to promoting, writing, and commissioning new works. In 1969, she recorded a three-

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards, J. Michele. "Abe, Keiko." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed January 19, 2014.

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/44618>.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Kite, "Keiko Abe's Quest Developing the Five-Octave Marimba," *Percussive Notes* 36 (1998): 53, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://publications.pas.org/archive/apr98/articles/9804.52-55.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, "Abe, Keiko," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>14</sup> Kite, "Keiko Abe's Quest Developing the Five-Octave Marimba," 54.

record album with Columbia Records entitled *Keiko Abe: Art of Marimba*.<sup>15</sup> This album consisted of works exclusively by Japanese composers and solidified her place as an internationally renowned performer of marimba music. Presently she has written around 70 works for marimba and, through dedications or other commissions, has inspired or premiered over 180 new works for this instrument.

Abe is the performer and composer that truly made the marimba into the respected solo medium that it is today. In her own compositions, Abe is most concerned with portraying a simple and pure musical idea, which usually begins or grows out of improvisation. This concept transcends the instrument itself and gives us a sense of what she believed the importance of the marimba is. Her goal is to be able to use her medium to communicate this simple musical idea instead of creating a discussion about her technical prowess. While it is not contested that she is a marimba virtuoso, her ideas on communicating music set her apart from other virtuosos in this genre. In her acceptance speech for her Percussive Arts Society's Hall of Fame Award in 1993 (of which she was the first female recipient) she said, "whether the composition has a strict form or explores improvisational possibilities, whether it is tonal or atonal, whether it is slow and ambles or is fast and direct, I hope the music of the marimba will always focus on real communication rather than technical virtuosity for its own sake."<sup>16</sup> This quote articulates her goal of taking the marimba from the status of spectacle and entertainment to a place of respect and artistry.

Since Abe is a proponent of artistry and pure musical communication, technical virtuosity was not her primary concern. Nevertheless, other virtuosic players have greatly contributed to the development of four-mallet technique. The most prominent of these contributors is Leigh

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<sup>15</sup> Edwards, "Abe, Keiko," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Vogel Weiss, "Keiko Abe," *Percussive Notes* 32 (1994): 9, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://publications.pas.org/archive/jun94/articles/9406.08-9.pdf>.

Howard Stevens, b. 1953. Stevens is most noted for his incredibly technical virtuosity, his development of his own modified four-mallet grip, and his approach to transcribing for marimba.

He developed several new techniques for the marimba, most notably the one-handed roll. Sustaining tone is one of the most fundamental problems of this instrument, and Stevens managed to find a way to sustain one note independently with one hand (a “one-handed roll”) while playing a melody with the other. His book, *Method of Movement*, published in 1979, describes in great detail the nuances of his newly-developed technique, the multiple types of rolls that he used, and every other technical aspect of playing four-mallet marimba. Stevens breaks down the very essence of the keyboard stroke into several different categories, some of them being single-independent, double-lateral, double-verticals, etc.

Furthermore, Stevens showed his desire to solve technical problems beyond his technique with his interest in creating new types of mallets for the instrument.<sup>17</sup> He began wrapping his own mallets to produce different articulations, which created a whole new palette of sounds and timbres to explore. One of the most important qualities of his mallets is simply how soft some of the models are. Before he started making mallets a performer had a few medium or medium hard models to choose from, but Stevens developed these extremely soft mallets to aid his roll technique. Any modern performer can find virtually any possible kind of mallet for the marimba.

Another of Stevens’ contributions was his approach to transcribing Bach for solo marimba. He identified the music of Bach as repertoire that would be appealing to his listeners while also lending itself to virtuosic transcription and performance. The scope of Bach’s music lent itself well to transcription in general and to marimba transcription in particular. The solo

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<sup>17</sup> Lauren Vogel, "Interview with Leigh Howard Stevens," *Percussive Notes* 21 (1982): 68, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://publications.pas.org/archive/8210/articles/8210.66-70.pdf>.

violin sonatas demonstrate his approach. He uses his one-handed rolls to emulate slurs and sustain as well as to create independently controlled voices, much like a violinist is able to do. It is visually impressive, if nothing else, to watch a performer move through the carefully choreographed footwork and delicate voicing required to complete one of these movements. These transcriptions take away any doubt that might be left over about whether this instrument is anything like the simple entertainment spectacle that it once was.

The work of both Stevens and Abe continues to influence the solo marimba world today. It is nearly impossible to go to a percussion recital and not hear either a piece written by, commissioned by, or dedicated to one of these great performers. Along with Stevens and Abe, composers like David Maslanka, Joseph Schwantner, Steve Reich, and Jacob Druckman have worked to create music that solidifies the marimba on the solo stage.

## **II. Modern Mechanics and Techniques of the Marimba**

Before diving into the specific details of transcribing I would like to address the capabilities of the modern marimba and the techniques that players use. First of all, the four-mallet grip is something is expected for all those wanting to be serious marimbists. While there are several different specific grips including the Musser, Stevens, Burton, and Traditional grips, all of them have the same basic technical abilities. This means that any composer can expect that the performer can strike a four-voice chord with all of the mallets at the same time.

The five-octave marimba is the standard across the board, which means that marimbists and composers have a wide range at their disposal. Though the first five-octave marimba was developed in the 1980's, it has only become widely available and standardized in the last decade.

Other noteworthy characteristics include versatility in timbre and articulation due to a wide range of mallet choices. Expanded mallet choices grants the ability to create clear lines in highly contrapuntal music such as fugues. An example of this would be the way that Stevens arranges mallet choices in his transcriptions of the fugues from Bach's sonatas.

As percussionists, we are always prepared to try new things and expand the marimba's sound, but there are certain limitations that are important to consider when performing or writing for the instrument. Some of these considerations go hand-in-hand with the instrument and the player's abilities. For example, marimbists can play four-voiced chords with two hands, but one hand usually can't comfortably play an interval over an octave or a ninth, just as the size of a pianist's hands determines what kind of chord he or she can land on.

As I previously mentioned, mallet choice can create very good opportunities to make beautiful sounds on marimba. But the mallets themselves can also present a few difficulties for players. While there are many different mallets, it is important to consider that using a mallet that is too hard in the lower register will possibly result in a broken bar; they are made of wood, and therefore a dead, non-resonant sound will be produced. Furthermore, not all mallets sound good everywhere on the instrument. Players are usually forced to compromise by either choosing a set that works well overall or seizing opportunities to change mallets in a long rest or in-between movements. Sometimes it is still very difficult for a performer to get the sound that they want because of the limited time that they might have to switch the implement that they are using.

The issue of sustaining, however, is the biggest issue on the marimba by far. It varies somewhat depending on register and performing space, but generally speaking the marimba does not sustain sound by itself for a long period of time. To solve this problem, performers and



composers use rolls to create the illusion of sustain. To roll on the marimba is simply to play single-strokes in rapid succession to make the bar, or bars, vibrate continuously. Creston used these rolls in the slow movement of his concerto in order to emulate the chorale-texture.

Milhaud avoided this problem by calling for the vibraphone for his slow concerto movement.

When it comes to transcriptions, this issue is particularly problematic since the marimba simply cannot sustain pitch like other instruments. Nevertheless, a composer must consider how to approach this problem, and the final section of this paper will address several examples of how that problem might be solved.

### **III. Transcriptions and Arrangements of Liszt**

The act of transcribing in its most basic sense simply means transferring music that was written for one instrument to a new medium.<sup>18</sup> This has been a common practice throughout western music history and continues to be a vital part of our musical life today. One of the most important and well-known transcribers in music history was piano virtuoso Franz Liszt. Like Leigh Howard Stevens, Liszt was known for his virtuosic talent, transcriptions, and influence on the manufacturing and development of his instrument. The study and analysis of Liszt's transcriptions yields several specific categories that provide a framework within which transcriptions for marimba can be understood. In particular, I would like to address two of these categories that provide the most clear-cut styles of transcribing. English pianist and composer David Wilde breaks down transcribing into these two approaches in Liszt's output:

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<sup>18</sup> Ter Ellingson, "Transcription (i)." *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press*: accessed January 5, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/28268>.

1. *Paraphrases* – the original work is transformed and freely composed.
2. *Partitions* –transcribing a work from one medium to another, sometimes not deviating from the original by so much as a single note.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to his *partitions*, Liszt’s main compositional goal seems to revolve around maintaining the original score without adding his own personal voice to the new piece. Liszt’s *partitions* include his transcriptions of Beethoven’s nine symphonies and Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*. In particular, it is noted that his transcriptions of the Beethoven symphonies remain highly faithful to the scores due to his high regard for Beethoven. Furthermore, these transcriptions can be understood as utilitarian since live performances of the original works were not as common as they are today. Liszt’s own comments make it clear that the main goal of these transcriptions was to convey as best he could the music of the Beethoven on this new instrument. He wrote: “the name Beethoven is sacred in art. His Symphonies are now universally acknowledged to be masterpieces...For this reason every way or manner of making them accessible and popular has a certain merit.”<sup>20</sup> While breaking down the compositional methods for transcribing the Beethoven symphonies, Wilde says that:

It is a question, then, not of fitting as much as possible into two staves and two hands, but of abstracting the sense and re-casting it in terms applicable to the new medium... This is a task which demands not only a complete knowledge of the works...but the ability to distinguish between that which is essential to the music concept, and must be retained, and that which is special to the orchestra, and must be re-thought.<sup>21</sup>

This last notion of re-thinking those things that are special to the original is a key point that I will address when discussing the transfer of violin and guitar music to the marimba. As a transcriber, Liszt prioritized the language of the new medium over the notes and details of the original,

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<sup>19</sup> David Wilde, “Transcriptions for Piano,” in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, ed. Alan Walker (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1970), 168.

<sup>20</sup> Wilde, “Transcriptions for Piano,” 168.

<sup>21</sup> Wilde, “Transcriptions for Piano,” 175.

which is one of the most important considerations in making an ultimately successful transition to the new medium.

A specific example of a change that Liszt made while maintaining the essence of the score is found in the opening of the *Eroica* symphony. In the opening chords, G is the prominent melodic note although it is not the highest pitch in the orchestral texture. Had Liszt simply reduced the score note-for-note, that G would have been buried in the middle register of the keyboard. In order to present a clear melody note from the beginning, he re-voiced the first chords so that the G sounds as the soprano voice and is therefore picked out as the important tone. At the same time, this G is maintained in Beethoven's original octave. He ends up with an E<sup>b</sup> and B<sup>b</sup> below Beethoven's original, but with the melody note G in the correct octave this is the best option for voicing this chord on the piano. This choice required a few considerations on Liszt's part. He knew that Beethoven has many timbres to work with and could therefore put the melody note in an inner voice and still have it stand out of the texture. On the piano, Liszt did not have that luxury and had to adapt to make Beethoven's intent clear. Liszt also took into consideration the overall range and size of the orchestra and realized that his hands could not cover the total range and notes played in the original. This is another reason to re-voice the opening.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most daunting tasks that Liszt undertook was the transcription of the finale of the Ninth Symphony. In a letter to his publishers, he insisted that the finale could not effectively be done with only two hands. He did write one arrangement for two pianos, placing the orchestral part in one piano and the chorus in the other. When he finally did do his official

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<sup>22</sup> Wilde, "Transcriptions for Piano," 173.

transcription for solo piano he still placed the chorus parts on separate staves to make sure that the two textures were clear.<sup>23</sup>

The *paraphrases* use thematic material in a freer way in order to create a new work. When looking at Liszt's operatic fantasies, which fall into the *paraphrase* category, we see a free interpretation and development of a select number of themes from a particular opera. Since he could not draw on the visual elements of opera, Liszt used a variety of other tools to create drama in the new medium. He instead used a variety of tonal areas, improvisatory sections, and developments to increase the tension. In this way Liszt maintained important thematic material that audience might recognize, but added a substantial amount of his own voice to the transcription.<sup>24</sup>

One example of what would be a *paraphrase* is the transcription of Schubert's *Erlkönig*. In this arrangement, Liszt maintained all of the thematic material but included short "cadenzas" and changes phrases and dynamics in order to achieve drama. Once again, without the text of the characters in these *paraphrases*, he had to make significant changes in order to achieve the affect of the original.<sup>25</sup>

Another example of this *paraphrase* style is seen in his fantasy based on Bellini's *Norma*. The introduction simply sets the mood in G minor without literally quoting the Overture at all. He then created two contrasting ideas based on the opera's main chorus introduction before returning to the piano introduction, which is stated a semi-tone higher in G# minor. The next themes are based on multiple arias as well as the finale of the opera.<sup>26</sup> It is evident here that

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<sup>23</sup> Wilde, "Transcriptions for Piano," 177-78.

<sup>24</sup> Penrose, James F. "Music: The Piano Transcriptions of Franz Liszt." *The American Scholar*. no. 2 (Spring 1995): pp. 274. Accessed January 26, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/stable/41212325>.

<sup>25</sup> Penrose, "Music: The Piano Transcriptions of Franz Liszt." p 274.

<sup>26</sup> Wilde, "Transcriptions for Piano, 185-88.

Liszt borrowed themes from Bellini but made his personal voice more prominent in the transcription.

In the *partition* transcriptions, we get a good view of how a great transcriber like Liszt was able to make compromises between the original score and the abilities of his new medium. He created performable works that embodied the voice of the original composer with the language of the piano. In his *paraphrases*, he maintained a sense of the original themes and melodies but took his own voice and virtuosity to make the piece his own.

#### IV. Marimba Transcriptions

In the final section, I will discuss and evaluate the transcription methods behind two very different works for marimba. The first example is Kevin Super's transcription of Astor Piazzolla's *Tango Suite* for guitar duo.<sup>27</sup> I will examine how this *partition* of guitar music works for marimba and how performers in general can deal with a few specific issues in the transfer. The second example is Leigh Howard Stevens's transcription of J. S. Bach's *Adagio* from the

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<sup>27</sup> The tango is "a dance originating in urban Argentina in the late 19th century. In duple metre, with a characteristic rhythmic figure, it consists of two sections, the second usually in the dominant or relative minor. It resembles the habanera and is often played on the accordion, specifically the bandoneon." Janet Halfyard. "Tango." *The Oxford Companion to Music*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e6656>.

first solo violin sonata in G minor.<sup>28</sup> Here I will point out a few fundamental issues with doing such a nuanced *partition* of violin music for the marimba. To conclude, I will address how Stevens uses extended techniques to emulate the violin and also how I approach the difficulties of performing violin music on marimba in my own transcribing. Each of these examples, including my version of the Bach, is a *partition* as compared to the Liszt-Beethoven examples.

The music for the classical guitar is basically ready to be performed on marimba with no transcription at all. The potential sounds created by both of the instruments can be similar in articulation, dynamic, and sustain (meaning the decay of sound when plucked or struck). The Piazzolla arrangement by Super is a great example of how easily the music can transfer to the new medium, although there are a few decisions that must be made. For player one, Piazzolla wrote six-note chords for guitar that a marimbist cannot strike or sustain all at once with only four mallets to use. One option for the marimbist would be to do what we call a ‘ripple’ chord, which is similar to rolling a chord on piano. Another option that many percussionists have chosen is to use a vibraphone for player one throughout the suite. As in Milhaud’s concerto (in which he calls for the sustaining power of the vibraphone in the second movement), the vibraphone is able to sustain pitch for long periods of time, which could work well in the transcription of the Piazzolla. Besides creating long, sustained textures with the vibraphone, the player can employ mallet dampening to maintain clear rhythm and articulation. In cases such as this, if another instrument in the percussion family can better serve the music, I think that it is the

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<sup>28</sup> This version of the solo Baroque sonata is a relative of what is known as the *Sonata da Chiesa*. This is a work in 4 movements for one or several soprano instruments with bass that consists of “a slow introduction, followed by a movement in fugal style, an expressive slow movement (sometimes merely a short transition) and imitative finale.” Sandra Mangsen. "Sonata da chiesa." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press: accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/26196>.

duty of the performer to make a choice that could improve the sound and individual character of the arrangement.

The following examples from the second suite show instances in which the uniqueness of the vibraphone can be utilized. In measure six of the Super arrangement (example 1), we see a place where mallet dampening could be employed. As the notes ascend, they are continuously tied through the bar, showing that they should be sustained. It is notated here that all notes should be rolled until the resolution of the top voice. When playing on the vibraphone, the performer can avoid rolling and can achieve a clear resolution by dampening the high F when resolving down to the E. This technique, mallet dampening, describes the use of a mallet to end one sustaining pitch rather than using the pedal mechanism to dampen all of the ringing pitches.

Ex. 1 (m. 6, Super version, 2<sup>nd</sup> Suite)<sup>29</sup>

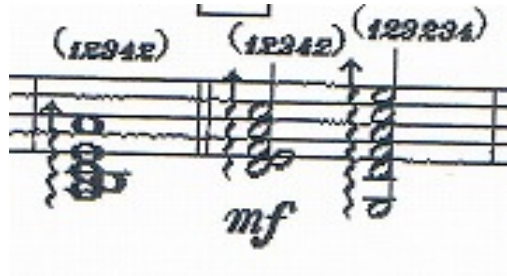


The next two examples show instances in which the natural ring of the vibraphone can be used to great effect. These are all five- and six-voice chords that the guitar can easily play. Due to the relatively slow tempo of this movement the marimba has trouble making these chords effective. As mentioned before, the vibraphone is the simple and best solution for playing these passages in such an open space.

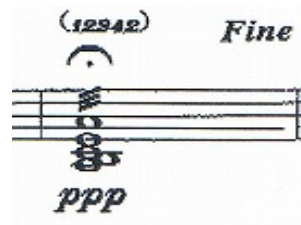
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<sup>29</sup>Astor Piazzolla, *Tango Suite No. 2* (guitar duo), transcribed for marimba duo by Kevin Super (HoneyRock 2001).

Ex. 2 (mm. 11-12, Super version, 2<sup>nd</sup> Suite)



Ex. 3 (m. 76, Super version, 2<sup>nd</sup> Suite)



In my opinion, the overall best choice for instrumentation in this suite is player one on vibraphone and player two on marimba. Each part is quite different and, as demonstrated by these examples, part one has a unique opportunity create a new and interesting texture with the addition of this new instrument. With Piazzolla's original score in mind, this choice identifies this transcription as a *partition*. Super made no changes of musical substance in his arrangement, and since the purpose of transcribing is moving to a new medium, the addition of the vibraphone gives his arrangement a strong sense of the original Piazzolla score.

The Bach transcription by Stevens demonstrates an approach that emulates the score with great detail. He maintains all of the written notes as well as all of the slur markings and trills throughout. This attention to detail initially made me think of this piece as a *partition* like Liszt's Beethoven transcriptions. However, once I began preparing the piece for performance, I noticed that his approach is slightly different than Super's in dealing with the two main elements of the *partition*: a translation to the language of the new medium and an absence of a personal voice over the original composer's. I still consider this to be a partition because of the way that



Stevens maintains the original score. However, it does not line up as well with the Liszt partitions due to its reliance on virtuosity and technique, which places Stevens' voice over Bach's.

As I mentioned in part one of this paper, Stevens was the virtuosic marimbist who developed the one-handed roll for the marimba. In Stevens's *Adagio*, we see the roll employed extensively in an effort to connect pitches at a slow tempo. In the performance notes, Stevens wrote that all notes of a sixteenth-note value or greater should be rolled, even if not indicated specifically. Rolling on the rhythmically slower pitches at such a slow tempo is meant to emulate the slurring and sustain of the violin.

First, Stevens employed the one-handed roll to create independent voices. Examples 4 and 5 show one voice being sustained over another voice that is moving. In measure 2 (Example 4), this is done by rolling with the right hand on the G# while playing the middle voice line with the inner mallet of the left hand. The same happens in measure 8 (Example 5) with the B and F# in the lower voices and measure 9 with the G# again. This is intended to emulate how a string player can sustain two notes at once on two different strings.

Ex. 4 (m. 2, Stevens version)<sup>30</sup>

The image shows a musical score for a marimba part. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a trill marked 'tr' over a series of notes. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a single note with a fermata. Below the staves, there are three sets of fingerings: '4-3' and '2 → 1' under the first measure, '3-2' under the second measure, and '(4-3) 2' and '1' under the third measure.

Note: a circle on the note stem indicates a one-handed roll

Ex. 5 (mm. 8-9, Stevens version)

The image shows a musical score for a marimba part, spanning two measures. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains two trills marked 'tr'. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a series of notes. Below the staves, there are four sets of fingerings: '4-3' and '2 → 1' under the first measure, '4 →' and '2 → 1' under the second measure, '4-3' and '2-1' under the third measure, and '4-3 2-1 4 4 4 4-3' under the fourth measure.

Example 6 shows several instances of the one-handed roll being used to simply connect pitches that are mainly slurred together. In measures 5-7 we see longer rhythmic durations in general, and, according to the performance notes, those longer values are to be rolled. If the issue here is connectivity, then the one-handed roll may not be necessary in almost all cases. A conventional roll would do well to connect the line in measure 5, beats 2-4. In this case, the new

<sup>30</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sonata in a minor* (original in g minor for violin alone), transcribed for marimba by Leigh Howard Stevens (Keyboard Percussion Publications 1989).

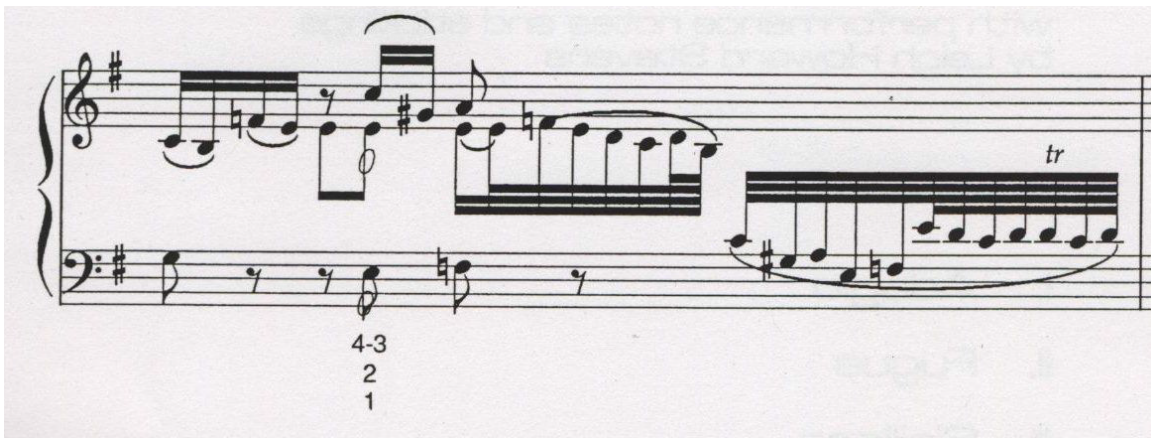
technique is being used as a virtuosic showpiece. Coming from Stevens, the master of this technique, it is not surprising to see it everywhere it can be employed.

Ex. 6 (mm. 5-7, Stevens version)



There are several instances in which the desired roll and the rhythm present a dilemma with interpretation. Measure 3 (Example 7) in particular presents an interesting challenge when trying to compromise between the notated rolls and the instructions in the performance notes.

Ex. 7 (m. 2, Stevens version)



The sticking notated in the second half of beat two is suggesting a one handed roll on the octave E's and also a one-handed roll on the high C. However, there is no specific indication on that C to tell us what type of roll it should be. It is a sixteenth note, so it should be sustained. If a one-handed roll is employed on the C, then that same roll must be transferred to the G#, and then to the A. The problem here is that the C and G# are tied, and transferring the one-handed

roll would inevitably cause a break in sustain. Furthermore, what happens to the A when it has to carry over the middle line that continues from F to E? Technically, it should still be sustained, but with the low F needing the same length, it is physically impossible to maintain the full values of those notes. This is a very tedious look at this example, which a performer could resolve by simply blurring the lines. The question, though, is less about maintaining rhythmic accuracy and more about whether we need to imitate the violinist's technique at all.

Another issue with this transcription is the overall visual distraction in the performance. Referencing example 5, measure 8 above, you can see that the outer mallet (soprano voice) is used alone in playing the entire line on beat 4 and then plays the trill on the D# and E alone as well. The player has to bend over the instrument and reach across his or her body to play this cadential passage. This is simply not necessary as the performer has more mallets to employ and can use an alternating sticking throughout. This would avoid the visual distraction and make it easier more the performer to make a smoother line into the trill and ultimately, achieve a very music cadence in measure 9.

At this point in my analysis, I ask the question: why, as marimbists, are we rolling so much in this piece? Is it because it is slow and we feel like we have to in order to make musical lines? Is it because we are trying sound like violin players? The answer to both of those questions regarding the Stevens transcription is yes. Most marimbists feel that if the music is slow, we have to sustain and connect our sound. And since this was originally for violin, we have to sound as much like a violin as possible. But does this technique work for the instrument I'm playing and the musical decisions I'm making? Does all of this "sustained" rolling work on this instrument? The answer is that it might in specific cases, but overall it works against the natural tendencies of the instrument.

While the Stevens represents one approach to transcribing the Bach sonata, it is possible to arrange this work in a sense closer to that of Liszt's Beethoven transcriptions. Slight changes were made in order to meet the demands of the new medium, but most importantly the original score and the original voice remained intact. In this example, the use of extended roll techniques seems to place a higher priority on virtuosity and technique than on the sound of the marimba or even the voice of Bach himself.

In my own experience with this music, I find that when I let go of the main obstacle of sustaining pitch as only the original instrument can do, the rhythm, counterpoint, and voicing all become as clear and well-defined as I feel they can and should be on the new medium. This ensures that Bach's voice and score remain the central focus while the main alterations are in the details.

For a performance of this *partition* on marimba, I feel that I can address the challenges of transcription more effectively by changing elements other than the sustain. Since the sound decay is a problem in imitating violin bowing, I would increase the tempo slightly, which will lessen the time that each pitch has to decay. Thanks to the deep, resonating qualities of the lower octaves of the marimba, transposing the whole movement down one octave, which Steven's does in his version, provides a slightly more sustained sound without having to create any illusion of that sustain on the surface. I also only use the tremolo on the written trills in order to draw expressive attention to those important moments. Finally, I choose mallets that make the voicing easier and obvious. For this movement I would use a very soft but articulate bass mallet in the lowest voice, two medium/soft mallets in the middle voices, and a medium/hard mallet in the top voice. This ensures that I can create independent lines that can easily be understood by an audience.

Other considerations could be simply rolling only on quarter notes and longer, or using rolls to connect only slurs. Either way, a performer must make a decision that takes into account the difference in the performance medium. We have options that violinists do not have, and vice versa; we cannot achieve the same nuances that violinists can, but we can achieve the same musical expression with different tools.

This description of the options that marimbists and percussionists should be considering when dealing with transcriptions is hardly exhaustive. I have merely chosen music with which I am familiar and described the issues that I have considered when approaching these pieces. With every solo piece and transcription for marimba there are new physical challenges to overcome in order to make the instrument speak for itself, instead of sounding like a technique exercise.

In the Bach-Stevens example, the use of extended roll techniques seems to place a higher priority on virtuosity and technique than on the sound of the marimba or even the voice of Bach himself. The voice of the performer is placed above the importance of the content of the music that is being played. While this style of virtuosic playing certainly brought the marimba to a prominent place on the solo stage, there are many other styles of transcription to be explored.

As we saw in the Liszt *partitions*, there was a great amount of importance placed on the composer's voice over that of the transcribers. Even as Liszt was, and remains, arguably the greatest pianist the world has ever seen, he was able to place Beethoven's voice over his while only making minor changes to facilitate the shift in medium. I do believe that in approaching a transcription for the marimba, we should be able to do the same. It should be the highest concern of the performer and transcriber to make sure that they are serving the individual voice of the

instrument over the desire to showcase virtuosity or the compulsion to emulate the original medium.

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