

Mourning Dove Sonnet - A Case in Extended Vibraphone Techniques

Abstract

Mourning Dove Sonnet is a musical work for solo vibraphone composed by Christopher Deane in 1983. Traditionally, the vibraphone is played with a single person holding two to four mallets. This piece however utilizes non-traditional extended percussion techniques to take advantage of the wide range of tones and timbres the vibraphone has to offer. Mourning Dove Sonnet is one of many experimental pieces in percussion literature that contributes to the constant evolution of the percussion artform. It is necessary for composers to continue pushing boundaries in the world of music. In this way, expression has new opportunities to be displayed and ideas are brought into reality.

Introduction

To study percussion is also a study in sound itself. People have used percussion instruments for centuries, but only since this past century has percussion begun to be a vehicle for organized sound pieces. Organized sound pieces deviate from traditional musical tonal systems and although many exist, the majority of chamber percussion music utilizes the many colors of organized sound pieces while still using traditional tonal systems. Tonal systems are organized sets of tones where one tone is central point for remaining tones. A major or minor scale would be an example of a tonal system. Chamber percussionists are trained to listen for all the characteristics that can describe a single sound, and then use the many differences of sound to create a sonic environment or image. Composers can use a wide variety of instruments or even a single instrument itself.

Creative Commentary

The piece Mourning Dove Sonnet, written by Christopher Deane in 1983, utilizes a single vibraphone with extended techniques. Traditionally a vibraphone produces sound by striking metallic bars (keys) with mallets with the player holding two to four mallets. This piece utilizes cello bows to bow the edge of the keys, standard vibraphone mallets, and a hard rubber mallet to bend the pitch of a given key. A rubber mute is placed on the bottom most keys to dampen the resonance. The process to learning this piece was very straight forward. The composer provided details and suggestions about the specific grip for holding the bows and mallets, how to bend the pitch of a note, his added notation, how to produce bowed harmonics, and specific type of bows and mallets. However, he did not provide suggestions on how to practice or how to maneuver oneself around the instrument with these extended techniques. Along with the score and notes from the composer, reference videos from past percussionists' performances were used to gain an understanding of how the piece would look visually. The largest challenge from this piece was adjusting to the physical differences of maneuvering around the vibraphone with a modified grip of bows and mallets. Repetition and practice was key to learning the piece along with the necessary amount of research in order to convey the composer's intentions and inspirations for

the piece. Although the piece is unorthodox in many ways, it still is written to be musical and pleasing to the ear. It allows the performer to showcase the wide variety of sounds a single vibraphone is capable of in an artful and unconventional way.

Conclusion

Most recently, this piece was performed at the Winter Visual and Performing Arts Center here at Millersville for the faculty and students of the Millersville music department. It is important for these types of experimental pieces to continue to be written and performed for people to hear. Despite public reception, experimental music holds an important role in the world of music. Pushing boundaries allows for more musical possibilities and more exposure to novel concepts ultimately growing music in new and surprising ways.