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An Analysis of the Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble by David Maslanka: The Power of Three Notes

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An Analysis of the *Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble* by David Maslanka: The Power of Three Notes

by

Justin Jacob Swearinger

An Honors Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma
to

The University Honors Program

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

April 24th, 2013

Abstract

In this brief analysis of the *Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble* by David Maslanka (coupled with two performances and an interview of Dr. Maslanka), the power and development of a three note motive is compared to the course of life.

Honors Thesis Advisor: Dr. C David Ragsdale
Associate Professor, Chair of the Music Department

Advisor

Date



4-29-13

Department Chair

Date



4-29-13

Honors Program Director

Date



4-30-13

It is curious how much life aligns with the compositional process. Great things are made from small ideas. The *Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble* by Dr. David Maslanka is a piece of music that is driven by a motive - a simple theme. From that theme, though, grew an entire piece of music.



The concerto begins with a three note motive in the solo marimba part (see measure 1). The marimba plays these notes alone and at a soft dynamic, immediately establishing an intimate relationship between the soloist and the listener. By the second bar a few more voices enter while maintaining the serene atmosphere.

As the piece develops, Dr. Maslanka plays with his motive by inverting it (see measure 32) and placing it in different voices. Instruments trade off pieces of it with the soloist, giving the concerto "an



outlay of colors and melodic ideas," according to Dr. Maslanka. He even compares the composition to a tapestry. While the marimba is the primary thread or color, all of the unique sounds from the ensemble are interwoven into its fabric. The first half ends with the melody being passed around the

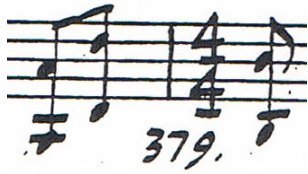
woodwinds as the marimba accompanies in a chorale setting.

The second half then begins with a burst of energy from the wind ensemble. The soloist sits out for a considerable length of time while the ensemble, as Dr. Maslanka puts it, "has a rip" at playing out for the first time. When the soloist reenters, the ensemble once again gets much quieter, and the orchestration becomes simpler. Yet the intensity remains.

After one final outburst in a cadenza of the marimba, the concerto shifts back to a more placid feel. This time the main melody is lead by the baritone, and the marimba joins on that same melody shortly thereafter. The piece ends like it begins, with three notes (see measure 379). It is in fact the same three note motive, but it is inverted. And instead of playing alone, the soloist is joined by several instruments up to the very last notes.

A couple years ago, Dr. Dave Ragsdale and I discussed performing the concerto with me on the solo marimba part. It was something we were considering doing before I graduated. However, we didn't speak about it much more. As my last semester has fast been approaching, we continued to discuss it.

Last fall, I ordered the solo part and began working on it. When my final semester began and it came time for my Honors Thesis, the Maslanka concerto fit perfectly. We ordered the parts, and it slowly started coming together. By the end of the semester, we gave two performances.



Like those first three notes, my conversation with Dr. Ragsdale set me down a path that ended with me playing the Maslanka Marimba Concerto, one of the most meaningful musical experiences I have ever had. What made the most impact on me out of the whole experience was those last three notes on the last performance. When it came time to play them, I wanted to hold onto them as long as I could, but eventually I had to play them. It was a fitting end to my time at UAH. I'm reluctant to leave my friends and the faculty, but it is time to move on.



During my time at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, I have had an extensive amount of exposure to the music of David Maslanka as well as to the composer himself. Every year I have played at least one large work by him. I first met him three years ago when the UAH Wind Ensemble was working on a piece called *Liberation*. I played the vibraphone part, and like the marimba concerto, I also played the last notes of that piece. During his visit, I met with Dr. Maslanka to discuss composition and attended his lectures about his music.

A year later Dr. Maslanka returned again as an Eminent Scholar of the Humanities. He again worked with the wind ensemble on a piece called *Mother Earth: A Fanfare*. During his second visit, I was able to perform a movement from one of his solo marimba pieces, *My Lady White*, in a masterclass. Also during that same visit I performed with the Huntsville Chamber Winds, a volunteer group led by Dr. Dave Ragsdale made up of professional musicians from all over Huntsville. The HCW was performing *O' Earth, O' Stars*, a large double concerto for flute, cello, and wind ensemble. Dr. Maslanka worked with us extensively on his piece as we prepared for our concert in less than a week.

Since meeting Dr. Maslanka, I still strive to stay in touch with him at least once a year, usually when I'm learning or performing one of his works. His music is characterized by very peaceful settings of

chorales with great bursts of almost violent energy that leave a sense of calm in both the listener and performer. His music is very honest - he lets his ideas run free and is not concerned about making money from his music. In fact, his music has to be special ordered, and his larger works can only be rented for a short period of time.

His marimba concerto is unique in that it contains a cello part. It was commissioned by the U.S. Air Force Band and premiered in November of 1990, making it an early work of Dr. Maslanka's.



My preparation to perform the *Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble* was very intensive over the spring of 2013. I had to spend countless hours practicing and memorizing the solo marimba part to this twenty minute work, and I had to be very familiar with the parts in the rest of the wind ensemble. Before I could rehearse it with the wind ensemble, I also had to meet numerous times with my advisor and conductor, Dr. Dave Ragsdale, to coordinate some of the difficult transitions in the music.



Below is a transcript of an interview I conducted over email, which I used as primary resource in both my preparation of the performances and the writing of my thesis:

Me: Did you have any images or specific ideas in mind when you first started composing the concerto?

Dr. Maslanka: I don't generally work from a specific image or idea. The character of the piece shows up as the sketching process proceeds.

Me: The concerto treats the marimba and the ensemble very differently from what I typically think of as a concerto. The marimba is almost always the lead voice, but it is really interwoven into the fabric of the ensemble. Why did you choose to structure the work this way?

Dr. Maslanka: I agree that the construction of the concerto is not typical. I always find that the color possibilities with wind ensemble are huge, and this offers a wealth of expressive opportunities. It just seems a natural thing to weave all these colors together in a very vibrant tapestry. All my concertos are this way, and I would say that all my composing is this way.

Me: I thought it was really interesting that the marimba drops out for the first part of the outburst around the middle. It gave our wind ensemble a chance to really play out - is there a particular reason you had the wind ensemble lead this?

Dr. Maslanka: The long first section of the concerto is a quiet outlay of colors and melodic ideas. There is quite a lot of this without anything being very loud or rhythmically vigorous. My instinct was that a high contrast was needed - take away the solo color, let the ensemble have a rip.

Me: I really love the three notes (both the first and last) in the marimba part. How did you come up with that motive?

Dr. Maslanka: I can't really say how I come up with ideas. They just appear. A better thing to say might be about the ability to let ideas happen, especially very simple ones, and to recognize their potential power, especially where they belong in a piece. Most concertos don't start the way this one does. The immediate presence of the solo instrument in a quiet way establishes an intimate connection with the listener, one which sets the basic tone for the whole piece.



**An Analysis of the *Concerto for Marimba
And Wind Ensemble* by David Maslanka**

Abstract

In this research project, I will learn and perform the solo marimba part of the *Concerto for Marimba and Wind Ensemble* by Dr. David Maslanka. The concert will be April 12th and 13th of 2013. The concerto is a twenty minute virtuosic and complex work. I will also write a detailed analysis of the piece's structure and main motives, as well as its inspiration. Information will be gathered through the program notes and my own analysis as well as through an interview with Dr. Maslanka conducted by email.

This project will be done in conjunction with the Wind Ensemble class as well as the Performance Emphasis Recital credit. The wind ensemble represents the ensemble in which the piece will be performed, and the performance emphasis credit covers the private lessons where I will receive instruction on specific technical issues throughout the piece.

From: **Justin Swearingner** <justin.swearingner@gmail.com>
Date: Sat, Apr 20, 2013 at 3:48 PM
Subject: Re: Marimba Concerto
To: David Maslanka <david@davidmaslanka.com>

Hello Dr. Maslanka,

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. It will definitely help me with my little project. I completely agree about the very beginning. Starting quietly with just the marimba made it feel really personal, and I hope the audience felt a connection when I played it.

Sometimes I try to compose little pieces, but I haven't had much luck. I think I limit and scrutinize my ideas too much, so I'll definitely try to let them go free.

Thank you, and I hope we get to meet again soon.

Sincerely,
Justin

On Fri, Apr 19, 2013 at 1:36 PM, David Maslanka <david@davidmaslanka.com> wrote:
Hi Justin,

In answer to your questions:

I don't generally work from a specific image or idea. The character of the piece shows up as the sketching process proceeds.

I agree that the construction of the concerto is not typical. I always find that the color possibilities with wind ensemble are huge, and this offers a wealth of expressive opportunities. It just seems a natural thing to weave all these colors together in a very vibrant tapestry. All my concertos are this way, and I would say that all my composing is this way.

The long first section of the concerto is a quiet outlay of colors and melodic ideas. There is quite a lot of this without anything being very loud or rhythmically vigorous. My instinct was that a high contrast was needed - take away the solo color, let the ensemble have a rip.

I can't really say how I come up with ideas. They just appear. A better thing to say might be about the ability to let ideas happen, especially very simple ones, and to recognize their potential power, especially where they belong in a piece. Most concertos don't start the way this one does. The immediate presence of the solo instrument in a quiet way establishes an intimate connection with the listener, one which sets the basic tone for the whole piece.

I hope these answers are what you need. Write to me again if you think of anything else.

All best,

David Maslanka

On Apr 19, 2013, at 1:40 PM, Justin Swearingner <justin.swearingner@gmail.com> wrote:

Hello Dr. Maslanka,

Thank you for getting back to me. And again, I'd just like to say what a wonderful experience performing the concerto was! People are still coming up and talking to me about it. Below I have listed a few questions. Please take your time answering them, and let me know if anything needs clarification. Besides the questions, I'd love to hear any other general thoughts you have on the concerto.

Did you have any images or specific ideas in mind when you first started composing the concerto?

The concerto treats the marimba and the ensemble very differently from what I typically think of as a concerto. The marimba is almost always the lead voice, but it is really interwoven into the fabric of the ensemble. Why did you choose to structure the work this way?

I thought it was really interesting that the marimba drops out for the first part of the outburst around the middle. It gave our wind ensemble a chance to really play out - is there a particular reason you had the wind ensemble lead this?

I really love the three notes (both the first and last) in the marimba part. How did you come up with that motif?

Many composers often write very rhythmically for the marimba, but in your concerto you really gave the marimbist beautiful lines that just yearn for musical phrasing. Thank you for doing that! What are your thoughts on the marimba itself as an instrument?

Thank you, again - I look forward to reading your responses! I've also attached the questions as a word document in case that would be easier.

Sincerely,
Justin Swearingner

On Tue, Apr 16, 2013 at 9:19 AM, David Maslanka <david@davidmaslanka.com> wrote:
Dear Justin,

Thanks for letting me know about your performances of the Marimba Concerto. I am very pleased that they went so well for you, and that you were able to reconnect to your deep capacity for music making. The Concerto has always been one of my favorite pieces, and I am also especially fond of the end. I am glad that you have had the opportunity to work with David Ragsdale. My visits to Huntsville to work with David have been very special.

I would certainly be glad to answer your questions about the Concerto.

All best,

David Maslanka

On Apr 16, 2013, at 1:17 AM, Justin Swearinger
<justin.swearinger@gmail.com> wrote:

> From: Justin Swearinger <justin.swearinger@gmail.com>

> Subject: Marimba Concerto

>

> Message Body:

> Hello Dr. Maslanka,

>

> This is Justin Swearinger, one of Dr. Dave Ragsdale's students from the University of Alabama in Huntsville. I just wanted to let you know that I had the pleasure of performing your marimba concerto with the university's wind ensemble twice this last weekend. The concerts went very well, and the audiences absolutely adored the piece. Many came up to tell me how beautiful the concerto is.

>

> More importantly, though, I wanted to tell you that I was truly moved by it. I have made many great memories during my time here at UAHuntsville, several involving your visits here, but I think my most memorable experience has been playing the last three notes of the piece with all my friends and Dr. Ragsdale. I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing than making music with all the people I love and admire, especially such beautiful music. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing that I'm about to graduate and move on, but one that I don't think I'll ever forget. Even now, it's difficult to think about it without tearing up.

>

> My best friend told me the concerto fit me really well, and I tried to put my heart into it. Lately, I've felt like my ability to really make music has been slowly disappearing, but your concerto reawakened my inner musician, and for that, I am truly grateful. I'm so glad I got the chance to perform it!

>

> Sincerely,

> Justin Swearinger

>

> P.S.

> If it's not too much trouble, would you be willing to answer a few questions about the concerto? I'm doing a small write-up for a class and would love to include your comments on the piece!

>

>

>

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>

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> --

> This mail is sent via contact form on David Maslanka <http://www.DavidMaslanka.com>

>

Concerto

for

Marimba and Band

by

David Maslanka

Missoula MT
9/24/90

Handwritten musical score for a string quartet, measures 377-381. The score is written on five staves, with the first staff labeled "1" and the others labeled "2, 3", "4", "5", and "6". The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Measure 377: *stagger breathing* (written above the first staff). The first staff has a note with a "1" above it. The second staff has a note with a "2, 3" above it. The third staff has a note with a "4" above it. The fourth staff has a note with a "5" above it. The fifth staff has a note with a "6" above it. The sixth staff has a note with a "7" above it.

Measure 378: *stagger breathing* (written above the first staff). The first staff has a note with a "1" above it. The second staff has a note with a "2, 3" above it. The third staff has a note with a "4" above it. The fourth staff has a note with a "5" above it. The fifth staff has a note with a "6" above it. The sixth staff has a note with a "7" above it.

Measure 379: *stagger breathing* (written above the first staff). The first staff has a note with a "1" above it. The second staff has a note with a "2, 3" above it. The third staff has a note with a "4" above it. The fourth staff has a note with a "5" above it. The fifth staff has a note with a "6" above it. The sixth staff has a note with a "7" above it.

Measure 380: *stagger breathing* (written above the first staff). The first staff has a note with a "1" above it. The second staff has a note with a "2, 3" above it. The third staff has a note with a "4" above it. The fourth staff has a note with a "5" above it. The fifth staff has a note with a "6" above it. The sixth staff has a note with a "7" above it.

Measure 381: *stagger breathing* (written above the first staff). The first staff has a note with a "1" above it. The second staff has a note with a "2, 3" above it. The third staff has a note with a "4" above it. The fourth staff has a note with a "5" above it. The fifth staff has a note with a "6" above it. The sixth staff has a note with a "7" above it.