

The Possibilities of the Marimba: A Dissertation about the ability of Marimba to play transcriptions with a transcription of Bela Bartok's String Quartet no. 5 for Marimba Quartet as an example

Yun Ju Pan

Abstract

Bela Bartok is one of the greatest composers of the 20-century; also he is one of the most important and successful composers in Hungarian music. Bartok wrote six String Quartets in his lifetime, and the fifth one is considered the most popular one. Considering the short history of percussion literature, as a percussionist and Marimba/Vibraphone lover, my passion is dedicated to composing and transcribing musical works for percussion, and specifically keyboard percussion instruments, so that more percussionists can play music from different era, and also, more audiences can meet these kind of music through the unique sound and passion of percussion.

Two years ago, in my 20-century theory class, I bumped into this amazing piece of Bela Bartok – The Fifth String Quartet. I was absolutely amazed by its' rich sound affect, wild rhythmic texture, sensitive melody line, and the powerful spirit. I love being a percussionist; however, that was one of the couple times that I truly wish I were a string player so that I can play this wonderful music.

As a professional percussion musician and educator, I see expanding percussion repertoire is one of my life duties. Compare to other instruments, like piano, strings, winds and brass, Percussion history is very short. The history of percussion repertoire is less than a hundred years. Because of that, most of our music is contemporary music. “.....marimbists, percussionists (and by logical extension, most of their teachers) have less background and training in the performance of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and all the great composers than string player and pianists.” said Lee Howard Stevens, a great marimbist and educator. He also claim that “While other young musicians are learning and training their ‘sense towards music’, percussionists are being limited to the lack of their repertoire.” Back to the 90s, many percussionists start to transcribe music for Marimba, and hanks to these great percussionists and composers, for example, Lee Howard Stevens, Gwen Dease, and Eric Sammut, percussionists started to have more and more transcription of early composers’ music, like Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart for marimba, and other percussion instruments. In the past twenty

years, some of the transcriptions become popular recital/audition repertoire, for example, J.S. Bach's cello suits, violin partitas, and lute. It not only expended the repertoire possibility, also shows that percussion (especially keyboard Percussion instruments) is capable of playing classical music like other instruments.

Although there is already many examples show marimba's capability, there are not many transcriptions from string quartets directly to marimba quartet. In my opinion, there are two main problems that people find challenge of. First of all, the instrumentation of string quartet is very unique. It uses three different instruments, but they all produce sounds in similar way. However, talking about marimba quartet, there is only one kind instrument, which is marimba. Some people suggest using other percussion instruments, such as vibraphone and xylophone, to add the sound characters in the music; however, their sounds are way too different to merge together like string quartets. Second, there are many unique string techniques on string instruments, for example, pizzicato, up-bow and down-bow, tremolo, spiccato, and also Col legano, which most of them are using in Bartok's Fifth String Quartet. To overcome these challenges and finding the right "replacement" sound are two of the most important things in this transcription. Here are two main solutions that are going to be discussed in the paper: Mallet choice, and phrasing/stroke style.

In this project, I want to focus on the possibilities of transcribing string quartet to Marimba quartet, which I will use Bela Bartok's Fifth String Quartet as an example. There are five steps that I am going to do in this project, the first three will be include in this document, and the last two will be my longer tern goal. The steps including:

1. Collecting Data: I have collected and will keep collecting transcriptions of strings to percussion, and observe them. Also, I will be interviewing some composers and percussionists.
2. Making a transcription of Bartok's fifth string quartet: After having the basic knowledge of transcribing string music, I will transcribe this piece, and while rehearsing with peers, I will be able to observe more solutions and possibilities.
3. Writing a document and have my lecture recital: The document and the lecture recital will be the final stage of this paper. I am including four main parts in it: First, a brief introduction of

Marimba, Bartok and his Hungarian music, and an analysis of Bartok's fifth string quartet. Second, a research and discussion of other people's transcription from classical era to Marimba and Percussion. Third, I am going to write a performance guide of transcription of Bartok's Fifth String Quartet for Marimba Quartet. This masterwork is a long and complicated piece; also there are lots of not common music languages (for percussionists) that are used in this piece. I will provide a general idea of characters of Hungarian music; also I will have short guide of the form, melody structures, rhythmic texture of the whole piece. After that, there will be a complete performance guide for each movement.

4. Record the piece with MSU recording service and perform it in Michigan, Taiwan, and Asia with my percussion quartet next year.
5. After all of that, I will work on publish with a professional publisher it in the near future.

My goal for this document is to help follow musicians having a basic idea about how to play this arrangement and be able to perform it as close to the original version as possible, to help educators use another way to think about playing marimba and be able to coach their ensembles, and to give some more ideas and show more possibilities of Marimba world.