

# An Analysis of Tomas Svoboda's *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*

By Niel DePonte

ON MARCH 26-28, 1995 Tomas Svoboda's *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra, Op. 148* was premiered on the classical series of the Oregon Symphony

Orchestra, James DePreist, Music Director and Conductor, in Portland, where I had the honor of performing the solo marimba part. There is no doubt in my mind that this is one of the greatest

marimba concertos ever written.

Tomas Svoboda is Professor of Composition and Theory at Portland State University. A nationally recognized Czech-American composer, his works have been

## Example 1

The musical score for Example 1, measures 11-14, is presented in a multi-staff format. The instruments and parts shown are:

- Orch Bells:** Measures 11-14, starting with a *p* dynamic and ending with *pp*.
- Crotales:** Measures 11-14, starting with a *p* dynamic and including the instruction "Mute in Bass Drum" in measure 13.
- Celeste:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 11 and 12.
- Harp:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 11 and 12, including a *dim.* instruction in measure 12 and a *p* dynamic in measure 13.
- Piano:** Measures 11-14, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with notes in measures 11 and 12, and a *p* dynamic in measure 13.
- Marimba:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *mp* dynamic in measure 14.
- VI I:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *con sord.* instruction in measure 14 and a *pp* dynamic in measure 14.
- VI II:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *con sord.* instruction in measure 13 and a *pp* dynamic in measure 14.
- Vla.:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *con sord.* instruction in measure 13 and a *pp* dynamic in measure 14.
- Vcl.:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *con sord.* instruction in measure 13 and a *pp* dynamic in measure 14.
- Cb.:** Measures 11-14, with notes in measures 13 and 14, including a *con sord.* instruction in measure 11 and a *pp* dynamic in measure 12.

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Example 1 (Continued)

The image shows a musical score for Example 1 (Continued). It consists of seven staves. The top staff is for Fl. I, marked 'A' and 'Poco più mosso' with a tempo of 104. The Solo part is marked 'pp' and 'come sopra'. Below the Solo part are staves for Vl. I, Vl. II, Vla., Vcl., and Cb., all marked 'A' and 'Poco più mosso' with a tempo of 104. The Solo part is marked 'pp' and 'come sopra'.

performed by many orchestras throughout the U.S. and Europe, including the Cleveland Orchestra and the Prague Philharmonic. A student of Bohuslav Martinu in Prague, Svoboda was considered Czechoslovakia's most gifted young composer when he escaped the communist-led country in the late 1960s.

In 1993, the Oregon Symphony commissioned this first-ever concerto for a member of the orchestra as part of a series of commissions celebrating the 100th anniversary of the orchestra. The resulting piece is a model of artistic writing for both soloist and orchestra.

The twenty-three minute work calls for a 4 1/3-octave marimba and is in the traditional three-movement concerto form (I—Con moto; II—Adagio; III—Vivace). A key element to the success of its brilliant orchestration is the use of a “keyboard” quintet that accompanies the marimba as a sort of concertino group, *a la* the concerti grossi of the baroque period. This unique ensemble consists of harp, piano, celesta, orchestra bells and crotales. The keyboard ensemble begins the piece and often collaborates with the soloist during each of the three movements.

Svoboda says this about *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*:

“My approach to this work is to expose the beauty of the marimba. The gentle and majestic sounds found in the instrumental mixture within the orchestra is always respectful of the somewhat limited powers of projection of the solo instrument. Overall the concerto is stylistically lyrical and neo-romantic. The energy and vitality of the marimba is highlighted through the rhythmic vitality of the composition while the marimba’s warm and resonant sound, emanating from its rosewood keyboard, is ideally suited for the lyrical sections of the piece.

The instrumental forces on stage are divided into three contrasting parts: the solo marimba; a percussive “keyboard” quintet and the rest of the orchestra. For acoustical effect the keyboard quintet is placed close to the conductor and the solo marimba, which is the prominent voice of this uncommon ensemble. There are several sections of the work that I like to think of as compositional “islands” in this concerto. These are when the keyboard quintet plays

alone for extended periods, creating a concerto grosso-like interplay with the rest of the orchestra. This unusual division of instrumental forces, heard throughout the work, underlines the unique character and personality of this concerto.”

The solo part is highly challenging in a number of ways. While the three movements of the work are tonally centered in G# minor, C minor and D Major respectively, the somewhat disjunct outline of the melodies in the solo part make each movement difficult to play and even more difficult to memorize. The work requires the soloist to hold four mallets for all but a few bars of the piece. There are virtually no tremolos in the piece and all lyric sections have to be phrased with great attention to creating musical lines out of long streams of individual notes.

The first movement uses ascending arpeggios to create not only the first theme but also a harmonic foundation of the work (Example 1). The introduction of the marimba as the *lowest* voice of the keyboard quintet is important to the overall formal plan of the concerto. Svoboda positions the marimba in the “mind’s ear” of the listener

Example 2

67

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Ob. 1

Solo

*p*

*mp*

*p*

Solo

*mp*

67

VI. I

senza sord., pizz.

*p*

67

VI. II

senza sord., pizz.

*p*

74

Fl. 1

*mp*

*mf*

*mp*

**E**

Fl. 2

Ob. 1

Solo

*mf*

*mp*

*dim.*

Marimba

*p*

74

VI. I

*p*

**E**

VI. II

*p*

Vla.

unis.

senza sord., pizz.

*p*

Vcl.

senza sord., pizz.

*p*

Cb.

unis.

senza sord., pizz.

*p*

(who may never have heard either a marimba or a marimba concerto) as essentially a dark, "lyric-melodic" instrument much more so than a bright and percussive one. This allows him to direct the form towards a more percussive climax later in the piece, while exploiting the wide range of colors, moods and the tessitura of the instrument itself along the way.

The introduction gives us some insight into the composer's own compositional process. When a colleague asked Svboda how he first began to compose the work he replied: "I first think of the relationship between the various groups of instruments: those from the orchestra, the keyboard

ensemble and the marimba itself. I place the groups, in my mind, across the whole of the score and create a [textural map] of the entire concerto. Then I sketch melodic and harmonic material upon that map."

Later in movement one, Svboda joins together melodic fragments into a second theme bandied about between the marimba and the orchestra (Example 2). This builds to a climactic seven-measure dash up the entire range of the instrument leading to a cadenza, which emerges from the sound of the keyboard quintet and is highly contrapuntal in nature (Example 3). A long ostinato passage in 16th notes creates a final climax and slows to a *mysterioso* state-

ment of the second theme in augmentation, ending the movement.

The second movement is based on an original chorale theme. It opens with a romantic trio played by two solo violas and a solo violin. These forces are soon joined by the keyboard quintet, soloist and clarinets stating the chorale melody in canon. A dramatic orchestra section connects the first section to the next as the soloist plays a stately, yet somewhat macabre, dance theme, which is later accompanied by various members of the woodwind section (Example 4). This builds to a huge orchestral climax, during which the soloist plays a passage consisting of triplets in one hand

Example 3

**L** Cadenza  
148 (with 4 mallets)

148 (8va) *p* *pp* (let ring)

154 *mp* *p* *mf*

160 *cresc.*



and four 16ths in the other, moving up and down the marimba and alternately switching the rhythmic figures back and forth between the hands (Example 5). The chorale theme returns and a coda ends the movement with the marimba fading away over the *pianissimo* strings.

Movement three is in rondo form, using an original folk melody that leaps all over the instrument in a kind of mad "Bartókian" dance (Example 6). This movement also has a cadenza of some difficulty (Example 7) and ends with an exciting dash to the finish for orchestra and soloist.

The orchestration of this work represents the finest writing for orchestra that this author has ever seen in terms of its appropriateness for accompanying the marimba. It is of a competency level that I heretofore would have reserved for Ravel or Debussy. It requires full orchestra, including winds,

Example 5

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Example 5. The first system (measures 69-72) features a piano part with a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes and a woodwind part with triplet and sixteenth-note figures. The second system (measures 73-76) includes piano, woodwinds, and strings. The piano part is marked *p* and includes a section for Cb, Vcl. arco. The woodwinds and strings parts feature intricate rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings like *cresc.* and *f*. Fingerings and articulation marks are clearly indicated throughout the score.

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harp, celesta and piano. It could be done with a small string section, although it was not intended for chamber orchestra.

The premiere was rewarded with standing ovations at the Oregon Symphony's subscription series as well as at the national convention of the American Sym-

phony Orchestra League, where the work was performed in June, 1995. Svoboda's unique yet accessible harmonic language and the excitement generated by the finale caused palpable excitement in the house at each performance.

Last year saw the emergence of a num-

ber of important solo works for percussion performed by America's major orchestras. The Svoboda concerto, along with Joseph Schwantner's percussion concerto (written for Chris Lamb and the New York Philharmonic), which was premiered in January, 1995, are two significant works because

Example 6

**C**

53 1 3 2 3 1 3 3 1 3 4 2 3 2 3 2 3 1 3 2 3 1 3 3 1 3 3 4 3 2 3 2 3

61 1 3 2 3 1 3 3 2 4 2 3 3 2 3 1 3 2 3 1 3 3 1 3 4 2 2 3 2 3 2

69 1 3 2 3 1 3 3 4 3 2 3 2 3 2 3 1 3 2 3 2 3 3 2 3 2 4 3 2

**D**

76 3 3 3 3 3 3 2 3 3 3 3



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they are great works for *both* soloist and orchestra. I am truly fortunate to have premiered Svoboda's landmark work and to be its dedicatee. My

humble thanks go to the composer.

*Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra, Op. 148*: Piano reduction (including solo part edited by Niel DePonte), pocket score

and full score and parts available from Thomas C. Stangland Company, P.O. Box 19263, Portland OR 97280. TEL: (503) 244-0634, FAX: (503) 244-8442.

Example 7

The musical score for Example 7 consists of several systems of music. The first system (measures 288-309) features a marimba part with dynamics *ff* and *trm* markings, and a piano part with dynamics *mf* and *f*. The second system (measures 332-342) includes marimba and piano parts with dynamics *mf* and *f*, and a tempo marking *a tempo*. The third system (measures 343-347) shows marimba and piano parts with dynamics *mp* and *p*, and a *cresc.* marking. The fourth system (measures 348-352) features marimba and piano parts with dynamics *f* and *cresc.*, and a tempo marking *piu agitato*. The fifth system (measures 353-356) includes marimba and piano parts with dynamics *f* and *cresc.*. The sixth system (measures 357-366) features marimba and piano parts with dynamics *ff*, *mf*, and *dim.*, and tempo markings *rit.* and *Poco meno mosso* with a quarter note equal to 96. The score concludes with a *sost.* marking and a page number 1.



**Niel DePonte** is the Principal Percussionist of the Oregon Symphony, as well as Music Director and Conductor for Oregon Ballet Theatre. He is the composer of *Concertino for Marimba*, published by Studio 4 Productions, and maintains an active international solo, orchestral and conducting career. He serves as an artist clinician for the Yamaha Corporation.