

## *In Defense of Unserious Music*

Recently, a young marimbist posted a video of their performance of *A cricket sang and set the sun* on social media. The post, and the following comments, led to a bit of a debate about whether or not the piece is a "serious" work. It was described as "just another pop song for marimba." Later, it was mentioned that too many people see the marimba as a "funny little instrument" on which we play "funny little pieces." This sort of thing happens all the time in our small corner of the musical world, but it's been a while since I've shared my thoughts on the subject. So, it seems like a good time to speak up in defense of "unserious" music everywhere.

Many see our instrument's reputation as fragile and feel that it can only be strengthened by "serious" composers writing "serious" pieces. Although I'm using my piece as an example, I know that many of my friends and colleagues who write music for the marimba (and percussion in general) feel the same way I do, and face the same criticisms.

As far as the idea that *A cricket sang and set the sun* is not a "serious" piece goes, all I can say is that I was serious when I wrote it. To me, it is a piece about how small acts of love and kindness can change the world. It says everything I wanted to say, just the way I wanted to say it. I spent a lot of time working on the structure and pacing of the piece, and more time working on voicings and textures, and then even more time editing it until I thought that every note (and every rest) was exactly where it was supposed to be. It's okay if others don't find the exact same meaning I do in the piece. I do hope they find a connection with it that gives them a chance to communicate with their audience and express themselves in a meaningful way.

I think I know what is meant by "serious" music. I've played a lot of it (Stockhausen, Druckman, Xenakis, Nono, Carter, Bartok, etc.). I've studied the compositional methods of Hindemith and Schoenberg, 16th and 18th century counterpoint, set class theory, jazz theory, and plenty of common practice harmony. Also, on a different note, I was surrounded by country music growing up, and I was fairly obsessed with British pop music back in the 80s.

Although I understand how to work in those styles of music, doing so doesn't let me communicate in the way I want to right now. To do that, I have to write music in my own "voice." And, while my voice might change over time, right now it sounds like *A cricket sang and set the sun*, or *Moonrise*, or *Vagabond of Light*, or *A Ceiling Full of Stars*. Other composers have different voices, and even different languages. They can all be creative, they can all be expressive, they can all be meaningful, and we need all of them.

A few years ago, thanks to a commission from Eric Willie that brought us together, I was talking with Paul Lansky about composers we both found inspiring. We talked about the

incredible orchestrations of Strauss and about the general brilliance of everything Steve Mackey does. Lansky said he thought that two of the greatest composers of the last 50 years were Paul Simon and Paul McCartney. I agree completely. That's why, in my opinion, "pop song" shouldn't be a synonym for "unserious music." George Gershwin and Cole Porter wrote pop songs in their time. Elvis Costello, Dolly Parton, and Stevie Wonder (and many others) have done great things. And right now, Ben Folds, Imogen Heap and Regina Spektor (and still many others) are pretty serious about writing their next song.

"Serious" music comes in many forms and styles, and we should all be careful to avoid dismissing music that is not overtly complicated as unserious. It is quite possible for a three minute song for voice and guitar to be packed with the same emotional impact and meaning as a thirty minute symphony. At the same time, we shouldn't push away music that is dense, complicated and difficult to comprehend. Finding a way to understand it can be an amazing experience. That doesn't mean we need to pretend to love everything we hear. I don't. But I do my best to understand, and I respect music (and art of all kinds) that is the result of creative people expressing their ideas and emotions in an honest way.

To sum things up:

- Do I want the marimba to be taken seriously? Definitely!
- Do I think Steve Mackey is an amazingly great composer? Definitely!!! As are all the others listed above.
- Do I think my pieces are the greatest music ever written? No. I do kind of like them, though.
- Do my pieces cause the reputation of the marimba any harm? I don't think so.
- Have others referred to pieces by me (and pieces by some of my friends and teachers) as "silly" "funny" "simple" "embarrassing" "practice room improvisations" and so on? Yes.
- Does that hurt my feelings? Nope. I'm okay.

So, play what you believe in, write what you believe in, and commission composers you believe in. There's definitely enough room for all of us behind the marimba.

– **Blake Tyson**