

An Interview with Composer Peter Klatzow

By Tracy Wiggins

Peter Klatzow has long been one of the most influential composers and scholars in South Africa. He has taught at the University of Capetown as a professor of composition and was awarded the rank of Fellow of the University of Capetown for his “distinguished and original academic work.” He holds a DMUS for published works in composition. One of the few South African composers to achieve international recognition, Klatzow has won prizes in Spain, the United Kingdom, and Toronto, and his works have been performed in various European centers and in the United States. In South Africa he was awarded the prestigious Helgard Steyn prize for his piano suite “From the Poets.” A major marimba festival of his works is planned for Tokyo in September this year, and he will be attending.

Tracy Wiggins: *We are nearing the 25th anniversary of your solo marimba piece “Dances of Earth and Fire.” As you look back, what is most striking to you about the piece now?*

Peter Klatzow: “Dances of Earth and Fire” (DEF) has a distinct quality to it, which makes it a very performance-oriented piece. I don’t simply mean this in terms of flashy stick work—although that is there, too—but it also requires the performer to be able to sustain the tension during silences and create an ambience of expectation through the first movement. That is the one and most important element that I would keep if I were to re-write the piece. Some of the rhythmic constructions are a little abstruse, and I would probably not use them now. Twenty-five years is a long time in music! Since the time I wrote the piece I have become more confident about using a wider harmonic spectrum.

TW: *Since you believe that some of the rhythmic constructions in DEF are abstruse, how would you change them if you wrote the piece today?*

PK: The off-beat tuplets coming after silence are a pretension. Sometimes they work, mostly not.

TW: *“Dances of Earth and Fire” was written for Robert Van Sice. Can you give some background on where the partnership originated and how it led to the piece?*

PK: Robert van Sice arrived in Cape Town to take up a position as principal timpanist with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra. However, his main instrument was marimba, and he solicited various composers to write for him. My first piece for him was “Figures in a Landscape,” and since I was not confident enough to write for solo marimba at that stage I added a flute. However, my love affair with the marimba had started long before that. I had previously heard a live performance of “Psalm 124” by Peter Maxwell Davies, which used the marimba in a very beautiful way, and the sound was unforgettable. As a result there were big marimba parts in my “Concerto for Horn and Orchestra” (1978) and “Chamber Concerto for 7.” And I have used it on every possible opportunity since then. For Robert I also wrote a “Concerto for Marimba and Strings” (1985) and subsequently a “Double Concerto for flute, marimba and strings.”

By the time I wrote DEF, Robert had left Cape Town to take up better opportunities overseas and I sent him the score. He didn’t answer for six months! Then he responded that I had written the “most difficult piece ever” for marimba, but that in ten years “everyone would be playing it”. Well, not *everyone* is playing it; it doesn’t get heard much in Europe. But the piece seems to have taken on a life of its own.

TW: *There have been many performances of DEF over the years. What qualities are common between the best performances you have heard?*

PK: The best performances all exude an excitement resulting from the performer’s mental approach to the piece. Accuracy concerning notes and rhythms is important, but equally important is creating the performance vibe. I also imagined the “choreography” that the player would have to use simply to negotiate both ends of marimba so rapidly; it requires immense energy to do this and it is also about dancing, and the player has to leap around like a ballet dancer. I have only once seen a live performance, by Robert van Sice, and by the end I was also exhausted for the performer.

TW: *You have written quite a large amount of marimba repertoire (“Inyanga,” “Song for*



Stephanie,” “Marimba Concerto,” “Figures in A Landscape”), and all of these pieces have a very different sound to them.

PK: You can also include “Six Etudes for marimba,” “Sunlight Surrounds Her,” “When the Moon Comes Out,” and “Towards the Light.” I am more and more fascinated about what the marimba can offer to a chamber ensemble, and at the same time exploring new textures for the instrument itself.

TW: *In terms of chamber ensemble, you have already written “Ambient Resonances” and “Figures in a Landscape.” What other instrument groupings are you exploring with the marimba?*

PK: “Sunlight Surrounds Her” is for marimba with flute, bassoon, violin, and cello. “When the Moon Comes Out” is for the same combination. I like the embryonic ensemble of two winds and two strings with marimba.

TW: *Did learning more about the marimba affect your writing as you went or was your writing more affected by where you were as a composer at the time (style, harmonies etc.)?*

PK: These two things inevitably interacted. Since my own harmonic idiom has expanded considerably since the 1970s I have obviously applied those changes to all my music. I continue to be fascinated by the marimba’s ability to sing a long cantabile line like a voice, and with all the vocal expressiveness one might expect from a great singer, and

also by its ability to sustain harmonic progressions like a string ensemble.

TW: *Do you think that living in South Africa where the marimba really began had an influence on your composition for the instrument?*

PK: Yes, but probably in ways that would not be apparent from my concert works. The African marimba has its own style of playing and its own intonation. I have included marimba parts in both my masses, but particularly in the “Mass for Africa”—which was originally written with four marimbists required—the style is more hammered, less cantabile. There is no doubt that African drumming techniques have found their way into my music. For many years I worked and taught immediately above the Kirby African Instrument collection at the College of Music, so I learned about African drumming techniques, so to speak, “through my feet.” My close friendship with Dizu Plaatjies, founder and member of the African Music ensemble “Amaondo,” has also led to the assimilation of some signatures in African music. However, the standard Western concert marimba has remained my primary interest.

TW: *I know that “Dances” was influenced somewhat by Paul Klee’s paintings. Are there other such connections to your pieces? How do these things influence your compositional choices?*

PK: Klee continues to haunt me. His gift for line and colour are also primary concerns of mine. I have no difficulty in “hearing” his paintings. He is a very rich artist in spite of the simplicity of his images. However, that was somewhat peripheral in DEF. What I was really concerned about there was opening up the marimba in a new way—well, new to me.

TW: *All of your percussion writing to this point has been for mallet instruments. Are you interested in composing for other percussion or do you prefer writing for mallets?*

PK: Being a pianist, keyboards inevitably fascinate me most. When writing for the marimba I always imagine the stick positions, the difficulties involved, etc., and I have a very clear idea of just how the player will “stick” a certain passage. Occasionally I make mistakes, and I get the chance to rectify the problem. I am always grateful to whoever points these things out. I am very conscious of stick positions, but I try not to let that inhibit my ideas for the music.

TW: *Have you found particular harmonies that you think best exhibit the marimba’s tonal qualities?*

PK: My own harmonic ideas derive from the overtone series, which is a vertical graduation from consonance to dissonance. I don’t

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think that the marimba has its own particular tonal or harmonic ambience. The strength of the lower notes, like the piano or any other string instrument, has a radical effect on the notes above it. The lower notes of the marimba are particularly strong in their overtone resonance—but not as strong as string instruments, including the piano—which makes it harmonically more versatile. The extension of the marimba range down to the low C has greatly changed its possibilities.

What irritates me most in contemporary writing for marimba is that composers often seem to regard the instrument as a xylophone with a bass extension. This is a gross misconception. My second irritation is transcriptions for marimba. It is true that there is a limited “classical” repertoire for the instrument, but performers should really encourage composers to fill the gaps in the repertoire. Robert van Sice hated transcriptions and refused to play them—something with which I entirely agree. If all marimba players would seek out and work with composers of various stylistic trends and persuasions, there could be a huge development of the repertoire.

TW: *Instead of performing transcriptions, do you think percussionists need to work with composers who might be in the baroque or classical style in order to better gain a sense of those periods, or focus more on what’s happening now with our instrument?*

PK: Of course it is a great pity that the marimba only emerged as a concert instrument long after the great composers, and this means that there is no first-rate classical or romantic repertoire created specifically for it. I am thinking of writing some sonatas in the style and structure of the Scarlatti sonatas. I love Scarlatti and I love the marimba. It’s very tempting to marry them.

TW: *Do you ever go to a marimba to see how some of your ideas might sound on the wooden bars vs. a piano?*

PK: I would do this if I had a friendly marimbist in South Africa, but alas, not! But I have a fairly acute imagination when it comes to imagining the final sounds.

TW: *I know that you watch and comment on performances of your pieces on YouTube. What do you most often see interpreted differently than you had intended?*

PK: All performances of my music interest me, especially as I note the differences in style. It seems that nearly all the performances result from a single teaching source—Bob van Sice and his students—and he is very precise about how the piece is played, so there is not much variation.

TW: *I know that you have several new pieces—especially a book of etudes—coming out soon. What can you tell us about those pieces? Do the etudes focus on specific techniques in each work?*

PK: Primarily the etudes are “concert” etudes, which means that although each one has a different “problem,” the literary or programmatic nature of each piece is also important. However, in most cases I wrote the piece first and then attached a title.

TW: *Who are some composers who have influenced your compositional approach to the marimba?*

PK: Actually, until very recently I avoided all contact with marimba composers, but about a year ago I became curious to see what other well-known pieces were like. I ordered inter alia the following: Hosokawa’s “Reminiscence,” Sejourne’s “5 pieces for marimba solo,” and Schwantner’s “Velocities.” Of these, I probably liked the Hosokawa the most, but since by then I had already developed my own marimba style, they did not contribute to what I was doing. The composers who have probably contributed most to my personal style are Chopin, Ligeti, Stravinsky, and Szymanowski.

TW: *What did you find interesting about the Hosokawa?*

PK: It seemed to find the voice of the marimba. It was not necessarily the best composition, but it was, in my opinion, the best piece for the instrument. The others were pseudo-xylophonic.

TW: *You mentioned Chopin as an influence. Is that fact that many of his works were etudes that have now become standard concert works influence you in writing your etudes?*

PK: Chopin has a very wide variety of textures, from simple harmonic and melodic to very complex interrelationships of counterpoint. It is the breadth of Chopin’s compositional technique that fascinates me, quite apart from the superior quality of the material. There is something of both his etudes in my pieces in that there is a focus on a single technical problem, and Liszt’s concert etudes

in that there is a programmatic aspect to them, primary to guide the listener and give a hint to the player about the character of the piece. I think it would be possible to play the last etude, “Water, Cypresses,” in a very straightforward way, a la Czerny, but for the nudge towards the Villa d’Este.

TW: You said that one of the keys to DEF is the ability of the performer to sustain the silences. Are you influenced at all by the works of Cage and Feldman in that regard?

PK: Both composers have from time to time been close to me. I knew Feldman well and admire his music. Silence is very important as a structural feature in non-tonal music, just as the tritone often acts as punctuation in Ligeti’s music. I am generally attracted to Cage’s personality and attitude to music, but his music, apart from “Sonatas and Interludes,” works much better in live performance than it does on recordings.

TW: Have you ever considered writing a work for full percussion ensemble?

PK: I have just done it! “Ostinato, Lament and Moto Perpetuo” for nine percussionists, commissioned by Brett Dietz at LSU.

TW: What did you find interesting about writing for a full percussion ensemble?

PK: Quite challenging, actually. It took me a few false starts to get into the piece. I am used to more varied ensembles, and without Brett’s prompting I would probably not have written this piece; I am getting lazy! The instrumentation is for glockenspiel, crotales, chimes, xylophone, two vibraphones, two marimbas, two percussionists, and timpani.

Once into it I started to enjoy the opportunities it offered, although I am sure I have missed many. My main inclination is towards tuned percussion, so I was probably not generous enough with the relative pitch instruments. I could have probably written a better timpani part, but I am going to wait for comments on that.

TW: In “Ostinato” you include temple blocks in the percussion part, and they seem to be used in a melodic manner. Were you looking to use the percussion instruments in the piece more melodically than rhythmically or for impact? Did the typical pentatonic tuning of the temple blocks have any influence on your melodic choices?

PK: The temple blocks were, for me, a medium point between melodic instruments and non-pitched instruments. It sits there in the middle, so it was useful as an instrument that bridged the gap.

TW: There are a couple of different editions of some of your works—the manuscripts and the PM Europe editions. Which of these would you consider most accurate?

PK: There are three editions of DEF. The earliest is the reproduction of my manuscript, the second is the version made by PME, and there is a final version that corrected a few mistakes and also improved the notational layout. The latter is the one I prefer.

TW: Do you see potential growth for percussion composition and performance?

PK: Absolutely. When composers discover the true voice of the marimba and its potential to sustain a wide variety of musical textures, I think it will develop a more extensive repertoire. Too many composers treat it as a super xylophone—big mistake.

TW: Where do you think that compositional approach of treating a marimba as a large xylophone derives from? What would you like to see composers explore more from the instrument?

PK: The marimba’s ability to create long, truly legato lines, rather like a human voice, is rather unique in a percussion instrument—partially shared by the vibraphone, but not in the same way, of course. I think a lot of composers tend to confuse the xylophonic image with the sound the instrument creates, and when percussionists write for the marimba, it seems to me that they emphasize the virtuosic aspects of the instrument rather than the harmonic/melodic ones. I find the sound of a single low note on the marimba, perfectly sustained with an even tremolo, absolutely exquisite—one of my favorite sounds in music, in fact.

TW: Who do you think are some of the most interesting newer compositional voices on the scene?

PK: Murail, but with reservations. Beauty of sound—and it *is*—and variety of texture don’t make up the whole compositional technique. There is almost no simplicity in his music.

TW: What role do you think complexity should play in the development of a composition?

PK: Complexity is very important as a means of extending the structural facets of any piece of music, but so is simplicity. For this reason I utterly reject pieces that are simply fantastically difficult, like Ferneyhough and Finnissy, and look for greater structural variety. This applies to all the constructional elements of music: melody and harmony, rhythm, timbre, and dynamics.

TW: Do you think that many of today’s composers are too focused on complexity?

PK: Very definitely. It seems to be bolstered by the results that emanate from various composition competitions, where the judges seem to reward an excessive number of notes. For me, a good piece will have moments where there is very little to listen to, and other moments that are demanding

on the ear. I find such types of moments in Ligeti, Stravinsky, and Beethoven, but not as extensively in contemporary music, which is either simplistic or somewhat overwritten.

TW: With there always being talk of the pending “death” of classical music, what do you believe the musician’s role is now to bring audiences into our performances?

PK: Classical music cannot die; there is always a place for the masterpieces of Western culture in our lives. But composers need to step off the pedestal a little and not always try to be Schoenberg. I truly believe that performers need to engage with composers to get new works written. What would the guitar be without Segovia and Julian Bream? Well, at least it has the lute repertoire to fall back on. Without the initiative and a big nudge from Dan Heagney I would not have gone back to the etude proposal. I have always encouraged my composition students to work *with* intelligent performers, to understand the performer’s requirements from a new piece. It is the tradition of our art, and somehow we have lost it

TW: How do you balance the performer’s needs with your needs as a composer? Does the question of how an audience will perceive the piece enter into the equation?

PK: Given that a performer has to engage with a piece over a fairly long period of time, and by the very act of doing that gets to become involved with the language and construction of the piece, I rate the performer’s reaction as much more important than the audience’s reaction. Audiences are generally slow to catch on and cannot enter into the music in the way that a performer can—unless they are also composers with an acute sense of hearing!

TW: What advice would you give to percussionists looking to work with composers on new works?

PK: Never be afraid to suggest improvements. The composer wants the piece to sound good, and so does the performer. Discussing the end result is of obvious interest to both. I would give this advice to any instrumentalist. But this action needs to be approached with caution. Ravel did *not* appreciate the “improvements” Wittgenstein made to his left-hand piano concerto.

TW: What information from a performer do you find most useful when starting a new piece?

PK: I like to know everything: who will be playing, where, the level of sophistication of the audience, the duration required, etc. Also the level of expertise I can expect. Writing, as I am at the moment, a very difficult piece for a major piano competition, I know that a *petite valse* would not be appropriate. But I also want the player to make colors and

textures not just finger patterns. I am also told it should be three minutes long. When a performer asks me to write a piece, I go to great lengths to find out his or her major attributes as a performer. Then I use them. Marta Klimasara is a superb colourist.

TW: *Was there anything from your studies with Boulanger that you have found particularly useful when writing for percussion?*

PK: Nothing. With me, Boulanger did not teach by demonstration, but simply by commenting on what I presented. She would question me about certain things in the compositions, I would respond, and she would usually make no further comment. The questions were quite penetrating, and indicated her familiarity with a then quite avant-garde use of instruments. She never indicated “like” or “not like,” and I only found out from the other students that she really did like my work and held me up as an example of industriousness and production!

TW: *What developments would you like to see composers make in regards to composing for percussion?*

PK: The first thing a composer would need to do is find a friendly percussionist, listen to as many performances as possible, and work closely with the real instruments. In this way a composer could start to understand all the finer techniques of the instrumentation—other than just the base ones, which one could pick up in any good orchestration class.

TW: *As a composer, is there any element of percussion performance in which you would like to see more development?*

PK: In general, I find percussionists more rhythmically developed than other instrumentalists— not surprising, as most of their repertoire is 20th century. There is quite a large gap in the percussion repertoire, in that there are no substantial tonal/romantic/classical works written—no concertos by Beethoven or Brahms. I think it is a pity that no one persuaded Samuel Barber to write a concerto; his percussion writing, as far as one can tell from the orchestral work, is very informed. If there is interest, it will happen, but percussionists need to be proactive about commissioning and generating more new repertoire. If Daniel Heagney, Svetoslav Stoyanov, and Marta Klimasara had not woken me up, I would still be writing choral pieces—which I love, too!

VIDEO LINKS

“Dances of Earth and Fire,” 1st movement, performed by Tomasz Kowalczyk: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAZJS3bE1qQ

“Dances of Earth and Fire,” 2nd movement, performed by Tomasz Kowalczyk: <http://www>

youtube.com/watch?v=xaDU94KDZPk&feature=relmfu

Tracy Wiggins is coordinator of the percussion program at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the Hartt School, University of Hartford, a master’s degree in percussion performance from the University of New Mexico, and a bachelor’s degree in music education from Oklahoma State University. He has done post-masters work at The Ohio State University. Dr. Wiggins’s varied musical interests are reflected in his performance credits, ranging from The Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Alabama Symphony orchestras, steel drum, and ethnic drumming ensembles, to chamber and solo performances throughout the United States. His teachers have included Wayne Bovenschen, Michael Bump, Joe Galeota, Alexander Lepak, Christopher Shultis, Ben Toth, Glen Velez, and Nancy Zeltsman. Dr. Wiggins has premiered works by composers David Macbride, Thomas DeLio, Daniel Davis, Ching-Chang Chen, and others. **PN**