

Finding Her Voice: An Interview with Beverley Johnston

By Nathan Daughtrey

Canada's premier percussionist Beverley Johnston is internationally recognized for her virtuosic and dynamic performances on a wide range of percussion instruments. Her exciting performances have been distinguished as unconventional, effectively combining classical transcriptions, contemporary music, and a touch of theatre; she is also a leader in commissioning and premiering new works for percussion. Beverley currently teaches at the University of Toronto and lives in rural Ontario with her husband, composer Christos Hatzis.

Nathan Daughtrey: *The theme of your PASIC showcase concert is "Percussion/Marimba and Voice. In the past, you have performed works requiring you to sing while playing. Is this what we can expect from this concert?"*

Beverley Johnston: Actually, I am playing several different pieces, some of which are just percussion and the others are just marimba pieces. All of the pieces in some way include the use of the voice. One of the works has the voice on the audio playback while I solely play marimba ("In the Fire of Conflict" by Christos Hatzis).

ND: *At what point did you become interested in this combination?*

BJ: I have always been interested in the voice as an expressive tool in learning percussion. The voice is filled with an infinite palette of tone colors, and I feel that transfers well to percussion. It helps us understand that percussion is *not* just about rhythm but, more three-dimensionally, about tone color, texture, and pitch—even when playing the drums. The type of multi-percussion pieces, therefore, that I have been attracted to have been those where phrasing, tone color, and texture override the rhythmic elements. I started the piano when I was seven years old, and I think that pitch has always been my focus as a musician—more than rhythm! I have always enjoyed singing, too.

ND: *Were there any artists or teachers (percussionists and/or singers) that particularly influenced you?*

BJ: When I was in high school one of my major mentors was my high school music teacher, Iwan Edwards. He was a specialist in choirs and subsequently was the music director of the St. Lawrence Choir, which was the core choir for the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Needless to say, my high school years were filled with singing *and* playing percussion *and* piano. It was only later in life that I started to combine the voice while playing percussion, and the first solo piece I played with that combination was the marimba solo "Bones" by Canadian composer Harry Freedman. His wife [Mary Morrison] was a specialist in contemporary vocal repertoire, and Harry incorporated vocal techniques in many of his instrumental works. I was fortunate enough to get a few lessons with Mary, who has taught many of the world's top vocal soloists.

In the 1990s I would say that I was in my more experimental phase and experienced a few vocal workshops, which included a weeklong adventure with Richard Armstrong, who was a specialist in extended vocal techniques. In the course, many vocalists attended including opera singers and contemporary music specialists. I learned so much from the experience and how one can really explore the "dirtiest" and

most delicate parts of one's voice—and everything in between! This was a cathartic experience and one that I cherish in my approach to making music in general.

But there have been *many* singers I truly admire and the reason being, they have "found their own voice." They are not afraid to be different, and you can hear their soul in their music. One vocalist I have been particularly interested in is Canadian singer Maryem Tollar, who is a specialist in Egyptian vocal music. I *love* this gut-wrenching style of singing where one bears one's soul. Because Maryem was the lead singer in my husband's multi-media work "Constantinople," I was exposed to Maryem's voice for months, so I just started subconsciously incorporating some of her sounds into my approach. Of course, she's the master. I do what I can with my limited technique as a vocalist!

I'm also attracted to many, many percussionists who explore their true character. This has nothing to do with whether or not they incorporate voice in their work, but these percussionists have, through the years, been true to following their passions in an honest way.

ND: *What is the greatest challenge for you when performing in this way?*

BJ: I think the greatest challenge is to make sure the voice does not follow exactly the rhythm of the instrumental part. As with any good



vocalist, the voice has to “float” on top of the instrumental part. There are some amazing vocalists who are masters of this technique including Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, and Diana Krall. They all have that innate ability to “soften the edges” of the vocal line. This, for me, has been challenging, and I really have to work hard at that. I usually record myself in order to have a better understanding of how I can “float” more effectively! I’m still learning!

ND: Can you talk about your literature selection for the concert? Will there be any premieres?

BJ: My presentation will include the following pieces: “Axion Esti” by George Kontogiorgos. Written for stamna—the Greek version of an udu—and voice, this piece was written for me by my dear friend George, who lives in Volos, Greece. The words are in Greek and it was challenging to get the correct pronunciation. Thank goodness my husband, Christos, could help me with that. The version I’m doing at PASIC is with audio playback, which both Christos and I played around with one day in the studio since we had some time to spare!

Christos Hatzis’ piece “In the Fire of Conflict” has several versions. The one I’m doing for my presentation is for marimba solo and audio playback. The other versions include marimba and cello and another is for percussion quartet. You will be hearing on the audio the voice of rapper “Bugsy H,” who describes his tormented former life dealing with gangs.

Julie Spencer’s “Everybody Talk about Freedom” was a piece I commissioned a couple of years ago. Julie heard me perform “Bones” by Harry Freedman at the Marimba 2010 International Festival and Conference in Minneapolis and wanted to write me something with voice. Of course I said yes, as I’m a big admirer of Julie’s creativity and musicality. This is basically a rap tune. During my learning process I sent Julie a very rough version of what I was doing, and she said in some sections it sounded like Peter Maxwell Davies’ work “Eight Songs for a Mad King”! So I kept some of the more wacky bits in my version!

During the 2009 Zeltsman Marimba Festival I had the fortune of premiering the work “Cinnabar Heart” by Chinary Ung. I love this piece because it floats along so beautifully—a piece with no barlines! Chinary will be writing another piece to go along with this work, and I haven’t received it yet but I’m so looking forward to doing the world premiere in addition to “Cinnabar Heart.” All I know is he asked me whether or not I whistle, so who knows what to expect! Many thanks to Greg Beyer, who helped organize the commissioning process through the Fromm Foundation. This is a consortium commission, which includes marimbists Greg Beyer, Lynn Vartan, Steve Solook, and myself.

I will end my presentation with a theatrical piece by Canadian composer Diana McIntosh. It’s called “All Too Consuming.” It’s about food, and I will have a guest appearance by a famous marimba player who will be my waiter at the beginning of the piece. The text for this work is from a poem by Canadian poet Peter Christensen called “It says I can Eat all I Want.” During the piece I turn my dinnerware into percussion instruments along with some extraneous vocalizations. Enough said!

I’m looking forward to being at PASIC 2014 and reconnecting with my friends and colleagues. What a great way to share music with others who enjoy the same percussive passions! **PN**

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