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hand drum

Beverley Johnston

A Champion Of New, Genre-Busting Works



COOL FOR SCHOOL

Johnston has struck a middle ground between academia and performance.

By David A. Brensilver

Beverley Johnston's sixth and most-recent recording, a 2013 album titled *Woman Runs With Wolves*, features a collection of compelling pieces that showcase the marimba, as well as the vibraphone, numerous other percussion instruments, voice, piano, and, in many cases, audio playback. A two-movement piece titled *In The Fire Of Conflict*, by Johnston's husband, Greek-Canadian composer Christos Hatzis, for example, features a prerecorded spoken-word part by an American rapper called Bugsy H. (whose real name is Steve Henry) and is made even more engaging by Hatzis' use of studio effects. After receiving the spoken-word tracks from Henry, Hatzis manipulated those sounds and added some others. It's a piece that would certainly come across as a genre-busting work to those who might not expect to hear a marimba soloist accompanied by a heavily manipulated spoken-word part with lines like "I can't take the conflict. I can't take the violence."

A work called "Up And Down Dubstep," by Laura Silberberg, a doctoral student at the University Of Toronto,



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where Johnston and Hatzis both teach, is another track on the album that defies categorization, with percussion and piano parts accompanied by various audio samples ranging from an opera aria to a hip-hop groove. “I don't even know what dubstep is,” Johnston says, with a smile. Rather than an indication of some detachment from popular musical trends, Johnston's quip about dubstep is evidence that she's not necessarily interested in what something is called. The pieces she performs all over the world are, quite simply, vehicles for expression, composed increasingly by younger musicians with diverse musical interests and backgrounds and access to ever-developing technologies. “They need more opportunities to write music,” Johnston points out. And her faculty position at the University Of Toronto, from which she graduated in 1980 with a degree in music education, keeps her in touch with what's going on in the world of composition — as do Facebook and YouTube. Certainly, it doesn't hurt that

her husband is at the university teaching the next generation of composers.

Alice Ho, who was born in Hong Kong and makes her home in Toronto, is one composer who's writing the kind of music Johnston enjoys playing. Ho's “Woman Who Runs With Wolves,” the title track on Johnston's most recent recording, is based on a tale recounted in a book by American poet and Jungian analyst Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés titled *Women Who Run With The Wolves* — a book that, coincidentally, Johnston and Ho had each read before the piece was written.

The recording of Ho's piece features Johnston playing various percussion instruments and vocalizing in a make-believe language that Ho conceived. “When I do that piece in performance,” Johnston explains, “I do a little bit of dancing in the piece and vocalizing, and I make it into more of a theater piece.” Currently, Ho is working on a piece for Johnston based on the life of Yoko Ono. In late November, Johnston had no idea what to expect from Ho in terms of

that new piece for percussion and audio playback. “Alice for me is one of the most open-minded composers, so in a way it'll be like a collaboration with her.”

Johnston grew up in Montreal studying piano and, in high school, began learning to play percussion instruments. She continued her musical studies in a two-year diploma program at Vanier College and then enrolled at the University Of Toronto. There she studied with percussionist Russell Hartenberger, a member of the trailblazing Nexus percussion ensemble, and with Steve Reich And Musicians, a group organized by its namesake in the 1960s to perform his compositions. Johnston didn't go to Toronto specifically to study with Hartenberger or to be part of the scene that surrounded Nexus.

She left Montreal, she says, laughing, to get away from her parents, who told her, “If you're going into music, you have to go into music education, because you're not going to have a career as a performer.” Unless one is a genius like the late Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, they believed (as

have countless other parents), he or she isn't destined for a successful performing career. Prior to arriving in Toronto in the fall of 1976, Johnston says, "I didn't even know who Nexus was." Regardless, it was Hartenberger who inspired Johnston to pursue a career as a solo percussionist (and to prove her concerned parents wrong). And it was a marimba owned by Hartenberger — an old Deagan — that drew Johnston to the instrument, and on which she started playing Bach's beloved and iconic violin Sonatas and Partitas. While she'd played marimba at Vanier, it was Hartenberger's Deagan, and his presence, that thoroughly engaged her. At Vanier, Johnston studied the "Montreal style," which meant focusing heavily on snare-drum technique — particularly with the use of French percussionist Jacques Delécluse's seminal étude book *Douze études pour Caisse-Claire (Twelve Studies For Snare Drum)* — and on timpani and mallet instruments.

"I learned how to hold four mallets for the first time," Johnston says. "One of the students went down to Boston and checked out Gary Burton, came back, and showed us how to hold the Burton grip." It was basic stuff, she says, but it nonetheless put her on the right track to continue her studies in Toronto, where Hartenberger and the groups with which he was playing became hugely influential. Talking about Hartenberger, who's still on the University Of Toronto faculty, Johnston says, "He wasn't going, 'Bev, you've got to do this.' It

was just being around the aura of Nexus and the aura of Russ Hartenberger and just learning by example, because he pretty much did everything in Toronto at that time," from studio work to new-music concerts. She remembers sitting in on Nexus' famous 1976 direct-to-disc *Ragtime Concert* recording. "I sat on the couch in a studio in Yorkville and watched Bob Becker go through all the ragtime stuff," Johnston says, referring to the xylophone pieces Becker recorded.

As influential as Hartenberger was, Johnston didn't try to make hers a copy of his career. "It's kind of interesting, because it's not like I followed the same path as Nexus or Russ or any of those guys — like, I was not very good at playing the music of Steve Reich, and of course Russ is in the ensemble. But nonetheless, he was the kind of teacher who encouraged whatever your passion was. And he had enough overall experience in all aspects that there was always something to learn from him." Johnston explains that "keyboard percussion was what I was gearing everything towards, but then I realized after I graduated, I really needed to be good at everything."

After she graduated from the University Of Toronto, composer and then-Canadian Broadcasting Corporation producer David Jaeger "took interest in what I was doing and started throwing all these Canadian percussion solos my way, so I kind of got into that scene." One of those pieces, for example, was "Steal The Thunder," a

work for timpani, gongs, salad bowl (yes, salad bowl), and tape (audio playback) by Canadian composer Jean Piché that Johnston aptly describes as a "rock-and-roll timpani" piece. It's indeed a hard-rocking work that has become part of the standard percussion-recital repertoire. While, for many, playing percussion is all about rhythm, Johnston has always been fascinated by the different colors and textures various percussion instruments (and other inanimate objects) can yield. For the record, she endorses Marimba One and Paiste instruments.

Asked about other musicians who inspired her keyboard-percussion-focused career, Johnston says, "I think for me it was Ruth Underwood," who worked with Frank Zappa's Mothers Of Invention. Percussionist and composer Gordon Stout, whose 1974 work "Two Mexican Dances" for solo marimba has long been part of the standard repertoire for that instrument, was another major influence, as was pioneering marimba virtuoso Vida Chenoweth. Johnston says Hartenberger introduced her to Stout's "Two Mexican Dances" — which blew her mind and, for her, made a hero of the composer — and gave her an equally inspiring recording of Chenoweth playing Bach on marimba.

Today, explaining that she's "a little less patient with contemporary music that's not good," Johnston commissions a lot of the works she performs. "I have my ear open to who's out there," she says, "so I kind of get in my ear their sound or

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Impact
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1988
Strange City
ARRAYMUSIC



1989
Marimbach
BEVERLEY JOHNSTON



1992
Alternate Currents
BEVERLEY JOHNSTON



1993
Regarding Starlight
VARIOUS ARTISTS



1996
Persuasion: The Contemporary Accordion
JOSEPH MACEROLLO



1998
Heavy Metal
HANNAFORD STREET SILVER BAND



2000
Patria
JUDY LOMAN



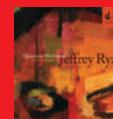
2003
Everlasting Light/Footprints In The Snow
CHRISTOS HATZIS



2004
Garden Of Delights
BEVERLEY JOHNSTON



2006
Dancing In The Light
CHRISTOS HATZIS



2006
Quantum Mechanics
JEFFREY RYAN



2009
Intermediate Masterworks For Marimba
VARIOUS ARTISTS



2009
Ming
BEVERLEY JOHNSTON



2009
Percussionique
TORONTO PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE



2010
Pinnacles
UHURU KAMILI



2013
History Is What It Is
BLUE RIDER ENSEMBLE



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their compositions. And that directs me toward them. I kind of go, 'I really like what this guy or this gal is doing, so I'm going to see if they're interested in writing something.' I don't specify, really, because I don't like to say, 'You have to write this, this, this, this.' I want to make it fun for them, too, not just something to cater to me." In other words, bringing new pieces to fruition is often a collaborative effort. "What I love about commissioning," Johnston says, "is that I feel like I'm a part of that creative process. If there's anything that I'm not really keen on, or technically I can't do something, I'll work my way around it with the composer to try and suit my playing a little bit better."

Currently, she's working on a marimba solo by California-based Cambodian composer Chinary Ung. Works in the pipeline that are being written for her include the above-mentioned Yoko Ono-based piece by Alice Ho and a work by Sri Lankan composer Dinuk Wijeratne, who plays in cellist Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble and studies with Johnston's husband, Christos Hatzis, at the University Of Toronto. The latter, she says, involves Indian tabla rhythms and will be performed this coming summer in Hanover, Germany. Johnston is also looking forward to making a new recording, one that features percussion and voice — a continuation of the direction in which she's been going, musically, and that was captured on many of the tracks on *Woman Runs With Wolves*.

"Everybody Talk About Freedom," by American composer and marimba player Julie Spencer, is one of the pieces she wants to record. It's a piece Johnston's played before. "Basically," Johnston says, "it's [for a] marimba that you wrap in foil and you dampen the sound a little bit so you get this kind of like electronic funky bass [sound]. And it's a rap tune, so I'm doing this rap and playing the marimba at the same time." She also wants to record American composer Frederic Rzewski's 1985 work "To The Earth," for flowerpots (those inanimate objects again) and speaking percussionist.

When she's practicing at home in Ontario, Johnston will often go through the exercises in George Lawrence Stone's widely used technique book *Stick Control*, which, along with Stone's *Accents And Rebounds*, is widely considered something of a snare drum technique bible. She'll also run through a few of Stone's exercises before going

on stage. Having to focus on the indicated stickings relaxes her, and for sure it relaxes her hands. After all, it's not easy to play through Stone's exercises when one is tense. Asked how honing her snare-drum technique has helped her mallet playing, Johnston says, "One specific thing for me is the double strokes. Learning to accent the second of the two double strokes has really helped me get an even sound." Having good snare-drum technique in general is important, she points out, qualifying that by saying, with a chuckle, "not that I have good technique on snare drum."

When it comes to learning and working on challenging percussion parts, Johnston says, "I believe in a little bit of magic, too. I just think that organically, you can get to where you're going if you just keep trying. Don't try and impose stuff. You just have to open up your whole soul, and somehow, something will work out. Even if you can't do something technically, try really, really, really hard to do it. Try and switch something around that's in the music — not the way it's written, but something that you can handle — but keep on trying, and then eventually you'll get to what has been written. You'll just do it. Or even if it's not exactly the way it's written, it will be in the style of what the composer is getting at, because you worked hard enough to try and get there." She tries to share that approach with her students at the University Of Toronto, where she's been on the faculty since 1996.

Just as she did, Johnston's students who are set on pursuing careers as mallet players have to learn other percussion instruments and techniques. "I keep on telling them that if Russ hadn't been on me with my snare drum technique, I just wouldn't have been as good a keyboard [percussion] player," she says. Developing good snare drum technique is obviously as important in Toronto as it is in Montreal and elsewhere. And while she's made a successful career for herself, Johnston has thought with some concern about those of her students who aspire to do the same. She says, "Sometimes I wonder, 'What the heck am I teaching students marimba for? What's the point? How many are going to become marimba soloists?' But I do believe that it's such an expressive instrument that it really helps the percussionist in general. Whether they do an orchestral career, world music, or whatever, they have that perspective in their percussion playing." □