Daniel Levitan: An Examination of his Compositional Approach with an Analysis of *Marimba Four Hands*

D.M.A. Document

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Gregory Austin Lyons, B.M.E., M.M.

Graduate Program in Music

The Ohio State University

2011

Document Committee:

Dr. Susan Powell, Advisor

Dr. Timothy Gerber

Dr. Russel Mikkelson

Dr. Robert Ward
Copyright by

Gregory Austin Lyons

2011
Abstract

Daniel Levitan is the composer of several well-known works for percussion, some of which are scored exclusively for non-pitched instruments such as *Variations on a Ghanaian Theme* (1981) (cowbells, temple blocks, tom-toms) and *Septet* (1981) (triangle, cymbal, cowbells, cabasa, bongos, timbales, rototom), alongside others that are scored for only pitched instruments like *Marimba Quartet* (1987) and *Duet for Marimba and Vibraphone* (1979). A wide variety of influences have molded Levitan’s particular approach to composition. These influences include the study of North Indian tabla drumming, Latin percussion instruments and styles, and keyboard percussion. Additionally, he studied composition and percussion at Bennington College where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1976. Also influential to his compositional approach have been his many years of experience in the field of piano technology where he has established his career.

His inspiration to compose music waned during the years in which his children were born and raised. In recent years, however, he has entered a new phase of compositional activity. Between 2006-2007, he wrote a set of duos for non-specified, non-pitched percussion entitled *Eight Two-Part Inventions*. In 2008, he completed *Marimba Four Hands*, a cycle of five movements for two players utilizing one marimba. He is currently composing a quintet that involves pitched and non-pitched percussion.
This document provides a more complete view of Levitan’s influences and identifies overarching aspects of his compositional style. A particular emphasis is placed on his approach to keyboard percussion writing. For that discussion, *Marimba Four Hands* is examined since it represents Levitan’s most current compositional thinking with regard to keyboard percussion. During the research stage of the document’s preparation, the author presented a lecture recital that involved a performance of excerpts from *Marimba Four Hands*. Consequently, a brief section offering information related to performance demands and considerations complements the work’s formal discussion. Concluding the document are appendices that list Levitan’s published works and include personal interviews conducted by the author.
To Troy Bunkley for enthusiastically introducing me to percussion
Acknowledgments

I extend thanks first and foremost to Daniel Levitan for offering his time and input toward the research contained in this document. It was a pleasure to hear your story and learn more about your motivations as a composer. I remain an even greater admirer of your music than before this project began.

I wish to especially thank Dr. Susan Powell, Dr. Timothy Gerber, Dr. Russel Mikkelson, and Dr. Robert Ward for their willingness to serve on my Doctoral Committee. Your dedication and commitment to the students and community of Ohio State speaks for itself. I am indebted to each of you for your time, your thoughtful critique, and your encouragement.

I wish to also thank my percussion instructors Dr. Susan Powell, Mr. Joseph Krygier, Dr. Andrew Spencer, and Dr. Kathleen Kastner. You have never failed to inspire, motivate, and engage me through your unique and diverse endeavors as percussion artists and teachers. I count myself entirely lucky to have had the good fortune of studying with the four of you, and I will always be completely grateful for your patience, expertise in the field, and careful guidance.

To Graduate Studies Committee Chair Dr. Patrick Woliver, thanks for your oversight and helpful guidance throughout the navigation of this degree. Also, to Becky
Chappell, Paul Lockwood, Sarah Burson, and all the many other staff members who make the School of Music operate so smoothly and effectively, much thanks.

I am enormously grateful for family, friends and colleagues in Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Louisiana. Their support has been the driving force behind any accomplishment I have so far achieved.

The unconditional love of my parents, Dennis and Rosana, has been a constant in my life that I can never fully repay. Thanks also to April and Jerry.

To my past colleagues and friends in Missouri: Diana, Michael, Bill, Jim, Valeska, and Josh, thanks for your support and for so many wonderful memories with the Cardinal Pride Band.

To The Ohio State University percussion studio members, thanks for your incredibly inspiring practice ethics and attitudes. For assisting me on my lecture recital and for being my fellow coffee confidant, I especially thank Darin Olson. To former D.M.A. colleagues Kim and Dave, thanks also for your insight and friendship.

Thanks to the non-members of the Central Ohio Emergent Cohort who shared life and un/faith with me for two years in Columbus: Nick, Jane, Jesse, Kellye, Jon, Zack, Eve, Kara, Adam, Andrew, Julia, Chris, Noel, Kristin, Chad, Nancy, Scot, Mary and Bo.

To Dean Edward Jacobs and Dr. Kenneth Robbins, thank you for affording me the opportunity to complete this document during my first year and a half at Louisiana Tech University. To the faculty and students at Tech, thanks also for your kindness and support.
During this last stage in particular, I wish to acknowledge my dear friend, Dr. Heather McCollum. Your persistent encouragement and advice from start to finish was truly invaluable to me. Your editing comments were so helpful. I am also grateful for the important insight you shared from your field with regard to the interview process. Thanks finally to Wes, Mike, Jen, Irene, Ian, Ellie, Heath, Heather, and Beau for the laughter and friendship over the last year.
Vita

1979.................................................................Born, Poplar Bluff, MO

2001.................................................................Bachelor of Music Education
Conservatory of Music,
Wheaton College

2002-2004...........................................................Graduate Teaching Assistant
School of Music,
Central Michigan University

2004.................................................................Master of Music
Percussion Performance
Central Michigan University

2004-2007...........................................................Assistant Band Director
Webb City Schools,
Webb City, Missouri

2009-present.....................................................Assistant Professor
School of the Performing Arts,
Louisiana Tech University

Fields of Study

Major Fields: Music

Areas of Emphasis: Percussion Performance
Music Education
Table of Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................................ii
Dedication........................................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................................v
Vita..................................................................................................................................................viii
List of Illustrations..........................................................................................................................xiii

Chapter One: Introduction...............................................................................................................1
  1.1: Categories of Composers Writing for Percussion.................................................................1
  1.2: Daniel Levitan’s Unique Position.......................................................................................2
  1.3: Levitan’s Unique Sound.......................................................................................................3
  1.4: Levitan’s Compositional Output.........................................................................................9
  1.5: Purpose of Study................................................................................................................11
  1.6: Need for Study..................................................................................................................11
  1.7: Review of Literature.........................................................................................................13
  1.8: Limitations of Study..........................................................................................................17
  1.9: Research Method...............................................................................................................17
  1.10: Document Organization..................................................................................................19

Chapter Two: Biography of Daniel Levitan...............................................................................21
B.1: Telephone Interview from January 4, 2010......................................................94
B.2: Telephone Interview from March 18, 2010....................................................102
B.3: Telephone Interview from October 22, 2010...................................................119
List of Illustrations

Illustration 1.1: *Septet*, mm. 13-14..........................................................................................4

Illustration 1.2: *Eight Two-Part Inventions, No. 7*, mm. 48-63........................................6

Illustration 1.3: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 7-10.................................7

Illustration 1.4: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 78-79..........................8

Illustration 1.5: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 80-82..........................8

Illustration 1.6: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” m. 83.................................8

Illustration 4.1: *Marimba Quartet*, Mvt. 2, Mar. 1, mm. 161-162.................................42

Illustration 4.2: *Marimba Four Hands*, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. 1, mm. 19-20.....43

Illustration 4.3: *Marimba Four Hands*, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. 1, mm. 3-4.........43

Illustration 4.4: *Duet for Marimba and Vibraphone*, Mar., mm. 5-6............................44

Illustration 4.5: *Marimba Quartet*, Mvt. 2, Mar. 1, mm. 134-135..............................44

Illustration 4.6: *The Redwood Box*, Duet IV., mm. 56-59............................................45

Illustration 4.7: *Marimba Four Hands*, “In the Night Kitchen,” mm. 34-35.............45

Illustration 4.8: *Recitative*, Mar.-Upper Register, m. 28..............................................46

Illustration 4.9: *Duo for Violin & Marimba*, mm. 120-121............................................47

Illustration 4.10: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin Down,” Mar. II, m. 6...............48

Illustration 4.11: Diagram of the middle and edge of the keyboard percussion bars......49

Illustration 4.12: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” m. 15.................................50

Illustration 4.13: *Marimba Suite No. 2*, Mvt. III., mm. 176-177..............................50
Illustration 4.14: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. II, m. 49.............52
Illustration 4.15: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 25-26.........................52
Illustration 5.1: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” mm. 7-8.......................55
Illustration 5.2: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. II., m. 1.............58
Illustration 5.3: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. I., m. 26.............58
Illustration 5.4: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. II., mm. 1-2.........59
Illustration 5.5: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” mm. 19-24...............60
Illustration 5.6: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” m. 86.........................61
Illustration 5.7: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” m. 1....................................61
Illustration 5.8: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 16-19.........................62
Illustration 5.9: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 93-97..........................63
Illustration 5.10: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 187-188......................63
Illustration 5.11: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 192-196......................64
Illustration 5.12: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” Mar. I., mm. 1-2...............64
Illustration 5.14: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 202-204......................65
Illustration 5.15: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 1-2......................66
Illustration 5.16: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” m. 7.............................67
Illustration 5.17: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 59-60....................67
Illustration 5.18: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 27-28.....................68
Illustration 5.20: Marimba Four Hands, “Short’nin’ Bread,” mm. 12-20.................70
Illustration 5.21: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 4-8.............................71
Illustration 5.22: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 27-30.....................72
Illustration 5.23: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 50-53.....................72
Illustration 5.24: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 75-79.....................73
Illustration 5.25: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 99-101.....................74
Illustration 5.26: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Goodnight Moon,” mm. 32-41.....................76
Illustration 5.27: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Goodnight Moon,” mm. 113-116.................77
Illustration 5.28: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 1-2.............................79
Illustration 5.29: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 1-6...............................81
Illustration 5.30: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 1-6 (stylistic sticking).....82
Chapter One: Introduction

Categories of Composers Writing for Percussion

When learning a new piece of music, percussionists are often interested in determining how the background of the composer has been impressed on the music itself. Knowledge of a composer’s formal training and subsequent life experiences has the potential to bring about a more informed and persuasive performance in the hands of a capable musician.

Composers writing music for percussion today generally fall into one of two categories. The first is made up of individuals who not only compose, but also happen to be first and foremost skilled percussion performers. Compositions by these individuals sometimes feel more natural to a percussionist than those produced by individuals unskilled in percussion performance. Whether this tendency is purposeful or unintentional, the performer often notices it in a very tangible way. Since percussion performance requires a type of kinesthesia uncommon to other instrument families, this tendency comes as no surprise. It only follows that composers skilled in percussion performance might be more inclined to physically work through the mechanics of a piece when making important compositional choices. In so doing, such composers would then be able to ensure that what they have written is in fact playable. Of course not every composer considers playability to be important in the first place, as any number of
extended techniques and advancements in the literature might reasonably serve to illustrate. But as one category of individuals writing music for percussionists, composers who are primarily percussion performers serve as an important example.

Another category of composers writing music for percussion today includes individuals who, regardless of their skill level as percussion performers, happen to be positioned in academia in some discipline. As such, these composers, because of their circumstances, are more prone to an immediate awareness of and familiarity with the most current compositional trend or device. Performers of percussion music by these composers would have no reason to necessarily expect the same kinesthetic ease seen in the compositions written by percussion performers. Instead they might assume a more idiomatically obtuse composition, one that does not necessarily consider playability. Because these composers presumably write music for various mediums, performers might expect to encounter a composition that reflects technical qualities uncommon to percussion instruments. Either way, composers in academia represent a second important category of individuals currently writing music for percussion.

**Daniel Levitan’s Unique Position**

Daniel Levitan is a composer who fits neither of the categories described above. His several works for solo and chamber percussion first date to the mid-1970s and continue to the present. However, unlike many composers of percussion music, he does
not also perform percussion music.¹ Neither does he write music from an academic setting in a composition department at a college or university. Instead, he is an active piano technician who composes music at his own leisure. This atypical position—outside academia, and outside the world of percussion performers—makes Daniel Levitan a unique voice among composers writing for percussion today.

Since his work as a composer has existed on the periphery, the mere fact that any of his music has endured speaks to the significance of his abilities. Evidence of those abilities can be seen in the sheer artistic merit of his compositions, which have been performed by numerous high school, college, and professional percussion ensembles and soloists.

Levitan’s Unique Sound

There is a specific sound that typifies Levitan’s style of writing, whether for pitched or non-pitched instruments. That sound is often made clear by a frequent use of articulation markings, as seen in his composition, Septet (1981) for triangle, cymbal, cowbells, cabasa, bongos, timbales, and rototom (Illustration 1.1).² The inclusion of staccato markings, accents, hand damping, pitch bending, damping while striking, and performing on alternative playing zones are all seen in the brief excerpt that follows.

---

¹ Levitan did perform percussion in college and in subsequent years; however, he does not consider himself a performer today. The following chapter will provide a more complete description of Levitan’s formal training and performance experiences during and after his years as a student.

Levitan’s consistent use of a variety of articulation markings adds a layer of complexity to the performance demands of his music, a topic that will be addressed in Chapter Five of this document. The articulation markings seen in his music also provide a sonic inflection to otherwise static repetitions of similar rhythmic figures.

Another defining aspect of Levitan’s sound is that it involves the frequent employment of asymmetrical meters and multiple meter changes. Sometimes these meter
shifts involve metric modulations.\textsuperscript{3} Also, they commonly shift the listener’s perception of the beat.

Asymmetrical meters are seen prominently in his latest duo for non-pitched percussion, \textit{Eight Two-Part Inventions} (2006-2007).\textsuperscript{4} In the score, Levitan requires the performers to choose their own specific tempi, dynamics, and instrument combinations. The following example displays a similar emphasis on articulation markings as the previous illustration, but with the added inclusion of “ghost” notes, i.e. notes played lightly as a sort of reverse accent. In addition to his use of a non-traditional time signature (27/16), notice particularly the metric modulations that occur between each meter change. For example, the eighth note in measure 48 of Illustration 1.2 becomes the sixteenth note in measure 49.

\textsuperscript{3} A metric modulation is a compositional device created by twentieth-century composer Elliott Carter (b. 1908), whereby a particular subdivision of the beat in one time signature becomes a different type of subdivision in another time signature.

An additional overriding feature in the case of Levitan’s pitched percussion writing is his particular harmonic language. Distinctly tonal and constantly peppered with 7th, 9th, and 11th chords, his music draws some degree of influence from contemporary harmonies and voicings as heard in jazz or pop music. One of his characteristic harmonic progressions can be seen in the illustrations that follow. The
excerpts are taken from *Marimba Four Hands* (2008), Daniel Levitan’s most recent work for keyboard percussion, which will be the topic of much further analysis later in this document. In the examples shown, Levitan writes a Major 9\(^{th}\) chord soon followed by another Major 9\(^{th}\) chord written a minor third higher. In this progression, the 5\(^{th}\) and 9\(^{th}\) scale degrees in each first Major 9\(^{th}\) chord act as pivot pitches that become the new 3\(^{rd}\) and 7\(^{th}\) scale degrees in each second Major 9\(^{th}\) chord. Illustrations 1.3 through 1.6 provide examples of this progression.

Illustration 1.3: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 7-10 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

---

Illustration 1.4: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 78-79
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

Illustration 1.5: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 80-82
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

Illustration 1.6: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” m. 83
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.
When asked about the prevalence of Major 9th chords found in his pitched percussion music and about their connection in his mind to chords found in jazz/pop idioms, he responded:

That's a very pop gesture. That’s an incredibly pop gesture. You know, I really like that sound. A pop musician thinks of it as a triad, say like a C major triad with F in the bass. To a classical theorist, it's like what is that? That's like a major seven nine. But this business of having a triad in the treble and then something else in the bass--and that particular one--I'm fond of it, and I overuse it [emphasis added].

**Levitan’s Compositional Output**

To date, Levitan has published fourteen compositions. These include two solos, seven duets, three trios, one quartet, and one septet. In addition, his website lists fourteen works “In Manuscript,” all of which may be obtained by contacting him directly. These include one concertino, one concerto, one duet, two trios, seven quartets, one quintet, and one work for large wind ensemble. A category of “Unlisted Works” is also mentioned on his website.

With only one exception, his works can be neatly divided into compositions scored exclusively for non-pitched percussion instruments, and compositions scored only


7. This duet may actually be a collection of duets, since Levitan’s website indicates *Tabla Duets* (plural). I refer to it here as “one duet,” because it is unclear how many duets are included in this collection; more importantly, my intention is simply to highlight the number of performers required in Levitan’s published and unpublished compositions, not the specific number of his total works.

for pitched percussion instruments. His motivation to avoid writing pieces that merge pitched and non-pitched percussion is two-fold. First, he is motivated by his own personal belief that his past attempts to merge the two were unsuccessful. Secondly, he wishes to avoid comparisons to seminal twentieth-century composers of classical music that inevitably arise in his mind whenever pitch is combined with non-pitched percussion. In keeping the two separated by only writing for one or the other, he reasons, “that whole question just goes away.”

Ironically, his only piece that does merge pitched and non-pitched percussion instruments, *Concerto for Marimba with Percussion Orchestra* (1978), earned recognition by winning a 1978 composition contest sponsored by the Percussive Arts Society, the professional organization of percussion performers, teachers, and enthusiasts. Still, Levitan considers the piece to be one of his least successful works. He reflected,

“It’s one of my least favorite pieces. I don’t feel it’s very successful at all. But it had a lot of instruments in it, and it was long, and it was very impressive looking. And it was cool, I mean, it did [work] in a way because it won this contest, and then people wanted to play it.”

---


Purpose of Study

A primary purpose of this study is to provide percussion students, teachers, and performers with a more detailed understanding of Daniel Levitan’s background and compositional approach. Guiding questions useful to this first purpose include the following: (1) What makes Levitan’s compositional voice unique among other composers writing for percussion today; (2) How has Levitan’s life trajectory contributed to his compositional aesthetic; (3) What are Levitan’s motivations as a composer, and how have those motivations influenced his compositional output over the years?

Another central aim of this study is to identify the predominant characteristics of Levitan’s compositional style, and subsequently to ascertain how and why those characteristics have evolved since Levitan first began composing. To illustrate these characteristics, musical examples will be utilized, and his newest composition, *Marimba Four Hands*, will be examined. Guiding questions useful to this second area of focus include the following: (1) What compositional features might be identified as uniquely characteristic of Levitan; (2) How does *Marimba Four Hands* resemble Levitan’s earlier keyboard percussion works, and how does it differ; (3) What are the main performance demands of *Marimba Four Hands*?

Need for Study

Today, high school and college percussion programs routinely perform many of Levitan’s compositions. He has been commissioned by a variety of professional performers and organizations. Some of these include Marimolin, the Manhattan
Marimba Quartet, the New Jersey Percussion Ensemble, Douglas Walter, David Samuels, and Ted Piltzecker.\textsuperscript{13} Yet in spite of his music’s prevalence on the concert stage, no serious study of his works or his compositional process has been conducted because no scholarly investigation into Levitan’s compositional style and approach has yet been offered.

The life and works of other important composers writing primarily for percussion today such as Nebojsa Zivkovic (b. 1962), Ney Rosauro (b. 1952), and Christopher Deane (b. 1957) have each begun to receive serious study; however Levitan’s contributions continue to be overlooked.\textsuperscript{14} This document is needed because his treatment of keyboard percussion writing, use of rhythm, and concern for articulation stand out as particularly unique; they deserve critical examination. Better understanding of Levitan’s background and compositional aesthetic will provide future percussion

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
students, educators, and performers with a greater awareness of how they might faithfully interpret his music.

Review of Literature

Currently, no scholarly articles or documents detailing Levitan’s background, influences, or compositional style can be found after a review of the literature. The websites of Levitan’s publishers, C. Alan Publications and Keyboard Percussion Publications, both provide brief biographical information related to his educational pedigree. These sites also include the names of several of his influential teachers during and after college. Levitan’s personal website, http://www.danlevitanmusic.com, contains the most thorough account to be found online. In addition to the biographical material duplicated on the sites of his publishers, his site also lists the many individuals and organizations that have commissioned him to compose new works. Information related to instrumentation, available recordings, score examples, audio excerpts, publishers, and brief program notes of his works are listed on his website.

Short reviews of several of Levitan’s compositions were discovered in various volumes of *Percussive Notes.* George Frock, Julia Gaines, Scott Herring, and Brian Zator each review individual movements of Levitan’s *Eight Two-Part Inventions* (2006-2007); Robert Chappell reviews *Variations on a Ghanaian Theme* (1981); Jim Lambert

---


16. *Percussive Notes* is the bi-monthly publication of the Percussive Arts Society.
reviews *Marimba Quartet* (1987); Lisa Rogers reviews *Marimba Suite No. 2* (1984); and John Raush reviews *Trio* (1980) and *Baroque Suite* (1981). These reviews describe general parameters about the compositions in reference, but are not meant to provide the type of thorough examination this document seeks to put forth.

Similar studies that examine the biographies and compositional styles of other important composers writing for percussion today have been offered in recent years. Examples of these studies include Jonathan Ryan Latta’s D.M.A. Document on American composer Eric Ewazen (b. 1954), Brian Edward Zator’s D.M.A. Dissertation on Japanese

composer Minoru Miki (b. 1930), and Grant B. Dalton’s D.M.A. Document on Australian composer Nigel Westlake (b. 1958).  

Latta provides a brief discussion of Eric Ewazen’s career, examines a selection of Ewazen’s works for percussion, and provides an analysis of Ewazen’s *Concerto for Marimba and String Orchestra* with suggestions for performance practice. He also includes personal interviews of Ewazen as well as She-e Wu, the artist who premiered the *Concerto*.

Zator begins with an introductory chapter on the significance of Minoru Miki’s *Time for Marimba* and *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*. Next, he discusses Miki’s biographical information. He then offers an analysis of *Time* and *Concerto*, followed by an examination of five compositional techniques shared between the two works. Additionally, he provides information about the performance demands of the compositions and, finally, gives suggestions for future research.

---
Dalton highlights specific life experiences that shaped the musical career of Nigel Westlake. Following, he devotes a chapter to the analysis of Westlake’s *Omphalo Centric Lecture*. Later, he provides information regarding various versions of *Omphalo* and concludes with suggestions for rehearsal techniques that have proven successful when used by selected performers of the piece.

Since no study related to Levitan could be found in the current available literature, the author chose to model this document on the D.M.A. documents of Latta, Zator, and Dalton. These documents were examined because of their connections, both conceptually and structurally, to this document. The author compared the approaches made by Latta, Zator, and Dalton with regard to their (1) incorporation of composer background; (2) method of analysis; (3) discussion of performance practice; and (4) ideas for future research. However, comparisons of studies devoted to Levitan could not be made, because no such studies were discovered after an exhaustive review of the literature that involved electronic searches as well as searches by hand. Zator argues that Minoru Miki’s works merit study given the absence of “very little formal research.”

In the same way, this document fills a needed gap in the available literature by looking at the compositions of Daniel Levitan, a current composer of percussion music about whom no scholarly investigation has yet been undertaken. This document represents the first of its kind to offer information related to Levitan’s background and compositional aesthetic.

---

Limitations of Study

This study provides information pertaining to Levitan’s background, compositional influences, approach to keyboard percussion writing, and his most recent composition. It is not meant to be an exhaustive study of Levitan’s published and unpublished works. Illustrations are limited to his published works, with a particular focus on those for keyboard percussion; all are related directly or indirectly to the discussion of Marimba Four Hands. An in-depth examination of his works for non-pitched percussion is beyond the scope of this study.

Research Method

The research put forward in this document is based principally on qualitative research interviews conducted by the author with Daniel Levitan. These interviews occurred by telephone on January 4, March 18, and October 22, 2010. Transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed and incorporated into the document. For a final reliability check, the author’s analyses of the interviews were next given to Levitan for perusal in an unfinished version of the document. Once examined, the analyses were then returned and incorporated into the finished version. This step ensured the accuracy of the transcriptions. It also ensured a more faithful representation of Levitan’s ideas, statements, and sentiments as interpreted by the author’s analyses.
Qualitative research interviews by definition draw philosophical grounding from a “postmodern perspective on knowledge construction.” Since a purpose of this document is to determine how Levitan’s life trajectory has influenced his compositions, a qualitative research interview is well suited. As Steiner Kvale (1938-2008), an authority in the field of qualitative research, has written, “The qualitative research interview has a unique potential for obtaining access to and describing the lived everyday world.”

Levitan’s “lived everyday world” as a piano tuner bears a striking discord to the everyday worlds of other composers writing for percussion today.

Analyses of Levitan’s published compositions were also an essential part of the research put forward in this document. The extent and scope of these analyses were considerably guided by Levitan’s own reflections during the interviews themselves. For example, when Levitan explained that he uses “rhythm as a basis of composition,” a decision was made to bring greater analytical focus to this document’s discussion about his treatment of rhythm over and above his treatment of harmony and melody. When he remarked that “the stuff in the middle, the traditions and the whole formal thing, starts to become clear, and you sort of write stuff to fill in gaps” as a conclusion to the assembly of what has already become “a good composition,” a decision was made to

---


21. Ibid., 54.

concentrate less attention on Levitan’s concern for large musical forms, and more on his concern for the “musical little nugget[s]” themselves.23


Document Organization

In Chapter Two, this document presents a biographical sketch of Daniel Levitan. Musical experiences and other important life experiences from his childhood, his college years, and his career in the field of piano technology are all discussed.

Chapter Three provides insight into Levitan’s compositional style and seeks to understand how his diverse influences have impacted that style. It includes five sections relating to his focus on rhythm, his emphasis on practicality, his belief in music’s communicative role, his organic approach to the compositional process, and his way of viewing composition as a craft.


Information specific to Levitan’s way of writing for keyboard percussion is identified in Chapter Four. Illustrations excerpted from various works are provided in order to present common threads of stylistic unity.

*Marimba Four Hands* is the centerpiece of Chapter Five. The work’s individual movements are examined from a formal standpoint. Several illustrations are offered to showcase important features. This chapter also includes a section related to the performance demands specific to the piece.

In Chapter Six, concluding thoughts are presented along with suggested ideas for future research.

Appendices to the document include a list of published compositions and personal interviews conducted by the author.
Chapter Two: Biography of Daniel Levitan

Childhood

Daniel Levitan was born in Geneva, New York on November 30, 1953. His father served in the United States Air Force, a fact that resulted in multiple relocations of the Levitan family during his childhood. But at each new setting, his mother, a trained musician, established a private voice studio where she gave lessons to several students. For this reason, some of Levitan’s earliest music-related memories are the lingering refrains of Puccini and Menotti arias heard echoing throughout their home. Mrs. Levitan obtained both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music at The Juilliard School where she studied voice. Not only did she teach private lessons, but she also organized and conducted several choruses. The young Levitan’s fascination was sparked by this early introduction to music. As a child and into adolescence, he recalls always thinking, “Music was the greatest thing in the world.”

Mary Blue Morris

When he was around ten years old, he developed a desire to play the piano and soon began taking private lessons. His piano teacher, Mary Blue Morris, happened to have a background that was not just restricted to piano instruction, but also more broadly

emphasized and embraced a comprehensive approach to music teaching. He remembers her to have been a “complete musician.”² So when Levitan found himself becoming somewhat unmotivated to practice, he was able to stop studying piano with her and to start studying composition instead. She introduced him to Bach’s *Chorales* and to the study of species counterpoint. By eighth grade, he began to write short works at the piano. This early musical training would provide a useful backdrop for his future endeavors in college and in his work as a composer. He considers his study with Mary Blue Morris to have been an important influence on his musical development.

Bennington College

Levitan views himself in high school to have been “kind of a science kid,”³ but he also developed a particular affinity for creative writing. It was this interest in fact that compelled him to attend Bennington College. One of his favorite authors, Bernard Malamud (1914-1986), author of *The Natural* (1952), was a professor at that institution. Believing he might have an opportunity to engage with the famous novelist, he entered college as a literature major.⁴ Quickly, he learned that his interactions with the author would be limited at best, due to Malamud’s small teaching load. This realization caused Levitan to become somewhat disillusioned with the idea of majoring in literature.⁵ At the same time, he was becoming increasingly interested in the College’s music department.

---


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.
By the end of his first year, he decided to switch majors and would eventually earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from the College in 1976 having studied composition.

It was during his years at Bennington that Levitan first began composing new works specifically for percussion. His interest to write for the genre was motivated by two factors: one was his growing awareness that the percussion ensemble music he had experienced did not sound like what he imagined it should. Second was his discovery that percussionists were generally eager to perform new music. In addition to studying composition in college, he also took percussion lessons from Marta Ptazynska (b. 1943), who taught at Bennington during his time there. Ptazynska studied with the French composition teacher Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), and is the well-known composer of many solo percussion works including *Space Model* (1971), *Graffito* (1988), and *Spider Walk* (1993). Despite Levitan’s work with Ptazynska, he remembers believing that his skill level as a percussion performer was never remarkable. This belief was fueled by recognition that his introduction to percussion studies came relatively late when compared to his peers.

**North Bennet Street School**

Between his junior and senior years at Bennington, Levitan spent one year studying at the North Bennet Street School, a craft and trade institution, located in Boston, Massachusetts. A friend of Levitan’s had recently attended the school, which piqued his interest and caused him to consider their program in piano technology. He

---

eventually decided to complete that program of study before returning to Bennington for his final year of college. When asked about this decision, he explained,

> I didn’t see a way I was going to really be able to make a living in music. I didn’t want to teach; I didn’t really feel inspired by any of the compositional styles that I found in the academy; I didn’t want to be in a composition department where I would have to play politics with the other composers and pretend to like their music even if I didn’t.\(^7\)

The training Levitan received at the North Bennet Street School proved to be a vital component of his future career path. Throughout the years, it has enabled him to compose at his own leisure while at the same time providing a dependable source of income for his family. How this career choice has impacted his compositional style will be addressed in the following chapter.

**Betty Ford’s Visit**

In college, Levitan’s compositions were written in what he describes as “basically in the style of the times [mid 1970s].”\(^8\) An incident during his final year at Bennington, however, catalyzed a shift in the direction of his compositional thinking. On May 22, 1976, First Lady Betty Ford visited the College to celebrate the opening of a campus arts center. For the ceremony in commemoration of the center, Levitan was asked to prepare a new composition. Less than a month earlier, he had traveled to New York City for the world premiere of Steve Reich’s (b. 1936) *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976). He remembers being very fond of Reich’s approach to orchestration and his use of rhythm in

---


8. Ibid.
particular, and as a result, he wrote his new work for the arts center in a “quasi-Steve Reich style.”\(^9\) The experience of writing that piece, surprisingly, forced Levitan to question his personal motivations even as a young composer. After the performance, he remembers making a deliberate decision to give up writing out of an attempt to satisfy anyone other than himself. He recalls thinking, “If I’m going to spend time writing—and I’m not going to make any money at it—I might as well write something that I really want to [write].”\(^{10}\)

### West Coast Studies

After graduating from Bennington, Levitan decided to move to California. During his two years there, he continued a personal quest to hone his compositional skills. His method of achieving these skills involved additional performance studies in percussion. As mentioned, he had already studied classical percussion at Bennington with Marta Ptazynska. Next, he began studying keyboard percussion with Thomas Hemphill who just a few years prior had been appointed to the San Francisco Symphony percussion section where he still performs today.

Levitan also began studying North Indian tabla while living in California. His teachers included Phil Ford and later Ray Spiegel, whom he studied with following his West Coast years. He explains that his motivation to learn tabla was two-fold: (1) He had a desire to write “music about rhythm;” and (2) he felt that his concept of rhythm was not

\(^{9}\) Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
as developed as he desired. Because of its highly structured rhythmic quality, he found tabla drumming to be a perfectly suitable choice of study. One consequence of this study was a 1977 article he wrote entitled “The Tabla as a Contemporary Chamber Instrument.” In the article, which was published in Percussive Notes, the journal of the Percussive Arts Society, Levitan provides a brief background of the drums, includes illustrations that demonstrate performance technique, and offers a compelling argument for the incorporation of tabla into future chamber percussion works. He has also written works that call for tabla. Tabla Duets and Tabla Trio are among the items listed “In Manuscript” on his website.

Return to the East Coast

Following the years he spent in California, Levitan moved back to the East Coast where he soon discovered within himself a growing interest in Latin percussion instruments and styles. “In New York, Latin music was everywhere,” he commented. The study of tabla had provided Levitan with a way of understanding rhythm from a linear standpoint. In order to experience a way of looking at rhythm from “a more vertical approach,” he began studying congas with Latin percussionist Frank Malabe.


14. Ibid.
Levitan’s work, *Conservatory Garden*, is an unpublished quartet for non-pitched percussion written at the time in which he studied with Malabe. Unsurprisingly, the piece is stylistically influenced by Latin styles. It draws its title from a similarly named arboretum located near the facility where Malabe gave music lessons, and by which Levitan regularly passed on his way to study.

**Time Away from Composing**

After Levitan composed *Canon at the Bar* (1990), a rudimental duet for two snare drums, seventeen years lapsed before his next published work, *Eight Two-Part Inventions*, was written. While a few “In Manuscript” works were composed during those years, the majority of his compositions—and arguably his most well-known works—were all written during the roughly ten year period following his graduation from Bennington College.

When asked about the cause of this temporary break in compositional activity, he explained that he essentially experienced a period of disenchantment with the idea of composing. The cause of this disenchantment was multi-layered. On one level, he simply did not find himself to be that satisfied with what he was producing. At a more penetrating level, he admits to not really believing in his music during his early stages as a composer. Also, he grew somewhat bored with the idea of investing so much of his time and effort into what he perceived to be a small sector of the musical world: percussionists and audiences comprised of the family members of those percussionists.

---

The busy side of raising his children combined with an increased amount of opportunities in his career as a piano technician contributed to this period of compositional inactivity.

**Revival of Compositional Activity**

Over the last few years, Levitan has been reminded of music’s importance “in the lives of people.”\(^{16}\) This reminder has provoked in him a desire to compose again. Something that has helped him see this importance has been the experience of attending rehearsals in which students have been engaged in performances of his music. During these rehearsals, he has had the opportunity to view firsthand the visible excitement and sheer enjoyment on display by the performers.

Another important factor he cites as being instrumental for his return to composition has been the experience of having children. “All kids love music,” he observes, and his were no different.\(^ {17}\) With this knowledge, it is all the more significant that *Marimba Four Hands* is dedicated to his daughter and son, Rebecca and Abe.

**Life in New York City**

Today, Levitan lives in New York City where he has established his career as a piano tuner. He is actively involved with the Piano Technicians Guild, an organization for which he frequently offers lectures and training seminars. Over the years, he has written articles, given presentations at national conventions related to piano technology,

---


provided training to other piano technicians, and invented tools specific to piano tuning. Incidentally, Levitan confesses to a certain amount of personal surprise at the degree of fulfillment experienced as a result of his work in the field.

The more I’ve done it [piano tuning], the more satisfying it is; it’s a real craft and there’s a lot to be said for having a craft as opposed to the academic life where a lot of your success depends on politics–you know, bullshit–because you can write a piece and say hey this is great, and who’s gonna say it’s not, really? When you do a craft, it’s like you do it or you don’t. Did you fix it or didn’t you? The feedback is immediate and you’re working with the real world. And I find that very challenging and very satisfying. Doing something successfully is very satisfying...because there’s no question that you actually did it.18

The following chapter will continue this discussion of how Levitan’s work in the field of piano tuning has impacted his approach to composition.

Chapter Three: Compositional Style and Influences

Chapter Overview

This chapter will examine Daniel Levitan’s compositional approaches. First, it will consider the pivotal role that rhythm plays in his writing. Second, it will identify the practical elements of his approach. Third, it will discuss the impact of his view that music should always communicate something from the mind of the composer. Fourth, it will examine the four steps of his compositional process. Finally, it will reflect on how his work in piano technology has influenced his music.

Centered on Rhythm

Levitan describes a point in which he realized he wanted “to write music about rhythm.”¹ It was this realization that prompted him to begin a ten-year period of study of tabla. Because of the complex rhythmic structure inherent in Indian music and specifically tabla playing, he recognized that he would acquire the means for using “rhythm as a tool for development.”² He also admits that his concept of rhythm was not as established as he desired.

¹. Levitan, interview, January 4, 2010.
². Ibid.
Significantly, Levitan attributes the higher occurrence of chamber settings in his works to be a result of his concern for rhythm. To illustrate the point, he compares his approach to that of a composer with an alternate focus. For example, if a composer originally thought of music from a starting place based around sonority, then that composer might be more likely to write for larger settings. But since Levitan thinks of music as rhythm, he finds that all his compositional needs can be sufficiently met by smaller settings.

This focus on rhythm, from his earliest to his most recent works, provides a sense of continuity to Levitan’s overall approach as a composer. Choosing this focus is “hardly a conscious” decision for him anymore in fact. It’s simply how he “thinks of music,” i.e., as a rhythm of some sort.  

Practical Approach

Levitan’s composition teacher at Bennington was Henry Brant (1913-2008), a composer whose primary interests were centered on the creation of spatial music. Brant also composed music for radio and film, however, and it is this experience that Levitan cites as having been most influential on his own compositional style.

He [Brant] had learned how to get a set of parts out, put them on a stand, and get people to play them right off the bat. And this was his big thing: be practical


4. Spatial music refers to the practice of composing music for a particular space, with all of its distinct acoustical and structural features.
[emphasis added]. So although musically he had zero influence on me, from a practical standpoint, he’s my idol still [emphasis added].

Arguably, a part of this practical element for Levitan has manifested itself in the use of precise indications, which outline his musical intentions. These indications, as mentioned earlier, are musically presented in the form of accents, “ghost” notes, hand damping, and striking a bar while damping. These techniques are found throughout many of Levitan’s works, including Marimba Four Hands, and will be discussed in further detail later in this document.

Another side of this practical element is seen in Levitan’s choice to write for smaller settings. Percussion performers are often asked to move and maintain large inventories of percussion instruments and hardware. Levitan, however, finds that by limiting his use of instruments, all the while choosing his sonorities with intent, he’s able to keep his focus on what’s important: the music. Additionally, the practicality of asking for smaller numbers of instruments has potentially resulted in more performances of his music. “Sometimes you get performances just because” groups and individuals with limited resources are enabled.

______________________________
6. A “ghost” note is best understood as the opposite of an accent. Levitan’s use of “ghost” notes will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.
7. Hand damping is the process of damping the marimba bar after it has been struck thereby prematurely halting its natural decay.
Music as Communication

Central to Levitan’s thinking with regard to composition is his belief that one of music’s primary aims is to communicate. While he acknowledges that composers hold varying opinions about music’s function, his personal rule is simple: real music first begins as a musical thought in the composer’s head. Next, that thought is notated. Those written notes then become the vehicle through which the performer attempts to rediscover and best represent the composer’s original musical thought.

Levitan is also motivated to communicate through music for the sheer fact that music composition and learning is such a large investment of time. A composer spends hours of time and energy creating and crafting a composition; a performer spends hours of time and energy interpreting and learning that composition. “If you’re going to [spend that much time and energy],” Levitan asserts, “[why not] go for something from your musical self?”

The priority to communicate a message through music has also been the reason that Levitan has chosen to write in a tonal manner. Though he enjoys atonal compositions, he does not feel he is able to communicate through them and therefore avoids writing in that style.

Organic Method of Composition

Levitan’s method of composing new works can be described as organic, in the sense that he does not think up new music analytically. Instead, he allows new musical

fragments to naturally arise in his head. His compositional process can be broken into four distinct phases.

A first phase involves the creation of new motives. Often these motives are merely rhythmic in nature. Other times, melodic material is conceived in combination with the rhythmic material. Either way, these motives show up unannounced during moments when Levitan happens to be engaged in some sort of typical routine activity (i.e. brushing his teeth, taking out the trash, etc.). Much of the time, he admits, these musical ideas are rather uninteresting, but occasionally one of them catches his attention. Sometimes, he realizes the motive is actually part of another work. If he determines, however, that the motive truly “came out of [his] brain,” then he records it for later examination. After several months, he returns to the motive for a final appraisal of its uniqueness and usefulness.

After landing upon a musical fragment that seems interesting to him, Levitan proceeds to the next phase of the process: letting the fragment “sit in [his] brain.” At this point, the fragment will either develop or stagnate. As to what specific qualities enable one musical idea to grow and another to die, Levitan is left guessing:

I don’t know what it is about a musical germ that makes one pregnant with opportunity and the other one dead. It makes one meaningful and not the other one. I have no idea, but you can tell. You can tell when you hear it.

11. Ibid.
The useful motives are made obvious by the way in which they naturally give way to new keys, new time signatures, or new harmonies. If Levitan attempts to artificially transform a motive in this way only to find that it “doesn’t have any life to it,” he immediately discards it.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, a motive’s predisposition to have transformative potential can be identified as a critical feature of Levitan’s compositional process.

The third phase is comprised of transcribing the usable fragments. What results, however, is not always similar to the original fragment. Since Levitan imagines the music first in his head, he sometimes discovers that the pitches and rhythms “that were suggested” at first are not exactly what he thought they were once they begin to be transcribed.\textsuperscript{14} As a result, the final transcription is in actuality a conglomerate of the imagined and the realized, written versions.

Finally, Levitan pieces together what will become a complete composition. An essential part of this phase involves filling in “the stuff in the middle, the traditions and the whole formal thing,” which by this time have begun to take shape.\textsuperscript{15} Guiding his decisions of what to include and what not to include is an “emotional picture” or “emotional tone” that he assigns to his compositions.\textsuperscript{16} The decisions he made during the creation of \textit{Marimba Four Hands} were particularly influenced by an emotional tone,

\begin{enumerate}
\item Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Levitan primarily uses this approach with pitched percussion. “I [Levitan] don’t find much of an emotional content in the music that is straight [non-pitched] percussion.” Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.
\end{enumerate}
because of the work’s connection to his relationship with his children. An important benefit to having assigned an emotive quality to each individual movement of that work as well as earlier works is that it has brought an overall sense of unity to his style.

The four phases of Levitan’s compositional process illustrate his predilection for an organic, non-analytical approach to musical creativity. He explains,

> Basically it's just all soup in [in my brain]. And so the processing doesn't go analytically. Your subconscious is doing all that processing, and it knows when it gets the feeling of satisfaction that "OK, that's satisfying." But it doesn't know why. Now we can speculate why, but all I know is that there are times when I just find that that's a very satisfying thing to do.\(^{17}\)

Influences of Levitan’s Work as a Piano Technician

Levitan’s work in the field of piano technology has influenced his work in the field of music composition. The fact that he composes from a place outside of the academic environment has molded his perception of, and consequently his approach toward, the compositional process. Consider again the following statement Levitan made when reflecting on his decision to choose a career outside of the academy:

> When you do a craft, it’s like you do it or you don’t, you know? Did you fix it or didn’t you? The feedback is immediate, and you’re working with the real world. I find that very challenging and very satisfying.\(^{18}\)

Comfortably situated within his craft, as he is, he takes great stock in the very practical question of whether a product, first and foremost, functions properly. In the work he

---


does as a piano technician, that product might translate into the creation of a new tool to aid in the skill of piano tuning. Or perhaps, the product might work itself out as an enhanced tuning procedure.

As noted in Chapter Two, Levitan finds the guiding question, “Does it work?” to be both challenging and satisfying, because when something works, there is “no question that you actually did it.”¹⁹ When crafting a musical composition, he measures whether or not a musical idea works based on the presence or lack of propulsion. By propulsion, he is referring to a sense of musical forward-motion. In the craft of composing music, a work without propulsion is proof for Levitan that the piece simply does not work. For him, this sense is a very concrete and identifiable feature, one that he “looked for in every bar of Marimba Four Hands.”²⁰ His experience as a craftsperson even spills over into his choice of metaphors when speaking about the process: “it sort of takes over the gears, makes you move in a certain way.”²¹ If a sense of propulsion is not evident in a particular rhythm, then he dismisses it. Levitan explains, “What I’m looking for is something that’s going to make me move. And that’s my criterion.”²²

Another way that Levitan’s compositional approach relates to his craft is demonstrated by his unique focus on those who eventually “use” his music: the performers and the listeners. He thinks both about their level of interest and their degree

---

²⁰. Ibid.
²¹. Ibid.
²². Ibid.
of comfort throughout important phases of a particular work’s construction. The audience he has in mind during the compositional process tends to be his clients: ordinary people who love music. Therefore he writes music that he thinks will be interesting to the average listener. It is not uncommon, of course, for a composer to consider a work’s audience appeal or its performance demands. But as a craftsperson whose primary approach is guided by the central question, “Does it work?” these factors carry added significance.

The question, “Does it work?” is just one example of how Levitan’s approach to composition bears similarity to his experience in the field of piano tuning. Another example is seen in his stylistic approach to writing keyboard percussion music, a topic that will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four. The “normal” way of writing for keyboard percussion shares a strong relation to how a composer might similarly write for piano, wind, or string music. For each of those areas, a common compositional approach is to create a sense of line. One note is connected to its previous and consequential notes through “nuances of time and nuances of volume” thereby giving “the illusion of continuity.”

In contrast to a linear understanding of musical phrases and forms, however, Levitan thinks in terms of a three-dimensional space when composing. The illusion he seeks is not one of continuity, but of depth. He imagines a three-dimensional sculpture of sorts, in which “you have this varied pattern in front of your ears . . . with a dot way over

there in the right upper corner [and] a big blob close to you.”

Musical fragments open up to expanded interpretations when conceptually framed as three-dimensional structures rather than just single (homophonic) or multiple (polyphonic) lines. Expanded beyond an understanding that only connects individual notes to preceding and succeeding notes, Levitan’s musical imagination creates fragments of melodic material that he then allows to process until an idea has itself been transformed as a result of the journey.

Also central to Levitan’s compositional approach is the idea that “a legitimate composed musical phrase is [first] a musical thought in the composer’s head.” Just as a craftsperson has a tangible object with which to mold and manipulate, so Levitan prefers to work with an actual kernel of musical material. Rather than producing what he refers to as “music [which has been] generated as notes on the page,” he chooses to write music “with a message” which originated from “inside somebody.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined Levitan’s approach to composition. It (1) identified the central role of rhythm in his compositional process; (2) speculated on the impact of the practical approach modeled by his teacher, Henry Brant; (3) illustrated the importance of music’s communicative qualities to his compositional style; (4) presented his four-phased organic method of composition; and (5) elaborated on the effects to his


26. Ibid.
compositional approach made by a career path in the field of piano technology. The next chapter will focus on specific characteristics of his music for keyboard percussion.
Chapter Four: Aspects of Levitan’s Keyboard Percussion Writing

Chapter Overview

The features that characterize so much of Levitan’s keyboard percussion music are an outgrowth of his particular way of thinking about the marimba in terms of its expressive potential. A lot of marimba music tends to emphasize the instrument’s relationship to the piano. He views this approach as a wholly legitimate way to write for marimba, but his approach is quite different. Levitan’s marimba writing seeks to capitalize on the instrument’s more percussive roots. “I feel like the marimba works best, if it is [treated like] a rhythmic instrument . . . when it is [played] like a giant set of drums,” he opines.¹ When reflecting on the limited use of rolls² seen in his keyboard percussion writing, he compares his approach to the type of music heard on the Balafon, a xylophone from West Africa.³ Levitan describes that style as “just like drumming, it's like a drum set or something. It works great for me.”⁴ The objective of this chapter is to

---


2. When referring to keyboard percussion instruments, “rolls” are understood as repeatedly alternated single strokes that are generally employed as a way to create a type of sustained sound.


define what are the more predominant features of his keyboard percussion writing as influenced by his “rhythmic” approach to the marimba.

**Back Beat Motive**

One identifiable trend common to Levitan’s writings for pitched percussion involves the use of a Back Beat Motive employed in a high register. A back beat in music occurs when a series of notes accent the “off” beat or weak beat as opposed to the “on” beat or strong beat. This motive is used prominently in *Marimba Quartet* (1987) and is made clear by the upper C notated in Illustration 4.1.

Illustration 4.1: *Marimba Quartet*, Mvt. 2, Mar. 1, mm. 161-162
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

This same type of Back Beat Motive is heard on a high E-flat in the Marimba One part of “In the Night Kitchen” from *Marimba Four Hands* as shown in Illustration 4.2.


The Back Beat Motive seen in Levitan’s writing can be considered to represent another example of the way in which his approach has been influenced by pop music, since a driving back beat is a prevalent feature of that style.

**One Note Repeated Motive**

Another characteristic motive seen in many of Levitan’s keyboard percussion works involves the use of a distinctive repeated pattern on a single note. This pattern includes combinations of accented notes along with either “ghost” notes or unaccented notes as illustrated below in Illustrations 4.3 through 4.5.
Levitan compares these repeated figures to examples found in African Balafon music as previously mentioned. In this way, the use of the One Note Repeated Motive found in his music represents a specific example of how his approach to marimba writing has been influenced by a preference for a rhythmic-centric style of composition.

**Interlocking Sixteenth Note Motive**

Another device found in Levitan’s writing for keyboard percussion involves an Interlocking Sixteenth Note Motive split between two voices. This way of writing for two separate parts provides a seamless continuity to the musical line when played perfectly together. In some instances, the continuity is heard both rhythmically and melodically, since the two parts constantly share the same first or last pitch respectively. Illustration 4.6 provides an example of Levitan’s use of this motive as seen in his

composition, *The Redwood Box* (1978), a duet for marimba and vibraphone with optional percussion and cello accompaniment.\(^8\)

Illustration 4.6: *The Redwood Box*, Duet IV., mm. 56-59
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

In Illustration 4.7, the first and last pitches between the parts are not shared as seen in the previous illustration. However, the rhythmic employment remains the same.

Illustration 4.7: *Marimba Four Hands*, “In the Night Kitchen,” mm. 34-35
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

---

“Ghost” Notes

Those performers familiar with Levitan’s keyboard percussion music are already well aware that much of his writing calls for the use of “ghost” notes in addition to accents. A “ghost” note, as introduced in Chapter One can best be understood as the opposite of an accent. It is achieved by approaching the keyboard with the mallet at a lower starting height so that a lighter, softer sounding note results. Together with unaccented notes and accented notes, the addition of “ghost” notes present musical lines that contain varied combinations of specifically defined inflections. “Without ‘ghost’ notes, I cannot get what I’m hearing in my head down on paper,” Levitan reflects. For him, a phrase with only accents and unaccented notes “doesn’t have life to it.”

How Levitan and his publishers have chosen to notate “ghost” notes has varied from composition to composition. In Recitative (1985) for example, the “ghost” notes are indicated by the symbol, ✿, centered above each note head (Illustration 4.8).

Illustration 4.8: Recitative, Mar.-Upper Register, m. 28 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.


10. Ibid.

In *Duo for Violin & Marimba* (1987), an open diamond-shaped note head is used to indicate “ghost” notes.\(^\text{12}\) This option is perhaps more confusing to the performer than the previously used symbol, since an open diamond closely resembles a normally written half note as seen in Illustration 4.9.

![Illustration 4.9](image)

Illustration 4.9: *Duo for Violin & Marimba*, mm. 120-121
© C. Alan Publications, Inc. Used by permission.

In *Marimba Four Hands*, Levitan chooses to specify “ghost” notes by the use of parentheses around the note heads as seen in Illustration 4.10. Again, this option may be less clear to the performer than the symbols used in *Recitative*, since the performer’s eye is diverted between bits of information coming above the note head and information relayed directly on the note head.

---

As already mentioned, Levitan’s approach to the marimba is similar to how he might also approach a drum set. By incorporating “ghost” notes in his writing for marimba, it is likely that Levitan is imitating the sound heard in many styles of drum set performance in which “ghost” notes are infused most commonly on the snare drum.

**Hand Damping**

In addition to “ghost” notes, Levitan frequently chooses to include hand damping in his works for keyboard percussion. This technique prematurely stops the natural decay of the keyboard bar. It can be accomplished by lightly depressing a few fingers directly to the top surface of either the edge or the middle of each bar as needed (Illustration 4.11).
The bottom palm of the hand can also be used as an effective way to damp the bars. Depending on the amount of time given between the striking of the bar and the necessary damping, a performer may choose at times to use fingers and at other times to use the palm. The decision of whether to use the same hand or the opposite hand is also dependent upon the amount of time available to perform the damping. When possible, the use of the opposite hand may be preferred, since this option provides a more consistent approach by placing one technique (striking) in one hand and another technique (damping) in the other.

An “x” in place of the normal note head is used to reflect the damping technique in Levitan’s compositions. Unlike the evolving progression of symbols used to represent “ghost” notes, his way of indicating hand damping has remained consistent throughout his works for keyboard percussion.

In the second movement of *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” both performers are required to damp the bars simultaneously with both hands. The performer
may choose to use the palm for this occurrence given the movement’s tempo and the brief time allowed before the following struck notes are to be played (Illustration 4.12).

Illustration 4.12: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” m. 15  
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

One of the most challenging instances of hand damping to be found in Levitan’s music is seen in the third movement of *Marimba Suite No. 2* (1984). Not only is hand damping of the notes required, but also employed in this passage is the related technique of striking the bar while it is being damped with the other hand. In the example that follows (Illustration 4.13), this technique is identified by the use of a staccato marking. The performer must execute accented and unaccented notes in between the two types of damping. The passage is made all the more difficult by the marked 132 beats per minute.

Illustration 4.13: *Marimba Suite No. 2*, Mvt. III., mm. 176-177  
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.
Levitan’s use of hand damping provides a way to alter the articulation of keyboard bars. Another important benefit of the technique is that it can serve to enhance rhythmic precision and ensemble cohesiveness by requiring a timed movement during moments of rest. However, Levitan recognizes that excessive use of the technique adds to the performance demands of his compositions, so he makes an intentional effort to “keep a limited palette.”\(^\text{13}\) He also acknowledges that some performance venues are acoustically incapable of highlighting the subtle variations in bar decay that hand damping is intended to emphasize.

### Use of Rolls

Levitan views the act of rolling on the marimba less as a way to sustain the bar and more as a way to provide a textural change or special effect.

To me, a roll is not a way of getting an instrument that doesn’t sustain, marimba, and making it sustain. To me, [rolls are] a very particular effect, and to use [them] as a way of sustaining a note is not successful. That’s not what I am trying to do. I hate rolls, in many ways.\(^\text{14}\)

Despite these pointed comments, Levitan still makes use of rolls in his compositions from time to time, even for extended periods. The final movement of *Marimba Four Hands*, for example, is comprised entirely of rolled notes. However, in this case, the “illusion of sustain” works more effectively for Levitan, since unrolled notes are never introduced.

\(^{13}\) Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
The listener’s ear grows accustomed to a particular sound, which is continuously employed from start to finish.\textsuperscript{15}

In other movements of \textit{Marimba Four Hands}, rolls make short appearances. The Marimba Two part has a quick roll during the first movement, “In the Night Kitchen” (Illustration 4.14), and both players are asked to roll during the third movement, “Snoozin’ Down” (Illustration 4.15).

In both of these instances, Levitan’s use of rolls is not based on a desire to create a type of sustain. Rather, the inclusion of these rolls provides an expressive effect.

\textsuperscript{15} Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.
Rolls in other movements of *Marimba Four Hands* . . . tend to be particular expressive things like a note that goes towards another note. It's not because you wish the note would sustain longer and you can't get it to sustain. It is because it does this buzzy thing that seems musically expressive at that moment.¹⁶

This description illustrates how Levitan’s treatment of the marimba as primarily a rhythmic instrument overflows into the way he chooses to incorporate rolls.

---

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, identifiable features seen in Levitan’s works for keyboard percussion have been discussed. These features include three commonly used motives: (1) the Back Beat Motive; (2) the One Note Repeated Motive; and (3) the Interlocking Sixteenth Note Motive. Also discussed has been Levitan’s use of “ghost” notes and hand damping as well as his unique use of rolls. The following chapter will discuss in greater detail how these and other techniques are manifested in his piece, *Marimba Four Hands*.

---

Chapter Five: Analysis of *Marimba Four Hands*

**Chapter Overview**

*Marimba Four Hands* is a cycle for two performers on one 4-1/2 octave marimba. When played in its entirety, the piece is approximately 25 minutes in length. Levitan specifies in the score that the performers may choose to perform all five movements in sequence or to select only part of the collection during a performance of the work. It is dedicated to the composer’s two children, Rebecca and Abe. Consequently, the cycle is centered on a unifying theme of children’s songs. The movements of the cycle are titled (1) “In the Night Kitchen,” (2) “Soakin’ Wet,” (3) “Snoozin’ Down,” (4) “Short’n’ Bread,” and (5) “Goodnight Moon.” Respectively, they symbolize birth, play, sleep, food, and death. This chapter will examine each movement, identifying important background information, themes and rhythms.

“In the Night Kitchen”

The first movement, “In the Night Kitchen,” draws part of its inspiration from a children’s novel of the same name by author Maurice Sendak (b. 1928). Sendak is better known for another popular children’s novel titled *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). *In the Night Kitchen* chronicles the imaginary journey of a young boy named Mickey who
finds himself suddenly transported from his bed “into the light of the night kitchen.” In the kitchen are three bakers who begin to cook the boy after he falls into a large bowl of cake batter. Fortunately, Mickey remembers that the bakers need milk for the batter, which he then helps them procure before magically returning safely home from his journey back into bed. For Levitan, Sendak’s novel is best interpreted as an imaginative depiction of a young child’s innocent understanding of being born. He explains,

I think of that first movement as kind of like these three little busy bakers, making a kid. Especially when it goes into seven, it’s like they’re busy building this little kid. And at the end, it speeds up and they kick it out into the world.2

Additionally, and in similar fashion with other movements, he adds one brief line of text in the score at mm. 7-8 (Illustration 5.1). In this example the text is a direct quote from Sendak’s book.

Illustration 5.1: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” mm. 7-8 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.


When asked about the inclusion of text into the score of *Marimba Four Hands*, Levitan offered the following explanation:

[The text is] in the score because a lot of the stuff I write has words to it. And they’re often really stupid words, but they mean so much to me. And I don’t write the words in but they mean something to me. And so I put them in the score kind of as a little thing for myself.³

As Illustration 5.1 makes clear, the line of text in “In the Night Kitchen” is aligned with specific pitches in the Marimba Two melody. This melody can be characterized as an alternating pattern between an ascending minor third, followed by an alternating pattern of another ascending minor third that has been transposed down by an interval of a perfect fourth. The melody ends after a resolution back to the original pitch.

“In the Night Kitchen” is comprised of 86 measures which, when played at the written 94 beats per minute, lasts approximately three minutes. It is the briefest movement of the five in terms of duration, though not in terms of measure numbers.⁴ The key signature is comprised of three flats that are fixed throughout, a characteristic unique to this movement in that the other four movements contain multiple changes of key signature. The first 25 measures are written in a time signature of 4/4, but are then followed by a series of eight separate meter changes including time signatures of 7/8, 3/8, 3/4, 12/16, and 9/16. For each meter change, the eighth note or sixteenth note remains constant.

---

³ Levitan, interview, October 22, 2010.

⁴ “Snoozin’ Down” contains one less measure than “In the Night Kitchen,” but lasts about half a minute longer because of its slower tempo marking.
Beginning with the beat and a half anacrusis that opens the movement, Levitan introduces his characteristic “ghost” notes. These are interspersed between accented and unaccented notes. As already mentioned, Levitan finds that to truly reflect his musical ideas, “three very, very different dynamic levels” are needed. However, he is not referring to typical dynamic markings such as *forte* and *piano*, which never appear in the first four movements. Instead, Levitan is referring to the use of unaccented notes, accented notes, and “ghost” notes. Using this combination of articulations, he achieves three dynamic levels that provide him with the closest realization of the sounds he hears in his head. He is quick to maintain, however, that what he is “hearing in [his] head” as it is realized according to these three dynamic levels, does not “capture, fully, the music.” But it does “capture enough that a performer can say, ‘Oh, I get it,’” and is then able to “play it the way it kind of makes music.”

Levitan confesses to a certain degree of frustration over some of his earlier compositions precisely because what he heard in his head was not being produced in performances. “And you really don’t know how much of that is them and how much of it is you. And I tend to blame myself. I go, ‘Well, I messed up,’” when some of the problem at least, it turns out, is remedied by a proper execution of the three dynamic levels he now frequently includes.

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
Intervals that routinely appear in the movement are an ascending minor third and a descending major second. The first two notes of the piece introduce the ascending minor third (Illustration 5.2), which is also highlighted as mentioned earlier in measures 7 and 8 in conjunction with the text (Illustration 5.1).

Illustration 5.2: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. II., m. 1 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

At the meter change in measure 26 (Illustration 5.3), the minor third interval is again featured prominently in the Marimba I part. Here, the theme, now in 7/8, is seen as a variation on its original statement in the opening measures of the movement (compare Illustration 5.3 with 5.4).

Illustration 5.3: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. I., m. 26 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.
The interval of a descending major second is also an integral component of the original theme, as it serves to release the tension built by the ascending line immediately preceding it (Illustration 5.4).

Illustration 5.4: Marimba Four Hands, “In the Night Kitchen,” Mar. II., mm. 1-2 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

From measure 19 to measure 24, the descending major second is seen five times as an E-flat major chord followed by a D-flat major chord (Illustration 5.5).
“Soakin’ Wet”

A common feature of a cycle is to musically link the final portion of one movement with the beginning portion of the subsequent movement. Levitan adheres to this practice by beginning the second movement of *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” with the same octave E’s that conclude “In the Night Kitchen.” However, a slightly quicker tempo and a shift to a major tonality together result in an abrupt change
of character between the two movements. Illustrations 5.6 and 5.7 display the final bar of “In the Night Kitchen,” and the first bar of “Soakin’ Wet” respectively.

Illustration 5.6: *Marimba Four Hands*, “In the Night Kitchen,” m. 86 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

Illustration 5.7: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” m. 1 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

Unlike the first movement, “Soakin’ Wet” does not share a literary connection to a children’s novel. Rather, its title and primary thematic material comes from a made-up song Levitan sang to his children when they were young. While “In the Night Kitchen” symbolically represents being born, “Soakin’ Wet” symbolically refers to the concept of
“play” as understood by a child. The text in this movement corresponds to the made-up song that Levitan sang and is seen in Illustration 5.8.

Illustration 5.8: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 16-19
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

For Levitan, the second movement represents “the heart” of the entire cycle. He describes the tune of this movement as being “fertile” in the sense that it seemed to generate a steady stream of new ideas with regard to its transformative potential. As a result, this movement is easily the longest both in terms of duration and measure numbers.


10. Ibid.
“Soakin’ Wet” begins in the key of E Major. Eventually, however, it cycles through all of the major sharp keys culminating with twelve concluding measures in the key of C# Major. It includes 18 time signature changes that involve several metric modulations. Examples of some of these metric modulations are seen in Illustrations 5.9, 5.10, and 5.11.

Illustration 5.9: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 93-97 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

The primary theme of “Soakin’ Wet” is repeated multiple times. However, with each new repetition, the theme has been reconfigured into a new meter or transposed to a new key. Illustration 5.12 shows the primary theme as originally stated in 4/4 and in the key of E major. Following, is the theme’s subsequent appearance after having been transformed into 7/8 and transposed to F# Major (Illustration 5.13).

Illustration 5.11: Marimba Four Hands, “Soakin’ Wet,” mm. 192-196 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

As highlighted before in Chapter Three, the process by which Levitan conceives of new ways to rhythmically alter his melodies is approached non-analytically. For instance, in the preceding example, Levitan simply realized one day that the primary theme (Illustration 5.12) heard in his head had morphed into a version with seven beats (Illustration 5.13). So he transcribed that melody, and later found a way to work it in to the composition. This approach is the method by which most of his many rhythmic alterations come to fruition.

The final measures of “Soakin’ Wet” foreshadow the following movement melodically and rhythmically, before an abrupt ending.
“Snoozin’ Down”

Levitan’s third movement immediately creates a mood that is comparatively subdued and calm following the more frenetic pace of the second movement. As its descriptive title makes clear, this movement is symbolic of a sleeping child. The movement is connected to the final bars of “Soakin’ Wet” both melodically and rhythmically as can be seen by a comparison of Illustration 5.14 and Illustration 5.15.

Illustration 5.15: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 1-2
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

The single text “Sleep” is found on the fourth beat of measure seven in conjunction with a rising minor third in the Marimba Two part as seen in Illustration 5.16.
“Snoozin’ Down” begins in C Major, modulates to E-flat Major, then finally returns to C Major. Along the way, the main theme is heard in measures 1, 14, and 59. When the theme is restated in measure 59, Levitan adds variety through the addition of 32\textsuperscript{nd} notes and dotted rhythms as seen in Illustration 5.17. He also transposes the Marimba One part two octaves higher.

Several features distinguish “Snoozin’ Down” from the other movements of the cycle. One feature is that only two mallets are required of each performer. Due to the
movement’s extensive use of hand damping, such a limitation allows for greater ease of execution.

Another unique feature of this movement is that it requires the Marimba One performer to walk back and forth behind the Marimba Two performer in order to be able to reach the written notes. The following illustration is an excerpt from that section.


A final unique feature of this movement is that it includes musical quotations from each of the other four movements. The inclusion of these quotations not only adds to the overall musical cohesiveness of the cycle, but also serves to strengthen the symbolic aspects of the piece. Since the child is supposed to be asleep in this movement, the appearance of past and future melodies is meant to symbolize that the child is dreaming. In “Snoozin’ Down,” the child remembers the time outside of life as represented by the modulation to E-flat major in measure 37. Levitan used this same key signature in the opening movement about birth, “In the Night Kitchen.”
The movement ends suddenly with a D major chord that serves as a bridge to the following movement’s opening melody in G Major (Illustration 5.19).

Illustration 5.19: Marimba Four Hands, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 83-85
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

“Short’n’ Bread”

The fourth movement of the cycle, “Short’n’ Bread,” is symbolic of a child’s need for sustenance. The melody Levitan uses is an arrangement of the popular song that shares the same name. He uses this melody because of its connection to eating, and because it was also a tune he sang with his children.

Instead of writing the melody in 4/4, as it is commonly associated, Levitan uses a time signature of 3/2. His reason for this alteration was out of a desire to give it a sort of “bizarre aspect.”¹¹ This same desire prompted Levitan to introduce greater harmonic dissonance throughout the movement as it progresses.

The text of “Short’n’ Bread” is found in measures 12-20 as shown in Illustration 5.20.

¹¹ Levitan, interview, October 22, 2010.
Illustration 5.20: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 12-20
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

A distinct feature of this movement is Levitan’s use of rhythmic transposition.

With each new occurrence of the main theme, a new key signature is used and the starting pitch appears in a different part of the measure. These rhythmic transpositions become increasingly more jarring with each new entrance. Compare the first entrance of the theme found in measures 4-8 (Illustration 5.21) with the second, third, and fourth
entrances of the theme beginning in measures 27, 50, and 75 (Illustrations 5.22, 5.23, 5.24). In Illustrations 5.21 and 5.23, the theme is heard in the Marimba Two part; in Illustrations 5.22 and 5.24, the theme is heard in the Marimba One part.

Illustration 5.21: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 4-8
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.
Illustration 5.22: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 27-30
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

[Second statement of theme begins as an anacrusis to beat 2 in the key of A Major]

Illustration 5.23: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 50-53
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

[Third statement of theme begins as an anacrusis to the “and” of beat 1 in the key of B Major]
Illustration 5.24: Marimba Four Hands, “Short’n’ Bread,” mm. 75-79
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

[Fourth statement of theme begins as an anacrusis to beat 3 in the key of C-sharp Major]
Levitan begins the movement in G Major, then modulates to A Major, B Major, and finally C# Major. However, the final 14 measures are repeated patterns that juxtapose an F# chord in the Marimba One part against a G Major chord in the Marimba Two part. This tension symbolically represents death. In addition to the tension created harmonically between the two parts, notice the tension Levitan creates rhythmically by juxtaposing a rhythmic feel of four beats against three beats as shown in Illustration 5.25.


Also seen in the final measures of the movement as well as the opening measures is the use of stick clicks or optional finger snaps. These are performed entirely by the Marimba One performer in the opening measures, and entirely by the Marimba Two performer in the final measures.

“Goodnight Moon”

The final movement of Marimba Four Hands draws its title from a children’s novel in the same way as the first movement. Margaret Wise Brown’s Goodnight
Moon,\textsuperscript{12} published in 1947, is a well-known bedtime story about a bunny saying goodbye to the world around him before venturing off to sleep.

The movement begins in D-flat major on the same notes as the previous movement, which had ended in C# Major. Levitan’s decision to enharmonically respell these notes is very significant for him. He sees this moment as a way to symbolically represent a transformation. The transformation initially represented the moment in which the body leaves the state of being awake and enters the state of being asleep. However, Levitan eventually widened his analogy to the deeper symbolic picture of leaving life and entering death.

The second one begins . . . [in] six flats. But basically, it's the same material [as “Short’nin’ Bread], only instead of calling something a sharp, I'm now calling it a flat. So it's kind of been transformed. It's just too painful for living anymore, and it's time to go. But one doesn't want to go. One resists it. So, there's kind of like these efforts, like, "OK, let's go." And it's like, "Nah, I'm not ready." Like, "Well, let's go." "I'm not ready."\textsuperscript{13}

The movement is wholly unique from the preceding four movements in that it is entirely rolled. This radical change in style and texture also works to reflect the picture of transformation. Levitan explains, “And so I thought, "OK, this will be stepping outside of what we've been doing."\textsuperscript{14}

The main motive of the beginning and ending sections in this movement is first heard in measures 5 and 6. It starts with a single D-flat in the Marimba One part that

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
becomes a perfect 4\textsuperscript{th} after a G-flat is added in the Marimba Two part. This perfect fourth then becomes a D-flat Major chord followed by a D-flat Major 7\textsuperscript{th} chord with an added 2\textsuperscript{nd}. Repetitions of this progression occur over and over and are seen in the portion of the score in which the text is used (Illustration 5.26).

Illustration 5.26: Marimba Four Hands, “Goodnight Moon,” mm. 32-41 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

In measure 43, the tension is finally released by the inclusion of a resting tonic chord in root position. However, this chord opens up into a new section that lasts from measure 44 to measure 99 in which the two parts present a sort of dialogue. In Levitan’s mind, this dialogue represents a conversation about the need to move on into death.

But to me it came to be this thing of attempting to do something and failing, attempting and failing, and then attempting to release, really, into death. It sounds so stupid, you know. It's kind of what I was thinking. And then stepping back
and having this long two-part conversation that resolves the issues and allows it to end.¹⁵

The resolution to which Levitan refers begins in measure 99, as seen by the reappearance of the motive that opened the movement. The two voices decrescendo *niente* in the last bar as seen in Illustration 5.27. That the movement concludes with both performers fading out on the particular pitch of C is significant in that the beginning of the first movement opens on the same pitch (See Illustration 5.2).

Illustration 5.27: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Goodnight Moon,” mm. 113-116 © Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

Having examined the five movements that comprise *Marimba Four Hands*, three performance considerations will now follow. These considerations include issues of cuing, the proximity of the two performers, and concerns about sticking.

¹⁵ Levitan, interview, October 22, 2010.
Performance Considerations: Cuing Issues

Having examined the five movements that comprise *Marimba Four Hands*, three performance considerations will now follow. These considerations include issues of cuing, the proximity of the two performers, and concerns about sticking. Chamber musicians rely on cuing through eye contact and bodily gestures. Such non-verbal methods of communication allow performers to execute musical passages with precision. They also enable and invite greater spontaneity between ensemble members when engaged in a performance. Direct lines of sight between percussion performers are especially useful, because they enable the visual alignment of the performers’ sticks and/or mallets. Attentive performers constantly note precise moments of impact between implements and instruments. A steady stream of information regarding dynamic levels as well as subtle changes in touch and tone are visually presented between the performers as a sort of uninterrupted feedback response.

The author’s experience of performing excerpts from *Marimba Four Hands* inhibited the cuing abilities mentioned above since the marimba performers are asked to play on the same instrument. Playing on the same marimba positions each performer behind the instrument in a way that severely limits direct eye contact. It also hinders the performers’ ability to align mallets, and generally limits the overall feedback that is allowed when more direct lines of sight are utilized. Performing the piece on two separate marimbas would be a quick solution to this dilemma, because it would allow both performers to position the marimbas in ways that allow easier views of mallets and of themselves. Nevertheless, the repertoire for marimba duet is only strengthened as a result of *Marimba Four Hands* whether that performance involves one instrument or two.
Performance Considerations: Proximity of Performers

Another challenge encountered when performing *Marimba Four Hands* is the issue of the two performers’ proximity to one another on the keyboard itself. In a few instances the close proximity creates minor difficulties with regard to executing relaxed, uninhibited strokes. One example in which the performers are particularly affected occurs in “Snoozin’ Down.” As seen in Illustration 5.28, the performers share the same pitches and momentarily reach into each other’s playing zones.

Illustration 5.28: *Marimba Four Hands*, “Snoozin’ Down,” mm. 1-2
© Marimba Productions, Inc. Used by permission.

To overcome this type of challenge, careful attention to body and feet placement is needed. By remembering to position the body at particular angles during moments of close proximity, the performers are able to perform more comfortably. Finding alternative beating spots on the bars allows another way to avoid the challenge of close proximity when performing. Another solution is to utilize two marimbas as suggested previously.
Performance Considerations: Sticking Decisions

Levitan does not indicate sticking in the score of *Marimba Four Hands*. Some of his earlier compositions for keyboard percussion, however, included sticking recommendations. After becoming aware that performers often disagree on what is the most comfortable sticking option for a particular passage, Levitan now chooses to stay out of the decision entirely by avoiding indications altogether. The author chose to assign “ghost” notes whenever possible to the weak hand. Accents were assigned to the strong hand. However, this formula is not always convenient. For instance, the degree of separation between the performer’s hands sometimes requires choosing to perform “ghost” notes with the strong hand or accented notes with the weak hand in order to facilitate easier execution.

Accepting that sticking choices are inherently a personal decision, there are stylistic implications in Levitan’s music that may lead one to implement less idiomatic sticking options in order to better serve the music. Typical sticking patterns generally place the strong hand on the strong beats and the weak hand on the weak beats. Illustration 5.29 provides an example of this method of sticking as applied to the first six measures of “Soakin’ Wet.”
As an alternative to the typical strong beat/weak beat sticking system seen above, Illustration 5.30 offers an example of sticking choices for the same six measures, but with greater regard for the stylistic implications that result from the accents and “ghost” notes.
Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on Levitan’s most recent composition, *Marimba Four Hands*. The work’s five movements were discussed, and excerpts were included to
illustrate important compositional techniques like rhythmic transposition and metric modulation. Important motivic and thematic material was identified and instances of uncommon performance techniques, such as finger snaps and the request for one performer to move behind the other, were highlighted. Performance considerations drawn from the author’s experience of performing excerpts from the work were also discussed.
Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusions

Summary

This document has examined the life and compositional approach of Daniel Levitan. As a composer, his works have been and continue to be an important contribution to the solo and ensemble repertoire for percussion. Two purposes of this study were: (1) to provide percussion students, teachers, and performers with a more detailed understanding of Daniel Levitan’s background and compositional approach; and (2) to identify the predominant characteristics of Levitan’s compositional style, and subsequently to ascertain how and why those characteristics have evolved since Levitan first began composing. This section will highlight and summarize conclusions drawn from this study’s attempt to achieve those two purposes.

Part of what makes Levitan’s compositional voice unique among other composers writing for percussion today is that his writing is characterized by a central focus on rhythm. This fact has not only influenced the number of players and instruments for which he has chosen to write, but it has also impacted his treatment of keyboard percussion in significant ways. For example, his association of the marimba as primarily a rhythmic instrument has caused him to approach it less like a piano, and more like a set of drums. It has also impacted his view and use of rolls on the instrument. Instead of using rolls to create a type of sustained sound, for instance, he primarily prefers to use
them as a way to provide textural effects. The Back Beat Motive, the One Note Repeated Motive, and the Interlocking Sixteenth Note Motive have been put forward as further illustrations of Levitan’s preoccupation with rhythm; each are compositional features that can be identified as uniquely characteristic of Levitan.

Another way in which Levitan’s compositional style sets him apart is evidenced in the way he thinks about musical expression. Rather than attempting to create a sense of musical line, he strives to create a sense of musical depth when composing for keyboard percussion. He approaches the compositional process non-analytically, choosing to allow fragments of motives to be transformed on their own as they journey through the “soup” that he refers to as his mind. He has a preference for motives that elicit bodily movement and quickly dispenses with the type “that leave you completely cold,” unaffected. ¹

Above all, Levitan is guided by the belief that legitimately composed musical phrases originate as musical thoughts in the mind of the composer; the performer’s task, then, becomes one of recreating those original musical thoughts. For the purpose of more clearly communicating the musical thoughts in his mind, he includes an uncommon amount of articulation markings in his scores. These articulation markings provide inflection to what would otherwise result in static repetitions of similar rhythms. “Ghost” notes, unaccented notes, and accented notes provide three dynamic levels that increase the performance demands of his music while illustrating in as practical a way possible what he specifically hears in his head during the compositional process. Thus, this detail of articulation also represents another unique aspect of Levitan’s style.

¹. Levitan, interview, March 18, 2010.
His approach to composition has evolved in that the compositional process seems to work more intuitively for him today than when he first began composing. The technique he developed in his early years, characterized by a four-phased method of composition, now functions on its own accord, operating by itself at an almost subconscious level. In many ways, however, Levitan’s approach has remained consistent as seen through his preference for tonal writing that is influenced by jazz/pop harmonies. Other consistent elements to his approach include his use of made-up words to assist the compositional process, and his assignment of emotional tones to his compositions. Personal memories imbued with emotion are an aid for Levitan when making important compositional decisions. They guide his choices on form and key signature selection.

*Marimba Four Hands* represents Levitan’s latest and most current thinking with regard to keyboard percussion writing. It contains similar elements and rhythmic devices as those employed in his earlier works. For example, it uses rhythmic manipulations as a means of formal development, and it provides textural and stylistic variety through its use of “ghost” notes, hand damping, and accents. Both of these characteristics are demonstrated in almost all of Levitan’s earlier compositions. However, *Marimba Four Hands* stands out from his earlier works structurally, since it represents his first cycle of related pieces. The work also includes the use of stick clicks or optional finger snaps, techniques unseen in his earlier compositions. Issues of cuing, body placement, and sticking have been spotlighted as performance demands of the piece.

This study has demonstrated that the formal structure of Levitan’s music is generally the last thing he thinks about, as it represents the final step in his compositional process. This study has also discovered that Levitan’s break in compositional activity in
fact served to strengthen his own belief about his abilities as a composer, because it allowed him to experience the joy his music created for performers. It is significant that Levitan associates *Marimba Four Hands* symbolically to the circle of life and death, since it was the reminder of how important music is “in the lives of people” that prompted him to begin composing again in the first place [emphasis added]. This study also found that Levitan prefers for his music to be approached in a non-analytical way. When asked to elaborate on the formal design of the movements found in *Marimba Four Hands*, he responded, “. . . when I say these things, it’s like taking a butterfly and pinning it to a board. Now, it’s going to be in that fixed state forever. It’s no longer just floating around as what it is.”

Levitan’s influences are varied and great. From his early introductions to composition at the piano with Mary Blue Morris, to his work at Bennington College with Henry Brant and Marta Ptazynska; from his in-depth examination and study of North Indian tabla drumming, to his explorations in Latin music, as well as his formal training on keyboard percussion and classical percussion; from his life experience outside the academy and the world of percussion performers, and uniquely inside the function-driven, product-oriented world of piano technology; from his experience as a father connecting with his children through made-up songs; Levitan’s approach to the compositional process has been impacted in all these diverse ways.

---


Future Research

The focus of the research contained in this document has been specific to Levitan’s published works for pitched percussion. However, Levitan has written several unpublished works for pitched percussion. Upon examination, these scores might provide greater insight into his compositional style. Some of Levitan’s unpublished works are performed with nearly the same degree of regularity as his published works. Consequently, a more complete understanding of Levitan’s compositional style would include further examination of his unpublished compositions as well.

Another direction for future research might involve a comparative analysis that examines Levitan’s treatment of rhythm as seen in a selected work for pitched percussion and one for non-pitched percussion. Five compositions listed on Levitan’s website are scored for non-pitched percussion; ten involve pitched percussion. One finding of this study has been that Levitan’s treatment of keyboard percussion instruments is approached in the same way he writes for non-pitched percussion instruments. However, the possibility remains that his treatment of non-pitched instruments has in some way been impacted stylistically or otherwise through his writing for keyboard percussion.

The author’s performance of excerpts from *Marimba Four Hands* required the use of particular sticking choices that better served the stylistic nuances inherent to Levitan’s writing. These choices are impacted by his frequent use of articulation markings. As a catalyst to this study, the author intends to develop an online video project that will enable better demonstration and understanding of possible sticking options useful to performances of Levitan’s music.
Bibliography


____. Telephone interview with author. Ruston, LA. October 22, 2010
_____.

_____.

_____.

_____.


_____.

_____.


Appendix A: List of Published Works


Appendix B: Personal Interviews

Telephone Interview from January 4, 2010

**Gregory Lyons:** Could you talk briefly about your musical background?

**Daniel Levitan:** Briefly I've always played music, listened to music. But I wasn't that serious about it. Played piano. Went to Bennington College in Vermont. It was a very small liberal arts school, thinking I was going to study creative writing, and didn't like the creative writing department and liked the music department a lot. So I started studying more there. The style there was very much 1950s abstract expressionist.

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** But some really, really terrific teachers and a terrific department that focused a lot on composition. And not on theory, so much as just writing. My main influence there was Henry Brant, who died recently, known for his spatial music compositions. But moreover, he had done a lot of work in movies and radio. And his whole thing was, "You've got to produce a score and part that you can put on the stand and they can play it." It was all about just the practical nuts and bolts of getting compositions out and having them playable. So although his style didn't influence me at all, that really influenced me.

**GL:** Sure.

**DL:** Then I started playing percussion also in college and I had an idea of what a percussion ensemble should sound like. I started hearing percussion ensembles and they didn't sound like what I thought they should. So I discovered when I got out of school that I could write pieces for percussion and get them played very easily, because percussion ensembles are always looking for new stuff.

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** If you go to string quartet, you bring it to a string quartet, they say, "Well OK, but why should we play this?" We have other things that are good to play. Whereas the percussionists are always like, "Yeah, we'll play it."

**GL:** Yeah.
DL: But I found out you don't make much money doing that. I took a year off from school and went to piano tuning school in Boston. And that's been my career, piano technician. That's what I do and am very active in the Piano Technician’s Guild. I teach at the national convention…written a lot of stuff about it. I have some tools. It's been a serious career for me. So writing is a very non-lucrative sideline. But over the years, the pieces that I've written, some of them have stuck around which was nice. Then I had kids and that took up a lot of time.

GL: Yeah.

DL: And I wasn't really sure what direction I wanted to go in writing because I wasn't that thrilled with what I was producing. Also, it seemed to me . . . the music is kind of stuck in this world of percussion ensembles. Every time I go to a rehearsal, it would be in the basement of some university. And I would go to a performance and it would be in the auditorium of that university and it would be attended by the friends and family of the people on stage.

GL: Sure.

DL: And it's like, well that's nice but there's no money in it and the public doesn't hear this and doesn't appreciate it so what's the motivation to do it. But somehow during the time when I wasn't writing and raising up the kids, I started to look at it a little bit differently and thinking just how great music is in the lives of people. I wanted to see if maybe I could move my music in a direction that would somehow reach out to a wider audience.

GL: Sure.

DL: That's what I'm trying to do these days. So I've made a couple of CD's recently of new pieces...

GL: Right.

DL: ...and trying to spread them around.

GL: OK.

DL: And I feel energized and I'm really happy with this music that's coming out so that's pretty much it in a nutshell.

GL: I'm surprised to hear you say that. I understand completely what you mean about being with the tight-knit circle and only a select few maybe hearing your works. But I think the two pieces I'm most familiar with, Marimba Quartet and the Marimba Suite No. II, they just have this really intimate quality to them as well. And sound like they're coming from a really deep place, personally. Would you say that's true?
DL: Well yeah. I mean, it's a conflict for someone writing classical music these days. The kind of classical music that the public really likes to hear is the stuff that was written before 1900.

GL: Sure.

DL: With a few exceptions. For those who find something in the ability of the Western classical tradition that tell a story with music and to have a kind of approach to musical production that where the piece resides is in a series of notes on a written page. That's an incredible achievement, and our musical culture now, more and more, is a shriveling...classical music composition thing that a very small world hears. But more and more, it's song-writing. Even people who like classical music. That's basically the contemporary music that everyone listens to is song.

GL: Right.

DL: That's fine, but I feel like we have this whole accomplishment of things that don't live on a CD, they live on a page. That's the heart of it, is what's on the page. That one likes to have and so I've always leaned towards tonality. You know I don't like to think about questions of tonality. If I can't hear it in my head, I don't want to write it. Do you know what I mean? And I've tried to write atonal pieces and I've enjoyed some atonal music but I just can't make it. It doesn't communicate anything that's from me. When I think of music, it's usually a rhythm of some kind.

GL: Sure.

DL: It seems to have potential to change into something else that has a different meaning but similar. It's tonality. So I couldn't be a composition teacher.

GL: Because you would have to teach all that other stuff?

DL: Well it's not just that. I'd have to...it's not a language that's current. It's academy. So, that's why I love percussion because it's given me a little niche to exist in where the people could play the work and as it's out there for a longer and longer time, it gains a certain amount of credibility.

GL: Right.

DL: Whereas if it's a brand new piece, that's one thing. But if it's been around for a while, people say, oh maybe there's something to it.

GL: Sure. Not to change topics here but the one thing that I'm really intrigued with about your music is, I've seen Septet played really, really bad and really, really good.

DL: Yeah.
GL: It seems to me that there's something about the learning process. Maybe it's the style that it comes from, but it has to be stylized in a certain way or just doesn't work. Would you agree with that?

DL: Yeah. That brings to mind two things. Do you know the name, Ray DeRoche?

GL: Yes.

DL: He was a big proponent when I first moved to New York. He would play at anything. He played my *Concerto for Marimba with Percussion Orchestra*, which is a huge piece. And his kids would rehearse for hours, and hours, and hours...and you've got the best performance you could. But his line was always “I really like Dan’s music because it's great for the beginners.” It gives them rhythms to something they could key into and they can have fun doing it.

GL: OK.

DL: It was a fun, painless way to get into percussion, but it wasn't serious music somehow.

GL: Oh really.

DL: Yeah, because it was rhythmical. So that always kind of bugged me. But then there's also this thing that I've discovered in going to a lot of different rehearsals with mostly students, right, but even professionals, is that in my music, it has to be played right...

GL: Right.

DL: ...or else it sounds like nothing at all.

GL: I completely agree.

DL: Because it's time. And you'd be surprised...more percussionists have good time than say, violinists. Occasionally you find a violinist who has amazing time. But for the most part, it's a fairly sloppy concept of time. And you'll find a lot of percussionists, especially the ones who play mallets and timpani, who don't really know what time is all about. The ones that really know what time is, tend to play drum set.

GL: Sure.

DL: But there's a lot of pieces of mine where if it’s played by people with good time, then you can hear what they're playing. You can hear the music and if it's not good time, it just sounds like people banging on drums.

GL: Exactly.

DL: It relies a lot on that feel, people having the feel.

GL: Right.
DL: So I agree with you completely. And it's discouraging when you're a new composer. You write a piece and you have inside your head what it's supposed to sound like and then you go to a performance, or rehearsal, and it sounds nothing at all like that.

GL: Right.

DL: And some of that is inevitable. There's always this moment of shock when you first hear it on the real instrument. Then you get discouraged. I had this piece for 20 temple blocks that I love.

GL: Yeah.

DL: ...and Morris Lang did it out at Brooklyn College. I went out to hear a rehearsal of it and it was just awful. It sounded so bad. I said, "How could I have written this?" I put it away for 20 years. Then somebody was asking me, "I would like to play some pieces. Is there anything I haven't heard of?" So I said, "Well, I always thought this was kind of a decent piece." So I sent it down and they did this piece and it rocked man! It was fabulous! And I thought I should have had more faith in it.

GL: Yeah.

DL: They just couldn't play it. But you don't really know the difference when you're first starting out between someone who has time and someone who doesn't. You hear them play and you know something's wrong but you don't know what it is.

GL: Right.

DL: So if you're someone like me, you blame yourself. The problem must be on the page. Then once you've heard someone play it who can play, you say, "No, no, no...the problem can't be on the page."

GL: Right.

DL: The music is there. Now how do we get this person to try to get it out into the air?

GL: Exactly.

DL: Yeah.

GL: This is the million dollar question, but are there any things that you've learned that, OK, here's what's missing, or you said it's the time. But it's something about the space in between the time or something that's happening.

DL: No, what it is, is that a legitimate, composed musical phrase on the page—if it's composed legitimately, in other words, this is what I call, real music—is a musical thought in the composer's head that's been notated and it's as close as it can be. But what you're doing is not playing the notes on the page. You're using the notes on the page as a
way to get back into the head of the composer and the music that was in his head. Then it
snaps and you say, "That's what he meant."

GL: Right.

DL: And now you're not playing the notes on the page. Yeah, everything you play
corresponds to what's on the page but what you're playing is that musical thought.

GL: Sure. OK.

DL: OK. And one thing that bugs me about some contemporary music is that it's
generated as notes on the page. Then the performer's job is to recreate those notes, but
underneath it all, there's not a message. In other words, it didn't come from the music
inside somebody. It came from some intellectual construct, or a throw of the dice. That's
legitimate in its own way but it's not the kind of music . . . You know, writing a
composition takes a lot of time. It's a lot of work. Then when people play it, they're going
to be rehearsing it for a long time. Then you’d hope that it would stick around for a while.
It's a long-term investment. Seems to me if you're going to do that, go for the max, which
is something that’s from your musical self.

GL: Right.

DL: So that's what I mean and that's what the feel is all about too. There's an underlying
feel in the rhythmic phrase and if you don't understand what that is...

GL: Right.

DL: ...it's hopeless. When we did this recording of Marimba Four Hands, we had four
players. Three of them got the music and one of them didn't...

GL: Oh no.

DL: ...but got it pretty much.

GL: Yeah.

DL: It sounds OK.

GL: Yeah.

DL: But there's a difference between the ones who are playing the music and the one
who didn't have a rhythmic concept.

GL: Right.

DL: Yeah.

GL: So thinking of what you're saying there, it seems it just needs to really be ingrained.
Do you think it's helpful then, if your music is performed by memory?
DL: No.

GL: No.

DL: No, not at all. I think what's helpful is the younger the person, the better they play it.

GL: The younger the person?

DL: Kids are growing up in a culture where like I say, they don't listen to classical music until they get to school and they're told this is what you have to do. They listen to songs on the radio and if they do listen to classical music, probably when they're kids, they're playing the old stuff, which doesn't have a rhythmic feel to it.

GL: Right.

DL: That's not going to help them. A lot of them spend their time listening to pop music, which, square as it usually is, still has a feel to it...

GL: Right.

DL: ...so they kind of innately understand what a feel is, even if they couldn't express it in words or they're not aware of it. I find that the younger the person usually, the more they are able to key into a rhythmic feel.

GL: Interesting. OK. Wow, well...

DL: That's a pretty big generalization...

GL: Yeah, but...

DL: ...that's been my experience. A lot of times the teachers are telling the kids to do something, that's like totally wrong headed and the kids are trying to do it because the teacher knows, right? But what they know is Xenakis. What they don't know is time. So the kids are like, "Well, I'm trying to do it." And then I'm like, "No-no, you're right."

DL: "You're playing it the right way."

GL: Right. Right. Going back to your background, you said you studied piano at a young age?

DL: Yes.

GL: OK. And then, other studies in percussion in college.

DL: Yeah, there was a woman named Martha Ptaszynska, well-known Polish composer and percussionist, in the Polish school, you know Ligeti and all that, who taught at Bennington. I studied percussion with her and I studied mallets with a guy named Tom Hemphill out in California where I spent a couple of years after school.
GL: Oh.

DL: And then I studied tabla a lot.

GL: Wow.

DL: A lot. Because I realized I wanted to write music about rhythm and I didn't have a rhythmic concept.Tabla is not music with a really great feel. It's a very linear music, but it's an extremely, complicated and analyzed...

GL: Right.

DL: ...formal in terms of rhythmic structure and uses rhythm as a basis for composition. So I thought, "Well this will be a good way to start thinking about how I can use rhythm as a tool for development." Theme and well, that's what it's really all about. So I played tabla a lot for about 10 years.

GL: Wow.

DL: I also wanted a more vertical approach. I was in New York, Latin music was everywhere so I studied Congas to get the Latin thing with a guy named Frank Malabe. In fact, he's the one that Conservatory Garden is dedicated to.

GL: Oh OK.

DL: There was a garden in Central Park right across from where I used to study with him called Conservatory Garden.

GL: Oh OK. Nice.

DL: So there's a lot of Latin stuff in that.

GL: Yeah, that's one of the pieces...

DL: Those are my percussion studies but otherwise it's just kind of been on my own. In terms of composition, yeah my teachers at Bennington, but it was mainly Henry and his main thing was practical.

GL: Right. Right.

DL: This is not pie in the sky. This is something that you put on somebody's stand and they need to be able to play it without raising their hand saying, "Excuse me Mr. Levitan, should that be an F sharp?"

GL: Yeah. [laughs]

DL: I don't have a dot after this half note but all that kind of stuff...

GL: Right.
Telephone Interview from March 18, 2010

GL: So what was your experience with music as a child? Oh, by the way, some of this stuff might have come up in the last interview, but feel free to repeat that and I'm just going to actually record it better this time.

DL: So, experience in music as a child? Let's see. I had started taking lessons. I guess when I was in eighth grade. No, before then. Probably around sixth grade, so I would say at the age of -- what is that? Ten or eleven?

GL: Right, yeah.

DL: My mom was a singer, a soprano, she'd gone to Julliard, got a bachelors and masters there. She always taught private students and she always led choruses. My Dad was in the Air Force, so we traveled around, but whatever Airbase we were on, she usually had a chorus going, and she usually had private students.

So, I would hear them singing their -- mostly arias. She was fond of Puccini and Menotti and all that, so that was a big influence.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Then I wanted to start playing piano, so I started taking lessons, and wasn't big on practicing and you know, I started writing little things. This was, I don't know how far back, but at least by eighth grade, ninth grade, tenth grade. So, I would write things at the piano, and then I quit taking piano lessons with my piano teacher, Mary Blue Morris, who was pretty much a complete musician, and started studying composition with her. We mostly did species counterpoint. So that was a big influence.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Doing the species counterpoint chorales, and stuff like that, because I've always been very fond of Bach, like everybody else in the world. So what led me to that? I don't know. I always thought that music was the greatest thing in the world.

GL: Yeah.

DL: And like most musicians, I think, like a lot of people.

GL: I read that you were a member of the Chelsea Percussion Ensemble. Would you talk about that experience? Do you still perform?

DL: That was a quartet that I put together to play my stuff. I'm not really very good at production and promotion. And rehearsals, I get really tired of the same old pieces. And
so we played around, but I wasn't really that enthusiastic about it. And finally, at some point, I started to realize that whatever I wrote, I could get played by percussion ensembles and I sort of said I'd rather spend my time writing stuff.

GL: Do you still perform?

DL: No, I don't perform. I still play piano for my own amusement. But we don't have any percussion instruments. My marimba is now living up in Massachusetts.

My nephew, Elliot—who actually plays 5 notes on the "Marimba Four Hands" CD—he's really into marimba. So when we did the recording session, I invited him to come in. There's one part—what movement is that? I think it's the third movement where the one player has to play really high notes and then really low notes. And basically walk around the other player. So, I thought, "Why not have Elliot come and do the low notes?"

So, he came in and played. They were like downbeats, basically, you know. So that was really fun. But anyway, he has my marimba, so no, I don't play much.

GL: What drew you to Bennington College? How would you describe your experience as a music student? Who were your main influences there?

DL: What drew me to Bennington College? At that point I wanted to be a writer. I wrote a lot when I was in high school. That was kind of my main interest.

I was kind of a science kid, but I really liked writing. I used to be in plays and the music was something that was fun, but it wasn't like my life.

And there was a guy teaching at Bennington called Bernard Malamud—I don't know if you've heard of him. He wrote "The Natural." "The Fixer." A lot of short stories. Very popular guy. And he wrote there, and he was one of my favorite writers and I thought this was great. So, I went to Bennington and I came to realize like a lot of times, they have these people and they use their name. But he taught like one course a year to a very few seniors.

And I really liked the music department there, so I started spending more and more time there. And then became a music major, rather than a literature major which I had thought I was going to be.

And also played in bands and stuff. You know, the usual.

GL: Right.

DL: I played keyboard and bass. So as a music student, my main teacher was Henry Brant. I also studied with Vivian Fine, Lou Calabro, Lionel Novak. But Henry was the main one and his was—he was a very—I don't know if you're familiar with his music. He's known for spatial music. So you know, he basically writes for a particular hall and he'll put musicians all over the place.
GL: OK.

DL: And I don't really...I'm not fond of his music, even the music that he wrote before he was a spatial musician. But he was a phenomenal, a phenomenally gifted musician, and he'd done a lot of radio and TV and movie stuff. So he had learned how to get a set of parts out, and put them on a stand, and have people be able to play it right off the bat. And this was his big thing, be practical. So although musically he had I think zero influence on me, from a practical standpoint he's my idol still.

He was like the essence of what a composer should be able to... it really wasn't about what you were saying musically. It was about getting it played. You know, never write something unless you know it's going to get played, and notate it so that it's going to be as obvious as possible.

GL: Exactly.

DL: And he was very practical with orchestration as well. He had some great ideas about orchestration that were unconventional but that really work. He was my main advisor.

GL: OK. Were there any other significant influences outside of academia that impacted your desire to pursue a musical career?

DL: I don't really feel like I've pursued a musical career. My career has been piano technology. I took a year off from college to go to piano tuning school in Boston, and that's been my career. I'm pretty successful here in New York and also write a lot, teach a lot. I've invented various tools. It's been a very important part of my life. That's my working life.

Music? I didn't see a way I was going to really be able to make a living in music. I didn't want to teach. I didn't really feel inspired by any of the compositional styles that I found in the academy.

I didn't want to be in a composition department where I would have to play politics with the other composers and pretend to like their music even if I didn't and teach composition students. What would I teach them? Because I wasn't writing in any of the styles that were accepted, so what were they going to get from me, you know?

And I didn't really feel like my compositional chops were that great at that time, so being honest. And also the whole idea of music that existed just inside academia and really is not listened to by the public didn't inspire me. I mean why would you want to spend your time doing that?

You'd basically have to get a gig at a university, and I'd feel like a fraud. And then I wasn't good enough as a percussionist. I didn't start playing percussion until I was at Bennington. And I wasn't nearly as good or as interested in playing other people's music to be a percussion teacher. So what was I going to do in academia?
There was clearly no way for me to do that, and I didn't see that I was going to be able to make money writing percussion music. So I figured, "Well, I'll just do that," and that's not going to be my career.

GL: And was there something specifically about the piano technology training that you did, that you did it in the midst of your college career, you said?

DL: Yeah, I took a year off between junior and senior years.

GL: OK.

DL: I had a friend at that school who had just come from North Bennet Street School. He was doing it, and I thought, "Well, I could probably do this." I didn't realize how gratifying a job it would be, even after I first started doing it. But the more I've done it, the more satisfying it is. It's a real craft, and there's a lot to be said for having a craft as opposed to the academic life, where a lot of your success depends on politics. You know, bullshit...

GL: Oh, yes.

DL: ...because you can write a piece and say, "Hey, this is great!" And who's going to say it's not really? When you do a craft, it's like you do it or you don't, you know? Did you fix it or didn't you? The feedback is immediate, and you're working with the real world. I find that very challenging and very satisfying. I find doing something successfully in that field is very, very satisfying because there's no question that you actually did it.

There's a lot in piano technology, especially in tuning theory that really wasn't clear. I have a pretty analytical mind, so I feel like I've shed some lights into some dark corners of piano tuning that weren't there before. Also, I feel like room for improvement in some of the tools that are used, which I've been able to do. It's been just really satisfying.

GL: Cool.

DL: You don't have benefits. You don't have vacation. On the other hand, you don't have a boss except yourself. You don't make a ton of money, but I've raised a family of four doing it and enjoy doing it. As long as you stay healthy, you're OK. If you get sick, man you're screwed.

GL: Last time I think we spoke, you mentioned that at the college there was kind of a less focus on theory but a big focus on composition, right?

DL: Right.

GL: And maybe that was partially what steered you towards that, too, a little bit? Or kind of...
DL: Yeah, it could be. I liked the approach, which was basically we learned theory. We
would analyze scores. We did score analysis, but the basic thing is their approach to
composition was "write a piece." Who do we have, and what did they play? And write a
piece for them. It was a very hands-on kind of thing, so it really didn't matter what style
you did or anything like that. Still, all the stuff I wrote was basically in the style of the
times until my senior year. I took a trip down to New York to hear Music for 18
Musicians. I have a lot of problems with Steve Reich, but I have a tremendous amount of
admiration for him. I loved his approach to orchestration and how he was starting to
integrate rhythm in a really attractive way.

And then, I was asked to write a piece. Betty Ford, who was the wife of the president,
was visiting for the dedication of a new arts center, and they asked me to write the piece
to open it. And I wrote it sort of in a quasi-Steve Reich style.

And that was the first piece I wrote where I finally said, "Screw all this modern
composition stuff. This is not really what I would like to spend my time doing." If I'm
going to spend time writing, I'm not going to make money at it. I might as well write
something that I really want to do.

GL: Would you provide an overview of how you engage in the compositional process
from start to finish?

DL: Sure. I'm not really sure how I've written in the past, but for a long time now how I
write is I'm just sort of hanging out, brushing teeth or taking a shower or taking the
garbage out and a musical little nugget comes to my head. Usually, they're very banal.
Sometimes, though I kind of like them. And then sometimes, I realize that they're
something somebody else has written. But then, if I figure, no, I think this one came out
of my brain, then I'll make a note of it.

And go back and look at it a few months later, and if it still seems like there's something
there, then I'll figure out, that's something I can work in somewhere. I find I can't really
write a piece unless I have something like that.

I can't really make up a theme, and I don't know what it is about a musical germ that
makes one pregnant with opportunity and the other one dead. It makes one meaningful
and not the other one. I have no idea, but you can tell. You can tell when you hear it.

GL: Right.

DL: Now, sometimes they're just rhythms, a couple of bars. Sometimes, they're a
melodic fragment. It could be a bar. It could be a whole tune, maybe, not a whole tune.
And that's where I start. If I have a piece to write, I'll find one of those things that I think
is useful, and I'll just start kind of letting it sit in my brain and then it seems to multiply
and come up with new things. It might change into a different time signature or it might
extend it—if it's a melody, it might extend itself out. It might suggest some harmonies
or... And I just kind of let it do. And then I start writing stuff down. The stuff you hear in
your head doesn't really sound like you think it's going to sound, and then you sort of try
to get it down in a way that it kind of sounds like what you had, and then, it sort of merges into something else.

You start to get stuff that when you hear it, you go, "I like that." And then, I just sort of paste them together to what I think would make a good composition.

And then, the stuff in the middle, the traditions and the whole formal thing, starts to become clear, and you sort of write stuff to fill in gaps. And also, if I find I have a really good idea, I can do artificial things to it, like move it a sixteenth note over the bar line.

Or put in a different time signature or harmonize it dissonantly, and it will suggest things. If I find something like that that I like, then I'll keep it. And if I do something like that, if I artificially do some transformation and it doesn't have any life to it, I just toss it out.

GL: OK. You said sometimes you just write the rhythms, you start with the rhythms. Last time we spoke you mentioned obviously that rhythm is a key component of your keyboard percussion writing. So, that's another part of that question that I was wondering about is if you sketched out a lot of rhythmic detail, I guess, before you added the pitch content.

DL: Not really. It happens more—they tend to sort of happen a little bit simultaneously. You have a rhythm going, and it kind of suggests pitches. Usually, it's like pentatonic, diatonic kind of stuff. But when you go to put it down, sometimes you realize that that's not really—the pitches that were suggested to you that you thought they were, once you actually put them down, it doesn't really capture what you had. And, maybe, it's a question of what other notes are happening.

It's the same thing with rhythm. You put it down, and it doesn't really capture it. So, then you start fooling around with it. But rhythm is fundamental to my composition process. That hardly is a conscious choice. It sort of gives me continuity in my style, but it's also how I hear things.

GL: Right.

DL: And also, I discovered a while back if I have an emotional picture in my mind while I'm composing, it tends to improve the outcome. It tends to—first of all, when I have choices, it tends to channel the choices, and it tends to give a kind of unity to the piece, like when I wrote—since we're going to be talking about Four Hands”—when I wrote "Four Hands", I decided at some point I wanted to dedicate it to my two kids. Each movement had a sort of intellectual thing but it was almost more an emotional tone that helped me to keep that image in mind. As I was composing, it helped me to sort of have it say something unified. So, I try to do that now. I try to think of something. This has more to do with music with pitches than with straight percussion music.

I don't find much of an emotional content in the music that is straight percussion, but pitches definitely give you an emotional content. And I find that having an emotional program in my mind helps because a lot of composition for me, at least, I work very
slowly. A lot of it is pruning. It's coming up with stuff and saying, "Does this fit? Does it work? No." It helps me to make those decisions.

**GL:** OK.

**GL Lyons:** So, I was looking back over and noticed that in 1978 you had won that competition for Percussive Arts Society, the composition contest, and was wondering since that was pretty much right after you finished your time at Bennington, right?

**DL Levitan:** Yeah. I was out in San Francisco for a couple of years studying tabla.

**GL:** Oh, that's right. OK.

**DL:** And I wrote it at that time. And I wrote it specifically to win that competition. So, in a way, it was disappointing because I had this idea of what I'd have to do to win it. I did it, and it won. It was like, great, what does this tell you about the world? It's one of my least favorite pieces.

**GL:** Interesting. OK.

**DL:** I don't feel it’s very successful at all. But it had a lot, a lot of instruments in it, and it was long, and it was very impressive looking. And it was cool, I mean, it did in a way because it won this contest, and then people wanted to play it.

Then, they played it, and it sounded just awful. It sounded just awful. Partly because it's not a great piece, but also I came to realize that they just didn't have any idea how to play it. And I at the time didn't have the experience to say, "No, here's what you're doing wrong."

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** Because when you're first starting out, you write something and they play it, and it's nothing at all like what you wanted. And you don’t really know how much of that is them and how much of it is you. And I tend to blame myself. I go, "Well, I messed up."

However, I did discover that people would play stuff. If you wrote something, a percussion ensemble would play it because there was not much music around. So, just on that. But the whole idea of contests just really turned me off. I thought this is not a way, not a productive way to have a career, just to win contests.

**GL:** Sure.

**DL:** I don't know. There's just something about that that's never appealed to me. That's just me. I think it's a legitimate thing but not for me personally.

**GL:** So, then my next question was how—you've talked about this a little bit already—but what are some major ways that you feel like you're compositional approach has shifted or has it pretty much been the same overall?
DL: I think my early pieces I would set specific challenges for myself to do. It was a long process of integrating, developing the language.

GL: Like challenges of certain restraints or limitations?

DL: Yeah. I was like, OK. I wrote a piece called "Septet". I had noticed that you can take sort of an underlying, rhythmic or sort of pulse thing in a bar, and you can repeat that over and over and over again. And each time do something different with it, emphasize different parts of it, and it doesn't sound like you're doing the same thing over and over again.

So, I was like, great. I kind of used that technique in there. And I experimented with ostinati, and I had studied a lot of tabla so I experimented with using various compositional devices as a formal tool. I'd started studying Latin percussion, so I was experimenting with vertical textures as well as horizontal textures.

But, to me a lot of those pieces—some of them are successful or not, but they don't really come together in a way. I feel like I didn't really have a mastery of my technique. So, that's another reason I wasn't interested in teaching or in promoting my music, because I didn't really believe that much in it.

It was interesting, but then I took time off. We had kids. I was tuning full time. I didn't really write for a while, and also when you have kids you have a lot of musical connection with them, because all kids love music.

GL: Right.

DL: And I started to see how important music really was to the world and to life. And I would go to rehearsals of pieces, and the percussion sounds—you could tell the kids really liked playing these pieces. And that was really kind of cool.

When I started writing again, I discovered that I had kind of taken all those years of working with rhythm and manipulating rhythm and putting things over the bars. And it had somehow seeped down into a subconscious level. So, I didn't have to do this stuff on purpose. I had this whole technical skill that was not a conscious thing. It was just a part of how I thought, how I spoke.

So that when I went to write something, first thing I did was the Inventions, which I think that's like the essence of my music. I think everything is right there. Wow, where is this stuff coming from? I'd come up with it. I'd put it together, and then I'd look and I'd say, "Whoa, look at this relation there. Look at that. And here's a tihai and here's that."

But I didn't like say, ok, I didn't map it out intellectually. It was all now coming out from a deeper level, and I thought this is great. This is really fun. So, that's how it's changed. I feel like I've kind of worked on this rhythmic language to the point now where it's kind of second nature to me.

GL: Right.
DL: And that has really opened me up compositionally. So, I really love writing now, because it's just really fun.

GL: Do you feel like it flows better now or something, too, I guess, in that way?

DL: Well, I like my stuff now better.

GL: OK.

DL: But, hey, what the heck. You always like what you're doing now.

GL: OK. And then, I kind of starting to think, too about how you mentioned last time you were getting ready to start this piece that has both keyboard percussion and non-pitched percussion, a new idea there. But you have typically gone in one direction or the other.

DL: Yeah. A couple of things there. When you write music with pitches in our culture, you're writing classical music. Whatever language you come up with is a very charged issue. If you don't, if you avoid the whole question by only writing rhythms, then nobody's looking at you saying, "Twelve tone, polytonal, sounds like Stravinsky, sounds like Orff, sounds like Babbitt, sounds like Carter.

GL: Right.

DL: That whole question just goes away.

GL: OK.

DL: So, that was one of the reasons for doing all percussion and all keyboard. And also, I never felt that I successfully was able to merge pitches, music and non-pitched percussion, and I tried. I would try off and on. It was like, it never really worked.

And I'm starting to work on a piece now where I think it's working out. I'm going to have to put it on hold for awhile. But it's a quintet, and I think it's going to work. I think I may have a way to do it, but yeah, you're absolutely right. I've always kind of divided it up. I mean, that Concerto, the one that changed that, that won that contest, had pitched and unpitched.

GL: That's true.

DL: But, it didn't really work for me. I don't know.

GL: Right. So, that kind of leads to the next thing though about that Concerto being such a large work, but a lot of your pieces being for smaller groups, and do you have that preference toward small sound or...?

DL: Well, for a couple of reasons. One, it's more practical. Percussion music that I tend to really enjoy listening to tends not to be the sort of kitchen sink stuff, but tends to be music from some other part of the world, some folk tradition, some tabla music, or
whatever. Or it tends to be, you know...in the western tradition, it tends to be with limited resources like Steve Reich’s *Drumming* or something like that because what I'm interested in is rhythm, right?

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** And you don't need a lot of instruments. It's like if you're writing harmonies and melodies, all you need is a piano, right or a string quartet. You really don't need an orchestra and if you're giving music for a percussionist to play and they don't have to schlep around a lot of instruments, they’re very happy.

**GL:** Yeah.

**DL:** And sometimes you get performances just because, “well, we already have this and this and this...let's do this piece because: Hey, why not?” To me it keeps the focus on the music rather than on the sonority. Sonority is important but for many people in today's classical world it is sort of the basis of composition. That’s what they’re working with is sonority. Of course they love percussion, because it provides an incredible range of sonority.

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** But what it means is percussionists are schlepping a lot of stuff. When I pick a sonority, I pick it for a reason. But, I feel like you can do a hell of a lot with a drum. You see a timbale player and he's got three or four different kinds of strokes, or a conga player, he's got maybe a repertoire of five or six different sounds. And with that he's got plenty of...he's got a big enough arsenal to say what he want to say rhythmically.

**DL:** Those two reasons, both my musical style and the practicality of it, that's why I tend to go through the small ensembles.

**GL:** This last question, maybe it's a little naive. But I thought you have written a lot of works for the keyboard marimba specifically; perhaps there have been times when you have been like: Gosh, I wish I could do this or I wish I could have this extra thing or whether it is just the way the instrument operates. Has there ever been a time like that where you wished you could have changed something. Or are you just...maybe as a percussionist you are already comfortable with how the instrument works.

**DL:** No, no, no. I think it is a very good question. I think my approach to the marimba, since it’s a rhythmic one and I guess this should be off the record...

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** ...But I feel like the marimba works best when it’s a rhythmic instrument.

**GL:** OK.
DL: When it’s like a giant set of drums. The style of writing for a marimba that is normal I think has its roots in piano music and guitar music, even in wind music, in string music, the idea of a line, giving the illusion of a line.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Which is very important. It’s one way of creating music.

GL: Right.

DL: So that you play four or five notes, they’re quarter notes and eighth notes and half notes, and there is a lot of space in between them, five or six moments of hitting and yet you do it with nuances of time and nuances of volume and tone that give the illusion of continuity. So now you have a line, perfectly legitimate. Not at all my approach to marimba writing.

To me I think of the music I am trying to write as more of a three dimensional sculptural thing where I am trying to create a space. I am trying to so I'll have a dot way over there in the distance on the right upper corner a big blob close to you and something...You have this varied pattern in front of your ears and it gives you the illusion of depth and space. I think marimba is very, very successful at that. I feel like my writing for marimba tends to want to seek for ways of capitalizing on that.

That's why I don't use rolls a lot in my music except for very particular reasons. To me, a roll is not a way of getting an instrument that doesn't sustain, marimba, and making it sustain. To me, it's a very particular effect and to use it as a way of sustaining a note is not successful. That's not what I am trying to do. I hate rolls, in many ways. I think: Ugh. What's that all about?

The marimba does not sustain. Fine. It does this great thing. It is like taking somebody who is terrific at spatial relations and saying: You have to learn how to write a terrific essay. This person may have no verbal skills at all. Well, let them do what they do.

If you listen to marimba music, like Balafon music, it is just like drumming, it's like a drum set or something. It works great for me. If you listen to the music from Guatemala where they’re playing the classics, they’re playing symphonies, piano music and it just sounds cheesy to me. I am sorry, it just sounds totally cheesy.

GL: In the last movement, which contains rolls, I was noticing that you write it out specifically “freely, unmeasured rolls throughout with no attack.”

DL: Right.

GL: And by no attack I am assuming you are talking about the front part of the roll right where it kind of creeps in.

DL: Right.
**GL:** Great. That is what I was imagining. On the recording night I was hearing that and was thinking that was obviously what their aim is. I agree, it is just a tricky thing to do rolls and I was wondering if you had a specific roll speed that you like or you prefer, but you kind of said you don't like them anyway.

**DL:** I find that I can get them to work for me. Again, this is nothing to do with anybody else. People compose the way they want to compose. They hear things they want to hear. It's my job as a composer to do what works for me. Rolls work for me in certain cases.

If the marimba music is not full of rolls, it works as a kind of expressive effect sometimes. There are rolls in other movements of Marimba 4 Hands. But they tend to be particular expressive things like a note that goes towards another note. It's not because you wish the note would sustain longer and you can't get it to sustain.

**GL:** Of course.

**DL:** It is because it does this buzzy thing that seems musically expressive at that moment.

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** Now, that last movement, however, is not a rhythmic movement. That movement steps outside that whole style of writing and is in a traditional style. It could have been written for string quartet.

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** Therefore, I had it rolled throughout, because I find that if you roll every note your ear gets used to it and now—Yes! It works as a way of sustaining because you sort of feel like: OK. That's what we are dealing with now.

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** If you stop rolling and if you have a few eighth notes and you don't roll those eighth notes, to me that destroys the illusion. It's got to be rolled throughout.

So that particular movement, I want it to be outside the other ones.

**GL:** OK.

**DL:** It has to do with my whole picture of how this piece goes together.

**GL:** Right, right.

**DL:** So, to me, that was fine. So let's roll everything, but we are not going to use measured rolls. You are going to roll however fast you want. There are no attacks. It is all just like...like imitating...it's not imitating strings. It is just like it's a way of sustaining the note.
GL: Sure.

DL: But it has to be done absolutely on every note in order to keep the illusion going for me.

GL: OK. Great. So now moving to the next section about the piece in particular. With the title I had just thought that maybe that as a pianist you had played pieces for piano 4 hands. Is that what you were drawing the title clearly from, that genre of music, and maybe perhaps had played piano 4 hands music.

[Recording mishap]

GL: OK. So, we were talking about, I think we were right after "Snoozin' Down" and...

DL: We were talking about "Short'nin' Bread."

GL: "Short'nin' Bread, " yeah.

DL: Right. So I thought of this as kind of like life being the same thing as death, and just the process of living is what does you in eventually. You can't live without living. On the other hand, it means this physical world, and it just takes its toll. It's in three-two, right?

GL: Right.

DL: So the tune starts on, we'll say it's a down beat. What is it? It actually starts the eighth before the downbeat, in measure five.

GL: OK, yeah.

DL: OK? And then, it changes to, on bar 27, we're in a different key, and then the tune is skewed over by a half note.

GL: OK.

DL: I think it's in bar 31.


DL: Right. So it's skewed over by a half note. And then the next key change, it's skewed over only by a quarter note. And then the last time, it's skewed over by just an eighth note. And it's in swing time. So, really, that last one is VERY skewed over. And also, each time, the harmony just becomes a little bit more abstract.

GL: Right.

DL: And the whole thing is just kind of falling apart.

GL: OK.
DL: And then, at the end, it's just like it gets into this repetitive groove, like I don't want this anymore, time to check out. And then, that's the beginning of the next one, which, to me, the first movement is sort of like outside of life. Have you read that book, "In the Night Kitchen?"

GL: I looked it up a little bit. I wasn't familiar with it, no.


GL: Yeah.

DL: And I've always interpreted it as like the story of birth. So I think of that first movement as kind of like these three little busy bakers, making a kid. Especially when it goes into seven, it's like they're busy building this kid. And at the end, it speeds up and they kick it out into the world.

GL: Wow. OK.

DL: So, to me, those two movements are before life and after life.

GL: Yeah.

DL: And I see the last movement... Key signatures have always meant a lot to me, too, and there's a lot in this piece that has to do with key signatures.

GL: Yeah.

DL: The first one is in a flat key.

GL: Right.

DL: And the last one starts out in a flat key. The second one is in all sharp keys.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Every one is a sharp key. And to me, that's kind of like... Again, I don't think you hear this, really, when you're listening to it, even in a subconscious way, but it helps me to give the piece an emotional tone. And also, some kinds of limitations are very useful in making your creative process happen a little more, I don't know. You've heard this, I'm sure, many times: the more choices you have, the worse off you are. But the more limited you are...

GL: Exactly. The paradox of choice.

DL: So, having a convention of, OK, this is going to be all in sharp keys. So the first one, we go through all kinds of sharps. The third movement, which kind of steps outside of everything, is in C, no accidentals. And then, I think it goes into flat keys...

GL: Three flats. Yeah.
DL: Sort of like it's remembering the time outside of life.

GL: Right.

DL: Then it comes back to a neutral key. And then "Short'nin' Bread" starts out with just one sharp. And by the end, it's got like...

GL: Seven.

DL: Seven sharps. And it's just about to go over the line.

GL: Yeah.

DL: And then, that flips. It's the same musical material, but now you're seeing it from a different standpoint. You're seeing it. The second one begins, well, it's six flats. But basically, it's the same material, only, instead of calling something a sharp, I'm now calling it a flat. So it's kind of been transformed.

GL: Right. OK.

DL: It's just too painful for living anymore, and it's time to go. But one doesn't want to go. One resists it. So, there's kind of like these efforts, like, "OK, let's go." And it's like, "Nah, I'm not ready." Like, "Well, let's go." "I'm not ready."

GL: Yeah.

DL: And then there's this long dialog between the two parts. And to me, it's kind of like stepping back and saying, "OK, this is what it's all about. This is why we have to do it." At the end, there's a kind of reconciliation: "OK, I get it. Let's go now." And it sort of disappears.

GL: Yeah. Wow. Now I'm really sad.

DL: Yeah. Well, that was...It's about my kids, but it turned into sort of life and death. They're little babies, but you know that 150 years from now, they're going to be dead.

GL: Yeah.

DL: They may have suffered quite a bit in the interim. You really don't know. That's kind of what it's all about.

GL: Wow. That's very fascinating.

DL: Well. I don't know. To me, it's a concept that moved me enough that I felt like, even if it's not explicit in the piece, it gives me some kind of emotion to hook onto.

GL: Of course, yeah.
DL: And that helps me to make decisions. I think a lot of this happens, then, after the fact, I make up an explanation for it. It's like those people with electrodes in their neurons. And they give a zap, and you move your arm. And it's because they zapped you. But then, if you ask that person, "Why did you move your arm?" they say, "Well, I wanted to reach for this." Your mind makes up an explanation, "Oh, some of this is that." And then you have this explanation, and then it sort of takes over, and it gives you these conventions to follow. So it's always kind of a mish-mosh.

GL: Yeah. All right. Well, that's very helpful. And I was thinking now, just to finish up, some thoughts on some of the performance demands, not only in this piece but other pieces, that you've incorporated: the hand-damping and note-ghosting.

DL: Yeah.

GL: I just wondered, do you envision the ghosting to occur with a particular hand?

DL: No. There was a while when I was sticking everything I wrote, because it was based on how I played it.

GL: OK. Yeah.

DL: And then I started to think, "Well, you know, there's other people in the world that play it differently, and does that really matter?" And I sort of gave that up.

GL: OK.

DL: But I find, when I'm writing, if I want to really capture what's going on in my brain, I need at least three very, very different dynamic levels.

GL: Yeah.

DL: I need an accent, and I need a ghost.

GL: OK.

DL: And I find that I cannot get what I'm hearing in my head down on paper without ghost notes. If I take a phrase and I write it out, say, in Finale, and I just have accents and notes, it doesn't have life to it. It doesn't say what I want to say. Once I can put ghost notes in, that seems to be enough to get it.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Now, of course, it doesn't capture, fully, the music, but I think it captures enough of it that a performer can say, "Oh, I get it," and then play it the way it kind of makes music.

GL: OK.
DL: But, it's like what I was saying about a drummer who's playing a conga, could only do open notes. He wouldn't be happy.

GL: Right.

DL: You give him a slap, give him a bass note, a few other little things, a few other little tricks, and now he's got enough stuff to say something. And I find it's that way when you're writing rhythms. If you don't have the ghost note... I find I can't get my ideas down without it.

GL: And it gives you this new inventory, it seems, of articulations and the ability to stop the sustain too when you're talking about the hand damping at least.

DL: That's a problem, the hand damping. That is definitely a time-honored way of making a percussion instrument articulate is to damp it. Especially with something like a triangle, but even anything that's got a ring to it. If you damp it, that is an expressive tool and it's like it's right there. On the other hand, you don't want to overburden your players with stuff. So I feel like it's good to keep a limited palette. The other problem with damping, especially on the marimba is that it really doesn't carry in most halls. You hear it when you're close up on it so I tend to shy away from it more, because in performance it's not really as effective. I think maybe sometimes it helps the players keep their ensemble together, and that's useful. Your last question refers to the fact that the bass player in the middle movement does a lot of that, and to me, I just couldn't get it to feel the way I wanted it to feel without that, so...

GL: I thought that that movement Snoozing Down included all four of those basic kinds of extra things. And I guess you include the stick clicking in "Short'nin' Bread" for a little bit, but the...

DL: Yes. Or actually, finger snapping.

GL: Finger snapping, yes.

DL: Or stick clicking, they're both good. I don't know why. It's a little cheesy when marimba players start doing other stuff, but it worked for me. It's sort of a swing time, and somehow it seemed to work. I was conflicted about it but I decided, why not? Plus, it's a long work for marimba. A little variety kind of helps to spice things up.

GL: And you had mentioned before I believe that this is a piece where you don't necessarily, you're not required to play the whole movement. You're fine with just a couple of movements?

DL: Oh, yes. But I think I like the cycle. And not only is it... It's like the end of the last movement segues right back into the first movement. It's like this endless loop, the wheel of life and death, to be really cheesy about it.

GL: Well, I'm not going to keep you any longer, and I really appreciate your time this morning, but before I hang up, is there any other item that stands out that you had just
wanted to mention? Like I said, I might have some more questions later as I continue to write, but I can just email those to you...

DL: What you were just asking about that bass line in the third movement makes me think of something that I probably should make [explicit]. When I say what I'm interested in rhythm is rhythm and time, what I look for, and I feel like there's a certain...you can do things emotionally when you're writing pitches. With rhythm what you do, and I'm not really sure how it works, it seems to me like when you hear something that really pops rhythmically, it almost takes over your body. It's like even if you're not dancing, it sort of takes over the gears, makes you move in a certain way. And if I'm writing a rhythm and it doesn't penetrate in that way, then I throw it away. What I'm looking for is something that's going to make me move. And that's my criterion.

That's what I looked for in every bar of "Marimba Four Hands." I wanted it to have that propulsion. The last movement, no. That's old-fashioned music where that's not an issue. But I wanted all of it to have that. When I listen to the bar, I kind of want to tap my foot or something. And there's a lot of rhythms that you can listen to that leave you totally cold. Totally cold. And what it is about a rhythm that gives it that spark, I don't know, but kind of know it when you see it. And if it ain't got it, then I try not to put it in there.

If you generate things intellectually, you'll come up with a lot of this stuff that just kind of "bop-ba-bop." It just doesn't mean anything. It leaves you totally unmoved. That's why I need the ghost note. I find it doesn't move you around without those.

GL: All right. Thank you again.

Telephone Interview from October 22, 2010

GL: In your keyboard music, I often hear something harmonically that seems to suggest a jazz or pop influence. I hear it in measures 8 and 9 of "Soakin' Wet" for example as a succession of major 9th chords. If you are influenced by jazz/pop idioms, can you expound a little on where, for you, that comes from? I also noticed it in "Snoozin’ Down." In measures 78 and 79 you write a major ninth chord followed by another; then you do it again in 80 and 81.

DL: It's like you have a triad and then in the bass... Yeah, I know what you mean. That's a very pop gesture. That's an incredibly pop gesture.

GL: And as soon as I played it, it seemed to remind me of what I think of as your music. And so I didn't know if you felt that too and if that was something that...

DL: You know I really like that sound.

GL: Yeah.
DL: A pop musician thinks of it as a triad, say like a C major triad with F in the bass.

GL: Yes.

DL: To a classical theorist, it's like what is that? That's like a major seven nine.

GL: Yeah.

DL: But this business of having a triad in the treble and then something else in the bass, and that particular one I'm fond of it, and I overuse it.

GL: I like it. I like it a lot.

DL: Yeah, I like it too. It's funny. I'm a piano tuner, right?

GL: Right.

DL: I was once tuning for Wynton Marsalis in his apartment on the West Side. This was years ago. I don't know where he lives now. But when I got through tuning, I was playing a whole bunch of those chords like going through the keys. And he's like, "What is that?" I was like, "Oh, man. Marsalis wanted to know what that was." So it's just totally pop, yeah.

GL: Yeah. OK. And so along with that question, I was kind wondering was there a certain influence in jazz or pop or do you have something that has put that sound...

DL: I'm like everybody else. I've listened to a lot of stuff, and inside your brain is just soup.

GL: Yeah.

DL: You're being analytical so you're pulling out this and that. But basically it's just all soup in there.

GL: OK.

DL: And so the processing doesn't go analytically. Your subconscious is doing all that processing, and it knows when it gets the feeling of satisfaction that "OK, that's satisfying."

GL: Yeah.

DL: But it doesn't know why.

GL: Right.

DL: Now we can just speculate why, but all I know is that there are times when I just find that that's a very satisfying thing to do.
GL: Another question I had was why you chose to include text in the score. Does it have a purpose for the performers? Or is it just supposed to be another association linked with the title?

DL: Yeah, it's in the score, but it's not in the parts.

GL: Yes.

DL: Yeah. So you wouldn't necessarily see it when you were...

GL: True.

DL: ...playing it. It's in the score because a lot of the stuff I write has words to it. And they're often really stupid words, but they mean so much to me. And I don't write the words in but they mean something to me. And so I put them in the score kind of as a little thing for myself.

GL: Right, OK.

DL: Like “Soakin’ Wet. There are words to that.

GL: Exactly.

DL: And they're very embarrassing words. It’s all about a diaper that's soaking wet. So whatever. That's why they're there.

GL: You said your decision to study tabla was based on a motivation to develop a better rhythmic understanding, since you knew you wanted to write music about rhythm. Do you incorporate specific rhythmic patterns directly from that genre? Or have they been somehow altered? Do they show up in Marimba Four Hands?

DL: Specific rhythmic pattern, no. But that kind of linear approach, yes.

GL: I feel I have a solid understanding of the conceptual background relating to Marimba Four Hands as well as its overall larger structure, but I’m struggling to discuss the structure of some of the individual movements. Could you speak to each movement’s formal design?

DL: Again, it's soup. And so when I say these things, it's like taking a butterfly and pinning it to a board. Now, it’s going to be in that fixed state forever. It's no longer just floating around as what it is. But if I had to say why the second movement has its structure, to me that's the heart of the piece, the second movement. And from that one tune, I just had so many different ideas.

GL: Yeah.

DL: It just was a very fertile tune. And I wanted to put them all in there. So I think that's why I came up with that form. It’s like we're going to do a little of this and we're going to do a little of that and then write this. And this is cool, and I want to get this in
somewhere. Oh yeah, this will fit there. And this will fit there. Oh, this one's in a different time so how... OK, we'll do a time change there but we're already in... It's just kind of figuring out how they're all going to fit.

**GL:** Yeah.

**DL:** And then it's sort of turned into this thing where it got a little slower towards the end, like it kind of started out very awake and sort of became sleepy at the end. Which reminded me of a kid playing and just going from this to that. So the whole thing just kind of seemed to work. And then the first movement, I had that little germ of an idea and it seemed to work well. I think the end of that is in five or something.

**GL:** Well, it goes to 9/16 and 12/16. And to me it just kind of gets compressed.

**DL:** Right. And so that started to remind me... That's the kind of maybe it's something that came out. First it was a musical idea, but then immediately it had a meaning for me all of a sudden emotionally. And it just started to feel like somebody being born. And things are all kind of swapping around in there, and it's sort of starting to take a shape from that standpoint.

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** And then the third movement, I wanted it to be kind of an African-y sounding thing. And I had that little figure and then I thought, "OK, well, now we're talking about kids here, right? So the kid's going to sleep after that second movement. Great. So this would be like nap time. But then, how about if he has a dream, where he dreams about all these other things? So all the other movements are going to come in there." So it was like he's sleeping, or she's sleeping, and then there's this dream that happens where all the other material from the rest of the piece appears, kind of comes up and comes out and then it ends again, and then it segues into that.

The "Shortnin' Bread" is a tune that I kind of like in that time. It's in three rather than in four.

**GL:** Right.

**DL:** And so I thought, "OK, cool. That's a thing I sing with my kids a lot. It's kind of a kids' song."

**GL:** Yeah.

**DL:** And it's eating. So, cool. But I wanted to make it kind of a bizarre aspect to it. So that's where that came from. And then the last one, I wanted it to be all rolls because that's a very different texture. And so I thought, "OK, this will be stepping outside of what we've been doing."

**GL:** Yeah.
DL: And I had a figure that I liked that seemed it would work well. And I don't know. I don't know. So the form of that one is, again, what is it musically? What is it emotionally? Which came first? They kind of work together. But to me it came to be this thing of attempting to do something and failing, attempting and failing, and then attempting to release, really, into death. It sounds so stupid, you know. It's kind of what I was thinking. And then stepping back and having this long two-part conversation that resolves the issues and allows it to end. So I mean there's a lot of different ways you could look at a progression like that, right?

GL: Yeah.

DL: But why look at it in terms of something as cosmic as like dying? Why not something like tying your shoe? Well like I'm having trouble tying a shoe here. Oh, god, I'm having trouble again. OK, well let me just back off and relax for a while and think about this and think about that. Oh, yeah, OK. Now I got it. So I got my shoe tied.

GL: Yeah.

DL: But somehow you tend to gravitate towards a larger explanation.

GL: Right, right.

DL: Music just...it's mysterious.

GL: OK.

DL: I guess as human beings, things happen in the world around us, and we tend to put meaning into them.

GL: Right.

DL: Including music. But is the music, is the meaning really there, or...? I don't know. This is a deep question.

GL: My analysis of the piece will include a large discussion of your treatment of rhythm. Can you expound more on the sorts of rhythmic devices you mentioned early on in our pre-interview (ostinati, use of tihai’s, etc.), as well as where you feature them prominently in the work.

DL: Oh probably we'll get the most mileage out of that second movement.

DL: I mean in the fourth movement, it's very, very simple. I've taken that tune and I've just moved it over.

GL: Right.

DL: Four eighth notes and I moved it over by two-eighths and then moved it over by one-eighths note. That is a very direct use of a rhythmic transposition over the bar.
GL: Right, OK.

DL: And so you listen to it in the way originally but then you listen to it moved over by four and you say, "OK, what's musically different about this? What does it say to me musically? Does it work? Oh yeah, that's going to work." So now we back up. OK, let's try it two-eighth notes. What does that sound like? Does that sound like music? Is there something in there that sounds like music? And yeah, OK, that works. OK, so let's do that. Now I try an eighth note and like this is ridiculous because it's in swing time, right? So it's like not even really... You have the swing factor but you kind of finally like, "[makes a noise] OK, yeah. I can hear that something, I can get something to work out of that. Fantastic. Now we have a form."

GL: Yeah. Hmm.

DL: So yeah. But in this second one you'll probably find a lot of transposing in that way over the bar.

GL: Right.

DL: Let's see. Let me see if I can find it. I have it in my mind, but I'm not sure.

GL: Like one thing that maybe comes to mind is measure 20 on the... where you start that repeated cycle of a rhythm.

DL: Oh, yeah.

GL: Yeah. For those four...

DL: That's just over the bar.

GL: Yes.

DL: So then the issue is you want the listener's ear to hear those triplets but you don't want them to lose the 4/4.

GL: Right.

DL: So that's that, in bar 21, the ghost note. If you do a ghost note and then a note right after it, it pretty much says to your ear, this is the downbeat.

GL: Sure.

DL: More than just the note. The “ba BA,” says that's the downbeat rather than “ba ba.”

GL: OK.

DL: So that's like, OK, your ear's starting to drift towards a three but then you get this, “ba BA”
GL: Right.

DL: OK, so OK. That's still the downbeat. And then it does it again on the next bar. So that's to keep your brain in the same place. You know when [hums a section of the movement].

GL: Yeah.

DL: Where is that?

GL: Is it 69 maybe? Picking up into it.

DL: Yeah, right. So here we have a phrase that we're still in four here, right?

GL: Uh-huh.

DL: We have a phrase in seven. That's [hums] duh, duh, duh, duh, five, six, seven, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, five, six, seven, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, five, six, seven, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.

GL: Oh, OK.

DL: It was just seven, seven, seven.

GL: Yeah.

DL: So that's what's going on in my head rhythmically and the notes just kind of fall into place.

GL: OK.

DL: What pitches are they going to be? Well once you have that rhythm going, it just seems like those are the notes that have to be there.

GL: Yeah.

DL: Right. So I don't know. I mean other techniques you can use, you can half time. You can double time.

GL: Right.

DL: I've put that melody like in 85. It's that melody [hums another section].

GL: Sure.

DL: It's the same melody and it starts in the same place in the bar. But it happens to be in 9/16. And so the game there is if I'm feeling 9/16 and I'm humming that tune, what comes out? And what makes sense?
GL: Mm-hmm. So it is kind of just this organic process of making the tune just hopefully seamlessly fit into this new meter?

DL: Right.

GL: Yeah.

DL: And sometimes it just sort of pops into your head.

GL: Yeah.

DL: You're just like wow, I'm humming that tune but now it's in seven. And sometimes you intentionally do it just to see what would happen or because you need to make a transition. You need to get from here to there so you start playing around with it until something lights up. And it's like "OK, that's the one."

GL: I noticed you wrote for 21/16 at measure 112 in “Soakin’ Wet.” Inventions and “Soakin’ Wet” share some important rhythmic similarities and time signatures. They also evolve in similar ways it seems. Were you intentionally connecting them during the writing process?

DL: Well, 21/16 for me is basically a seven with triplet subdivision.

GL: Yeah.

DL: So let me try to hear this. I'm not quite hearing it yet.

GL: This one kind of sounded like the swing time as well at 21/16 because of that, right?

DL: Very much swing, swingish.

GL: [hums]

DL: All right. Yeah that. [hums] This is one that just came. I'm sure this was, I was just humming that. [hums]

GL: Right.

DL: [hums] I was just humming that. And then I would've sat down. Jesus, what is that? You're kidding me. That's in seven? All right, well what am I going to do? Well I guess probably the easiest way to notate it is to put it in 21 because it's sort of like groups, two groups of three, two groups of three, and three groups of three.

GL: Right.

DL: So yeah, that's one. That was not an artifice. That was just something that happened.

GL: Sure.
DL: Yeah. So it works both ways.