

## Methodical Projections: KEIKO ABE - MICHI

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**Abstract:** *One of the challenges facing a performer is the variants of performing and addressing a work, depending directly on the various hypostases in which the instrumentalist has to perform (concert, exam, or recording). Michi by Keiko Abe is a work that can be addressed differently depending on the three hypostases. The purpose of the work is to expose the analysis of a famous work dedicated to the marimba (which does not benefit from a wide repertoire except in modern times), and its structure highlights the composer's personality and the stylistic details of the analyzed work.*

Key-words: *marimba, concert, exam, recording*

### 1. Introduction

One of the challenges facing a performer is the variants of performing and addressing a work, depending directly on the various hypostases in which the instrumentalist has to perform (concert, exam, or recording). Michi by Keiko Abe is a work that can be addressed differently depending on the three hypostases.

Solo marimba repertoire has grown significantly since the 1970s. As a result of this expansion, there is no doubt that the marimba is regarded as a legitimate solo instrument: “Keiko Abe, developed solo literature and performance skills, and improved the reputation of the marimba as a solo instrument. Abe has been a well-known marimba player, educator, and composer for almost four decades. Her music, life, and achievements are featured in many international media” (Hashimoto 2017, V).

Marimba is a “term for a group of idiophones, some of which are plucked (lamellophones) and some of which are struck (xylophones). In parts of eastern and southern Africa, it may denote either type of instrument. In Latin America, it is mostly used for the calabash-resonated xylophone introduced from Africa, but in

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19th-century Brazil it also applied to calabash-resonated lamellophones of African origin, and in Colombia it is used generically to denote any melodic instruments other than aerophones (see List, 1968)" (Kubik 2010).

Japan currently represents the territory with the largest share of marimba players in the whole world, a phenomenon that is due to the marimba player Keiko Abe, who has been the main promoter of the marimba for the last 50 years (especially through her compositions that have become known to percussionists all over the world world). In addition to Keiko Abe, there are a number of other names such as: Momoko Kamiya, Nanae Mimura, Eriko Daimo, who are top names in the world marimba soloist.

Born in Japan on April 18, 1937, Keiko Abe is probably the most important name in the second half of the 20th century in marimba composition. This plays an extremely important role both in the evolution of the instrument itself, as well as in the repertoire and innovative techniques. Many of his compositions have found their way into the standard repertoire of percussionists around the world. His oeuvre for marimba is extremely rich and stylistically diverse (studies, small pieces, concertos for marimba and orchestra).

## **2. Analysis: Keiko Abe - Michi**

The work is of average difficulty from a technical point of view, but its performance poses real problems related to phrasing, dynamics, aesthetics, and semiotics, problems that have to be solved irrespective of the hypostasis in which an instrumentalist has to perform.

In my opinion, the most important is the concert variant of a work because it implies much more than a mechanical execution of a work. Here, a performer has to adapt rapidly to the sonority of the concert hall, to master one's emotions for a correct rendering of the musical text and not least, there has to be a coherence of the entire musical discourse that can be achieved through phrasing, dynamics, and a vision of the work that goes from microstructures to macrostructures and the other way round. From a macro-formal point of view, the work is structured as follows: A-B-C-D-C-B-A.

The first section of the work has an improvisation character on a mode with the fundamental on A, where the composer offers the performer the freedom to improvise in the written manner (example 1).



\*If the player wishes, he may improvise from the beginning to the \* in the same style and mode as what is written.

### Example 1. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

In the concert variant, the freedom to improvise is recommended provided that one observes the direction of the composer and the dynamic path of the entire section, with the final section as a climax, whose role is also that of binding the first two sections.

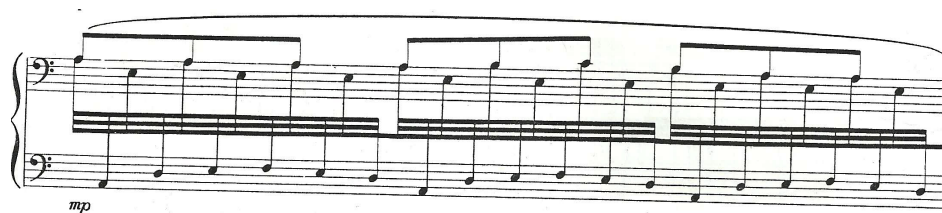
Another challenge for the performer in the concert variant consists of choosing the type of mallets appropriate for the entire work; if in the first section, soft mallets are the ideal solution, in the second section, the medium-soft mallets are recommended, and in the middle sections (C-D-C), the medium-hard mallets, the compromise solution is to use medium mallets, this type of mallet providing a balance of sound along the entire pitch range of the instrument.

The exam or competition variant often has a scholastic side; in some cases, a concert variant presented in an exam is not accepted in academic environments. For this reason, tackling this work has to be extremely rigorous, my recommendation for the first section is to observe entirely the text proposed by the composer. Here, the major difficulty consists in providing an improvisation character to a text that has to be rigorously observed. Although the tempo indicated by the composer is  $\text{♩}=160$ , I do not recommend observing this tempo in any of the three variants presented, my suggestion is to choose a slower tempo ( $\text{♩} = 138-145$ ), this being, in my opinion, the natural tempo of the work, the sound discourse being perceivable to the last detail. Another aspect that needs to be mentioned consists of the lack of measure, in fact, the improvisation character can be obtained also due to this fact, the only accents that are important are only those written in the score.

In the case of a special recording of this work, things are much simpler, the mallets can be changed in each section, in the case of the first section, the soft mallets being the best variant, the dynamic relations need to be balanced in order to establish a sound homogenisation of the recording, without the studio mix interfering with the dynamic construction of the work. We need to mention the fact that, in order to have accuracy and a rhythmical equality, the performer has to

control very well the mallets for the motion 4-1-3-2, in varied dynamics (pp-ff). The dynamic construction of this section is extremely important, the poco a poco crescendo requires an accurate dose, the risk of reaching a strong dynamic too fast is very great and it results in an incoherence of the musical discourse over the entire section.

An aspect one needs to be aware of is that of the title of the work *Michi* (road), a title also suggested also by the form of the work (A-B-C-D-C-B-A); in my opinion, the idea of a temporal recurrence is the main idea of the work. The direction of the composer (expresivo) supposes the creation of an emotional state that suggests a state of silence, specific to the Japanese rural area, which becomes gradually increasingly agitated, in accordance with the daily present of our times. The second section starts with the exposition of the main theme of the work, made up of two sound planes, the melodic line, on the one hand (played with mallet 4), and the accompaniment of minimalist type. This time, even in the absence of a written measure, the metric accent that emerges from the script is a ternary one.



Example 2. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

In the concert variant, emphasising the melodic line requires an independence of mallet 4, compared with the other 3, hence the capacity to articulate more strongly with mallet 4 in order to highlight the superior voice, the dynamic relation between the two planes being mf-mp. Regarding the accompaniment, the three mallets that perform it require a full equality among them, both rhythmically and dynamically.

The second theme is constructed by the same pattern of handling the mallets (4-1-3-2), the register in which it unfolds is medium (example), which, on the one hand, have sounds B and C as a gravity centre (mallets 2-3), around which other two planes are created (mallets 4-1), oscillating in the opposite ascending-descending direction, on an aeolian mode with the fundamental on A.

Example 3. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

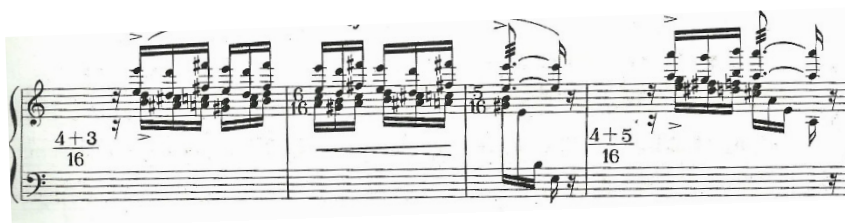
Here, the tackling of the text requires the capacity to articulate independently and to quickly change intervals, without affecting the sound flow. A study variant for the rapid change of intervals and for an awareness of each voice is the study of the entire section, first as chords, and secondly, each hand separately.

In the concert or recording variants, I recommend that the tempo be a little slower, in order to prepare the return of the main theme, this time slightly changed, in a strong dynamic and, in my opinion, in an extremely rapid tempo, this being, in fact, the climax of the entire work (example 4).

Example 4. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

In the third section, the sound material is different, measure lines appear for the first time, the direction of the composer (*risoluto*) supposes a state of firmness, that can be achieved only through an extremely well worked out mastering of the musical text. The register in which the musical discourse unfolds is the sharp one, hence normally, the necessity of also using hard mallets; of course, this is possible

only in the case of a special recording of the work. Also, here the independent tremolo appears for the first time in the work, a technical method that is carried out through a rapid alternating of two sounds with one hand (example 5). The realisation of this type of tremolo requires a high technical level and a very good independence of the mallets. In the first stage, if there are difficulties in the realisation of the tremolo, the execution measured as 32nds, starting from slow to fast, is recommended.



Example 5. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

The fourth section introduces us to a realm of playfulness, that passes gradually to a state of greatness, practically using the same sound material. In order to mark these differences in character, the solution consists of suddenly changing the tempo from a rapid ( $\text{♩}=138-145$ ), to a more moderate one ( $\text{♩}=112-120$ ), when the direction *Grandioso* appears.

From a technical point of view in the first stage, the major difficulty consists of a rapid change in intervals and in highlighting the superior voice, then the octave jumps for the left hand that require a mechanical, very well worked out approach, any error being easily perceivable by the audience (example 6).



Example 6. *Michi* by Keiko Abe

Solving these technical problems supposes a constant study period, implying specific exercises of rapid interval change for the right hand, and the development of the capacity to perform precise jumps in speed. In any of the proposed variants (concert, recording, or exam), observing the musical text and implicitly, the directions in the score, are mandatory, and in my opinion, accuracy represents the main aim of the entire section.

The next section is created of elements taken over from the third section (C), this time in the middle-low register of the marimba, the proposed character being this time imposing and great, which makes the transition to a state of calmness of the next two sections that constitute the end of the work, and which outline the recurrent, both formal and expressive character of the entire work.

### **3. Conclusion**

While at present, the repertoire for percussion instruments is extremely rich and varied both from the point of view of style and timbre, only 100 years ago there was no work devoted especially to these instruments. The evolution of the repertoire and of the instruments occurred at an extremely accelerated rhythm over the last 50 years. In what follows, I proposed a synthesis of the evolution of percussion instruments in the history of music, from the beginning until present, the marimba benefitting from enhanced attention both from composers and percussionists all over the world: "marimba is any of several varieties of xylophone.

Keiko Abe's contributions to the contemporary marimba repertoire have been a milestone in the development of the marimba as a solo concert instrument: "besides the creation of a new repertoire through commissions and her own compositions, Abe's contributions to the marimba include the improvement of the sound quality of the marimba and the establishment of the five octave instrument as the standard concert marimba" (Santos 2008, ii).

Marimba is one of many African names for the xylophone, and, because African instruments bearing this name frequently have a tuned calabash resonator for each wooden bar, some ethnomusicologists use the name marimba to distinguish gourd-resonated from other xylophones. Marimbas have become widely popular around the world being used throughout Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, South America and Central America" (Tikkanen, Amy 2010, 178).

From the experience acquired until now, I can say that if a work is very well prepared for a concert variant, the recording or playing at an exam of the respective work does not suppose a greater effort from the performer, the concert

representing in my opinion the main concern for an instrumentalist when he/she addresses a score. Besides solving technical problems, which represents the ground for a qualitative performance, aspects such as: the form of the work, phrasing, the title (if applicable), and the composition style also contribute to the quality of an artistic act, when the performer takes all these details into account and applies them when performing.

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