

'Tales from the Center of the Earth'

An interview with Benjamin Toth

BY JEFF GRANT

On November 6, 2004, Ben Toth performed a new piece called "Tales from the Center of the Earth" by composer Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic with the University of Louisville Wind Ensemble conducted by Dr. Frederick Speck. In the days leading up to the performance, Toth presented several clinics on hand drumming, world percussion, and marimba pedagogy. He was also kind enough to sit down with me and discuss this new piece, his relationship with Zivkovic, and his love for world percussion.

Grant: *Tomorrow night you will be performing "Tales from the Center of the Earth," a concerto for percussion soloist with wind ensemble, for the University of Louisville New Music Festival. The piece was composed by Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic (pronounced Neboyssha Yovan Chivkovich) and is dedicated to you. Many of us would be interested to know more about the piece and its premiere.*

Toth: The whole thing would not have been possible if not for the Director of Bands at The Hartt School, Glen Adsit. He invited me to play a concerto with the Hartt Wind Ensemble—a new work that we would help generate by organizing a consortium [see end of article for list of schools] to commission the piece, and by presenting the premiere performance. He also allowed me to select the composer.

I liked the idea of a percussion concerto being written by a percussionist because I wanted the solo part to feel comfortable and logical on the instruments. I also wanted to feel like I had earned the right to be standing in front

of the ensemble; in other words, the solo part should require some virtuosity, and not just serve as a busy accompaniment part. Nebojsa was the clear choice for me, for several reasons. First, because I have always admired his writing. In addition, I have worked with him, played lots of his music, and feel as though I have a good understanding of his compositional style. I also knew that Nebojsa would be open to feedback during the compositional process. Finally, I was impressed by the three concerti he had previously

written for percussion. He has one concerto for percussion soloist and orchestra, called "Concerto of the Mad Queen," commissioned by Evelyn Glennie, and two marimba concerti with full symphony orchestra.

I premiered "Tales" in April of 2003 with the Hartt Wind Ensemble, Glen Adsit conducting. Nebojsa attended our final rehearsals and the premiere performance. Since then it has been played by at least half of the consortium schools. Having had the opportunity to tour a bit with the piece, I have found it to be very attractive and rewarding for all those involved—the soloist, ensemble members, and, of course, the audience.

I consider "Tales" to be a welcome addition to our repertoire, and one that I think will grow in popularity, like much of Nebojsa's music.

Grant: *When did you meet Nebojsa and how did your collaboration begin?*

Toth: I met Nebojsa when I was a member of Percussion Group Cincinnati. We were appearing at the Fifth International Percussion Workshop in Bydgoszcz, Poland during the summer of 1991. I was immediately impressed with his playing, his teaching, and his music. I think he was interested in and taken by what he saw from the Percussion Group. So we became buddies. At the time he was really interested in improving his English. Nebojsa speaks five or six languages, so when we tour we have no problems; he can talk to anybody [laughs]. English is maybe his third language. At the time he was interested in polishing up his English, so we spent a lot of our free time



Ben Toth

working on that and just hanging out. It evolved from there very gradually.

Our collaborations have been an important part of my own education, because I feel that the ten years or so that I've worked with Nebojsa in the Jovan Percussion Group, and occasionally as a duo partner have had an effect on my musicianship, and more specifically my marimba playing. I sort of consider him to be my unofficial marimba teacher; every time we play together I carefully observe what he is doing and try to glean what I can. Also, musically speaking, I have a lot of respect for his writing; his pieces are fun and challenging to play, audiences like them, and they're well constructed. I think that reflects the fact that he has graduate degrees in composition, theory, and performance. He really has put as much energy into developing his composing "chops" as he has into his playing "chops." Nebojsa began composing "Tales" during the fall of 2002 and called me almost daily while he was composing the piece.

Grant: *It sounds like a collaborative effort.*

Toth: I didn't really contribute any compositional ideas, but I did have some specific requests. I wanted the solo part to include both marimba and a

multiple-percussion setup. He was open to that idea, and after a few discussions he settled on the exact instrumentation and configuration for the multiple-percussion setup. The soloist plays marimba during the first movement and the multiple percussion setup during the second movement. I also wanted to include an interlude in the middle of the piece where the percussion section would be featured with the soloist; the winds, at that point, would basically be tacet. There is some pretty intense writing in there for percussion ensemble with the soloist, so he did let me contribute a bit in terms of the form of the piece.

Other than that he was really open to sharing his compositional ideas—generally looking for some feedback. He would call me up at like 10:00 or 11:00 P.M.—which was 4:00 or 5:00 A.M. at his home in Germany—and would play riffs or themes over the phone! He seemed to compose this piece nightly, from eleven at night to four in the morning! He had the the soloist's whole multiple-percussion setup constructed in his home studio because he tends to compose at the instruments, with a marimba and piano handy as well.



Figure 1

Grant: *It is very interesting the way he composed this piece. The two of you figured out what instruments were going to be used and then he composed from the setup.*

Toth: That's true. In fact, it served as a point of departure for the second movement. The soloist's percussion setup for "Tales" includes a kick drum, five tomtoms, bongos, a snare drum, four cymbals of various sizes, two ribbon crashers, two Jam Blocks, two cowbells, one octave of crotales, and a "thunder tube," though I've been using a Zildjian gong sheet instead (see Fig. 1).

Actually, Nebojsa and I don't use the exact same setup for the percussion instruments; he originally set it up as an exact mirror image of the way you see me playing the piece. So when he began sending me sketches of the solo part, I started to realize that the stickings were very left-hand oriented, with lots of left-hand double-stickings and left-hand leads. That didn't feel so comfortable, or even necessary. I tend to set the larger instruments on the left, just like we set up the timpani, but he's more used to a German arrangement with the larger instruments on the right. He also relates the setup to a modified drumset, with the floor tom on the right. So, on a whim, I set up everything backwards, as an exact mirror image, and I modified all the stickings. It felt much more comfortable. I called him up and said, "Hey, is it okay with you if I reverse the entire setup?" He said, "Sure." If you visit his Website [www.zivkovic.de] you will see photos of each of our setups, allowing performers to select their own preference.

Grant: *I understand that you encouraged Nebojsa to include various world percussion instruments for the wind ensemble percussion parts—specifically, some hand drums. When did you develop your interest in world percussion?*

Toth: I have always been interested in world percussion, and have been introduced to various drumming traditions by attending clinics or workshops, including several PASIC clinics. These experiences prompted me to initiate a program at The Hartt School in which we rotate guest percussion teachers. Each teacher is in residence for one or

two semesters. The guest teachers provide weekly private lessons, and sometimes master classes, as a complement to the weekly lessons students have with me. Through this guest teacher program, the students and I have been able to study with some fantastic musicians, including Glen Velez, who is our frame drum teacher, and Joseph Galeota, who is our African drumming

teacher. We have had two Latin percussion teachers, Johnny Almendra and John Amira, whose lessons focused on folkloric music from Cuba and Haiti. Our most recent guest teacher was Dave Samuels, who taught improvisation, and this year [2004] we will have PAS Hall of Fame member Al Lepak and a Brazilian percussionist named Rogerio Boccato.

Grant: *I think we are all interested in how world percussion instruments were incorporated into this piece. For example, some of the instruments in the percussion section include “large frame drum” and an Egyptian tambourine, or riq. Is this something Zivkovic was interested in?*

Toth: Yeah. When we tour I get a chance to play my frame drums with him; lots of his Serbian folk music works well with frame drums. So he is familiar with the drums and he knows that my students play frame drums, so he didn’t hesitate to include them in the piece. As it turns out, the main theme of the first movement has sort of an Arabic sound, and like all of his music, a hint of Balkan folk melodies. But “Tales” is more Arabic sounding than Balkan.

I think we both immediately realized that some frame drums would be a good fit. In addition to the riq, he also incorporates a dumbek and a Glen Velez-style bodhran; he likes that low frame drum sound. Those instruments are well integrated into the piece, and really add to the exotic nature of the marimba movement. The hand drummers sit right next to the marimba soloist, up front, and the audiences seem to really enjoy seeing these instruments played.

Grant: *Zivkovic’s music is very melodic, and that holds true with this piece.*

Toth: That’s true. He is the master at writing pieces based on Serbian/Balkan folk music with very distinct melodies, and of course he’s very comfortable in odd-time signatures because Serbian folk music is typically uneven. Although much of his music is in odd meters, it flows in a very dance-like way, including the second movement of “Tales,” which alternates between 5/4 and 9/8. In this particular piece, I think the colors and textures of a wind ensemble, as opposed to a symphony orchestra, made him think and compose in a certain way.

Generally, one of the most interesting things about Nebojsa’s work is that you can always hear at least a hint of his Balkan roots in the music, whether you are listening to his most tonal, pedagogical pieces—like in the *Funny Marimba* books—or whether you are listening to his more contemporary

pieces, like “Tensio” or “Ultimatum I.” That is what I love most about his music.

Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic will be releasing a CD in fall 2006 that will feature percussion concerti that he has composed, including “Tales From the Center of the Earth,” Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic, soloist, with the Slovenian Army Band; and “Castle of the Mad Queen,” Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic, soloist, with the Slovenian Radio Symphony Orchestra. For more information, visit www.zivkovic.de

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