

# The well-tempered marimba: Bach and the percussion instrument are perfect together in the hands of She-e Wu



Marimba player She-e Wu, artist-in-residence for the Bethlehem Bach Festival.  
(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

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If the marimba had existed in J.S. Bach's time, would he have composed for that dark, mellow, resonant instrument? Most folks would answer yes, but renowned marimba soloist She-e Wu goes one step further. "I think if Bach really could have heard the marimba, he might have written for nothing else," she says.

That's the kind of response that comes straight from the heart, and Wu is both heart and soul a lover of the music of Bach and the marimba, possibly in that order.

There is hardly a continent that Wu has not brought her percussive skill to, performing not only works by Bach, but also many works for marimba she composed, commissioned and premiered.

Wu has performed as a solo artist at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center and at percussion festivals across the globe. She's appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Moment Musicale Orchestra of Taiwan and many other orchestral groups. She has performed as guest recitalist and clinician at universities, colleges and conservatories in Asia, Europe and throughout the U.S.

Wu, associate professor of music and the head of the percussion program at Northwestern University, is coming to Bethlehem for the 111th Bethlehem Bach Festival May 11-12 and 18-20. As the artist-in-residence, Wu will give free outdoor performances and participate in activities in area schools as well as perform concerts featuring works by Bach and Eric Ewazen.

Notwithstanding Wu's love of Bach, we're lucky she can fit Bethlehem into her hectic touring schedule. Last week, her solo marimba performance closed the "A Season of Women in Music" concert series in Greensboro, N.C. "The week before I was in New York City, the week before that I was in Nevada. In the coming weeks, I'm going to Nashville, then Denver and then Bethlehem," Wu says.

The classical marimba repertoire — and percussion repertoire, in general — has become a hot ticket. The marimba is an instrument far removed from the foundations of classical music. It was first introduced to the genre by Darius Milhaud in 1947, and until the late 1950s, its repertoire was almost entirely based on transcriptions.

"These days, it's nearly all commissioned works. In the past we used to play Bach, Saint-Saens, and others — all transcriptions. It was only more recently, in the last 50 years or so, that composers started to write commissions, so we're really the new kids on the block," Wu says. "But we didn't get really popular until the 1980s with composers such as Joseph Schwantner and Roger Reynolds. Before that, a lot of activity happened because of the Japanese marimba player Keiko Abe, who just turned 82. In the last 20 years, it's really exploded."

One of the most popular of contemporary marimba works is Ewazen's "Concerto for Marimba and Strings," which Wu will perform with members of the Bach Festival Orchestra at the Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concerts. Ewazen composed the work for Wu, who premiered it in 1999 in her native Taiwan with the Moment Musicale Orchestra.

Wu says, "I had been concertizing Eric's piece for solo marimba, 'Northern Lights,' for years, when after a performance in Taiwan, the conductor of the Moment Musicale Orchestra came up to me and said, 'I really love how you played this work. Do you think the composer would be interested in writing a concerto for you and my orchestra? We will pay the commission.' Well, I just looked at him in amazement — this was like a gift that was just dropped into my lap."

Wu called Ewazen, whom she had never met, and convinced him to come for a visit and hear her play.

"He got so excited, he said he'd start on a piece the very next day. He went to the premiere with me in Taiwan in 1999, but two months before the concert, there was an historic earthquake there

that left thousands dead,” Wu says. “So we dedicated our concert to all the firefighters and the people who were involved in saving so many lives. That made the event very special for me.”

There’s good reason for the work’s popularity. “The first movement is in a form of a Mozart Horn Concerto. Eric is a theory teacher, so he’s very into form. He wanted to write something really classical for the first part of the piece,” Wu says. “The second movement, which we’re not playing, is very lush. The third movement is really over the top — jazzy, rhythmical and exciting. In the end it brings back the theme from the first movement. It’s crazy!”

Wu also will perform Bach’s Cello Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009, at the Bach at Eight concerts on Friday nights. Interestingly, since the scale of the marimba matches that of the cello — they both share the same lowest note — the piece is not a transcription, but played as-is.

Wu has recorded the first three of the six cello suite and has a special rapport with them. “For me personally, I know that Bach dedicated his music to God, and was a perfectionist. I relate to that. He was the ultimate perfectionist — each note had to be perfect. Even on his deathbed he was working on counterpoint. Who else would be so obsessive? That was Bach,” Wu says.

“His music speaks to me on many different levels. First, as a musician, the harmonic progressions and forms are so amazing that I find it difficult to believe a person could actually write those notes. Then, as a player, if you play the three cello suites in one concert, you get into this weird mode, like an out-of-body experience, where you can almost see yourself playing it and you’re just floating from one sequence to the next.”

Sometimes, Wu says, she gets so lost in the performance, and has to catch herself to hear the next chord.

“At the Paris Conservatory, I once played the three suites in a single concert. I decided it would be years before I would do that again! Two months ago, I played the three suites again, almost 10 years later, in Omaha, Neb.,” she says.

Growing up in Taiwan, Wu got involved in classical music from the urging of her mother, who was a music lover, although not a musician. “When I was about 6, she wanted me to play the French horn, her favorite instrument. I went to the first lesson, and after about an hour — it felt like an eternity — I could barely make a sound. The teacher suggested to my mother that maybe that instrument was not for me, and that I should try another,” Wu says.

“I said, ‘How about the timpani?’ My mother said you don’t even know what timpani are. But I said ‘I do! They’re the big drums in the back of the orchestra.’ Of course, I wasn’t even tall enough to reach them, but she actually got me lessons and I started practicing — on our couch. Maybe three years later, my teacher asked me what drums I had at home. Reluctantly, I had to answer that I didn’t own any, and had been practicing on the couch. He was, like what?! You need to buy a set of timpani!”

Wu’s mother eventually bought her a set of timpani for kids. By the time she was 10, she was learning the snare drum and xylophone, and finally, by 11 or 12, the marimba. “I was only

playing with two mallets back then,” Wu says. “I remember the year before I went to college, my teacher said, you know, there are people who play with four. So he taught me how to do it, and I did it.”

For the past three years Wu has been deeply involved with the design of marimbas and mallets.

The Innovative Percussion musical instrument company sells the She-e Wu Signature Series of mallets, and her Majestic Reflection marimba was released last year. The magnificent 9-foot-long, more than 200-pound instrument will travel with her to Bethlehem.

No matter where she travels, Wu is often asked the same question, one that was asked of her as recently as her North Carolina performance, which included works of Bach.

“All these people came up to me after the concert and asked, ‘Do you really think Bach would approve of his music being played on the marimba?’ Anyone who knows Bach at all would know he’s one of the most open-minded composers ever — if he heard the marimba he probably would have loved it. So my answer has always been, absolutely yes!” she says.

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## **DETAILS**

She-e Wu

What: Internationally renowned marimba soloist performs as artist-in-residence at the 111th Bethlehem Bach Festival

When and where: Free outdoor performance, noon Fridays, May 11 and 18, City Hall Plaza on Church Street; 8 p.m. May 11 and 18, Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University; 10:30 a.m. May 12 and 19, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University. Festival runs May 11-12; 18-19

How much: \$22-\$34; \$9, students May 11, 18; \$23; \$9, students May 12 and 19

Info: 610-866-4382, [www.bach.org](http://www.bach.org)

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**Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.**