

**“How much do you know about marimba?”
Its construction, history and an exclusive
interview with Maestro Keiko Abe**



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Adilia Yip helps us learn more this instrument.

He has studied under the direction Albert Ludwig Professor for your graduate and is currently a Ph.D. in musical arts, research projects being at the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp (Belgium).

What is marimba?

Marimba, literally means “the goddess” in Guatemalan language, is a wooden keyboard belongs to the percussion family. Sound is produced by two parts: the wooden bars and the metal resonator. The wooden bars are made into different width and length and organized the same as the black and white keys of the piano keyboard. By striking the wooden bars with wool mallets, a sound is produced and amplified by the metal resonator. Due to the acoustic physics of the strike and resonance, the marimba bars are generally tuned slightly higher (A=442Hz) to reach the most satisfactory acoustic effect. For different levels of quality, function and price, the modern marimba is tuned in different ranges: from the smallest model for 4 octaves to the widest we have nowadays for 5.5 octaves. Here is a table of the possible octave and pitch range:

No. of octaves	Pitch range
4	C3-C7
4 1/3	A2-C7
4 2/3	E2-C7
5	C2-C7
5 1/2	C2-G7

Where does marimba come from?

The first modern marimba (model 350) is manufactured during 1918 to 1925 in the USA, Chicago. Although the instrument builders J.C. Deagan and U.G. Leedy¹ had noted in their factory catalogue that the design was inspired by the African xylophone, the exact ethnic origin of the instrument remains a controversy. Some musicologists and percussionists suggest that the modern marimba is an imitation of the Latin American instruments from Guatemala; some say it was developed from the Indonesian Gamelan instruments; therefore, the true ethnic ancestor of the modern marimba remains a mystery.

The Sound of the Modern Marimba

To most music lovers, marimba is no longer a new name in their music dictionary. It gains more popularity in the mass media and concert halls: the merry tune in a TV advertisement, the sweet chorale played by a harmonic band, the mystic moment of a detective investigation, etc. But have you ever listened to compositions that are dedicated to the marimba? The instrument can sound mellow and dreamy like clouds floating in the sky, as well as a powerful woofer that can shake your ear drum. It has a wide range of sound possibilities to create different moods; and indeed, because of its special construction and playing technique, it has a unique music style. An exclusive interview with Miss Keiko Abe, the pioneer marimba maestro from Japan will tell us her creativity and deep enthusiasm towards the instrument.

¹ The manufacture history of the modern marimba is incomplete, deviations are found between the *Deagan Catalog* (1920) and some important literature concerning the actual birth year of the first modern marimba. According to the *Deagan Resource*, J.C. Deagan and U.G. Leedy built the first marimba, model number 350, during 1918 to 1925 in the USA, Chicago. However, scholars have suggested various alternative manufacture period. England (1971) claimed that J.C. Deagan has produced the United States version of the Central America marimba in 1910-1918; Smith (1995) suggested that between year 1910-1918, Deagan manufactured a version of the Central American marimba which he called the *nabimba*. MacCullum (1968) and Pimentel (1982) stated that the finest marimba (model 4632) has a range of six octaves, made during 1910 to 1920.

Exclusive! Interview with Maestro Keiko Abe

Keiko Abe (born in Tokyo, April 18, 1937), is the first-lady of the marimba world. Being a legendary figure in the marimba history, she contributes as a composer and performer, but more importantly, she is the pioneer developer of the instrument and new performance techniques. Through her collaboration with the Yamaha musical instrument company, she has developed the modern five-octave concert marimba and her marimba mallets signature series.



Composed over 80 compositions and at least 70 commissions, including her solo works like *Michi*, *Variations on Japanese Children's Songs*, and *Dream of the Cherry Blossoms*, Miss Abe's works have become the standard of the marimba repertoire for student and professional recitals all around the world. She has premiered her works in worldwide concert halls and collaborated with renowned composers and musicians; one example is the *Marimba Spiritual* for marimba solo and 3 percussionists, written by Minoru Miki in 1984, which Miss Abe has premiered with the *Nieuwe Slagwek Groep Amsterdam* at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Hall. Inspired by improvisation and the nature, her compositions truly blend the wealth of tonal nuances of the marimba and her unique musical style and deep sympathetic emotion.

In addition to her heavy composing, touring, and recording schedule, Miss Abe is professor at the Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo. Among her countless prizes and awards, she is the first woman to be inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 1993.

I am much honored to have the chance to interview Miss Abe in March 2013 to discuss about creativity in marimba music. Miss Abe has the ability to 'merge' with her marimba— she creates works that reflect an incredible depth of feeling, combining her virtuosic technique and musicianship. Creativity is indeed inexplicable verbally, but from an insightful description of her creative process, you will certainly feel the immense passion and vision behind her boundless creations.

Adilia Yip: Thank you so much for your time Miss Abe, it is my pleasure to interview you. Considering your projects as five different categories, Instrument developer- Invention of the YM 6000, Arrangements- Latino xebec trio, Commissions- marimba selection, Own compositions- works of marimba, Improvisation- with Dave Samuels, Which project(s) do you like the most? Could you tell us the reasons why you wish to carry out these project(s)?

Keiko Abe: *You are welcome! In fact, I prefer a lot arranging music for marimba ensemble, but I enjoy composing the most. The reason that I am doing all these music projects is that I wanted to establish marimba as an independent instrument. At that time, I mean in the earlier period that I started to compose and commission for the marimba (In 1964, Miss Abe has published her first work Frog with American publisher Studio 4 Productions; and her first published commission in 1962 Suite for marimba "Conversation" by Akira Myoshi) marimba was only regarded as a kind of percussion with musical pitch; nobody saw it as a solo instrument that has its own voice in the most prestige concert hall. I wanted marimba to be regarded as an independent instrument to express art the same as piano or violin. I believe in the possibilities that it has, so I started this project.*

Adilia Yip: Did the first idea come up in relation to self intuition (self interests)? Have you confronted with environmental circumstances like economic, social (inside the music world), tradition, etc. or taste of the audience?

Keiko Abe: *The first idea came up from self intuition of creative ideas.*

Adilia Yip: As you are the main designer of YM 6000, historically speaking, you have defined sound and techniques with the marimba you have created, not only contributed the marimba world with innovative compositions.

Being the pioneer developer of the first 5-octave marimba, could you share with us your inspirations in designing the first prototype?

Keiko Abe: *The uniqueness of marimba is low-pitched sound. I had an idea of expanding the low range of marimba, to make a fuller sound and lower in range. It was a demand for my musical creativity as well, because it would have given much more compositional possibilities.*

Adilia Yip: Did you base your design concepts on an earlier instrument (for instance, the manufacture of the first Deagan marimba in America was inspired by the African percussion keyboard), or was it a genial imagination of sound that has already existed in your mind?

Keiko Abe: *It was a genial imagination of sound. It was also my demand in musical sound that has requested to reform the marimba instrument.*

Adilia Yip: How did you explain the special characteristics of marimba to the commissioned composers, who are neither marimbist nor percussionist?

How could you communicate your artistic concepts with composers during the creation process?

Keiko Abe: *I ask composers to give all their musical creativity into marimba. If I gave indications to the composers about the technical aspects in the beginning, I think they would have only followed my indications and good works could not be made. After the composers have finished the compositions, they would come to my house and I played the composition (sometimes only a few bars) and discussed with them, but note, before they brought the music to me, they worked completely without my explanation about playing it or the techniques on marimba. Then, I would advise the composers an effective way to use the musical energies which they wanted to express on the marimba. On the contrary, from passages that seemed technically too difficult, I could search for other possibilities to play the music or new techniques for marimba, which I did not notice them before. The past good works were made by joint operation of composer and performer.*

Adilia Yip: One major theme in your composition is the nature and Japanese culture, so may I say it is your origin of inspiration, or what else has inspired your creativity?

Keiko Abe: *Yes, my works are inspired by these two categories: the first one is from nature; I get energy from nature and creations are made when I am alone in the nature. The second category is folk songs. As folk songs have the energy that closely reflects life and human emotion, it connects naturally to my marimba world.*

Adilia Yip: Do you think composing is an intuitive process?

Keiko Abe: *In my case, composing is an intuitive process.*

Adilia Yip: Your compositions are highly depended in improvisation. Could you comment the characteristics of improvising and composing as a creative process?

Keiko Abe: *Improvisation is absolutely music. It is the origin of composition. What I have in myself and my mind is translated to sound and expressed as music. Improvisation is to let the inner voice speaks, to be heard, and when it is managed to be precisely written into a score by precise calculation, organization of notes, ideology and etc., I think this is composition.*

Here is a remark from the speech when Miss Abe accepted her Hall of Fame award at the PAS 93' Awards Banquet, she had delivered these intriguing thoughts on her instrument and creativity to her audience: "The marimba is very special for me. I listen carefully to understand its many possibilities. I have great respect for the marimba. When I play, I have a great desire to find its expressive possibilities—knowing that at one time this most beautiful wood came from a living tree with its own history and experience. It is as if the marimba bar breathes like a living tree, and when I make music I want to breathe with it. With these deep feelings, it is very important for me to continue to commission new works and try to compose music which explores the expressive and emotional possibilities of the marimba to communicate to the listeners who come to my concerts. Whether the composition has a strict form or explores improvisational possibilities, whether it is tonal or atonal, whether it is slow and ambles or it is fast and direct, I hope the music of the marimba will always focus on real communication rather than technical virtuosity for its own sake."