

DRUM LINES

SHANNON WOOD PERFORMS A CONCERTO WITH SO MANY TIMPANI THEY DON'T ALL FIT ON THE FLOOR.

BY RENÉ SPENCER SALLER



Shannon Wood practices the Kraft concerto.

Shannon Wood's practice space is across the street from Powell Hall, in the Big Brothers Big Sisters building, formerly a Woolworth's drugstore. From the lobby we take an elevator down to a concrete bunker crammed with beautiful percussion instruments in various stages of restoration: timpani, glockenspiels, marimbas, chimes. Besides being Principal Timpani of the St. Louis Symphony, Wood owns and operates Malletshop.com, an online resource for vintage mallet percussion instruments. His basement rental has several functions: storeroom, practice space, composing studio, workshop. Not so much cluttered as efficiently packed, it's clearly the workspace of someone who is passionately devoted to percussion.

Dominating this resonant lair is Wood's specially augmented rig. A large, horseshoe-shaped steel structure secures the nine additional drums that Wood is renting so that he can perform William Kraft's Timpani Concerto No. 2, "The Grand Encounter," with the St. Louis Symphony on April 30 and May 1.

"These drums are called tenor timpani," Wood explains, waving toward the row on top, which are on loan from David Herbert, who premiered the work in 2005. "They're chromatic, starting from C sharp, so the whole concerto expands to just about three octaves. The lowest

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Shannon Wood

note I play is a C sharp below staff, and the highest note is an A.

“Usually in the context of an orchestra I will just have four drums on the floor,” he adds. “Sometimes five—that one’s called a piccolo; Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* uses a piccolo—but generally I just have four.”

The Kraft concerto calls for more, and then some. Six drums on the floor make for an unusually deep low end. But even more remarkable is the shifting tonal palette.

“The drums down here on the floor have pedals, and throughout the concerto I’m constantly changing pitches just like a harpist,” Wood says.

Tuning his instruments requires constant vigilance. The Kraft concerto, he says, would be impossible to play with calfskin heads. “There are so many changes of the pitch and tuning that it would be all over the map. It’s really a different sound,” he says, rapping first the calfskin head and then a plastic one. “Also, some of these notes in the concerto are really, really high, pushing the range almost to the limit, and you could possibly break a calfskin head.”

Although Kraft spent two decades as Principal Timpani of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he isn’t at all prescriptive in his performance notes. Flipping through a nearby study score, Wood searches for examples. “He does include pedaling recommendations, but every timpanist is going to decide that for himself,” he says. “Kraft doesn’t say use a hard mallet or a soft mallet—he leaves that for the soloist. He might write where he wants you to play a buzzed roll, or, see, there’s a glissando right there, and it says what drums to put it on.”

He peers down at a page, points to a line of crabbed script. “That’s his actual handwriting right there, where he inserted some revisions.”

Wood has already memorized Kraft’s score, but he’s always on the alert for overlooked nuances. “See, here he does write ‘with felt.’ I think previously he might have had something with wood sticks.”

Wood first met the composer in 2005, at Kraft’s California home. At the time, he was casually acquainted with Kraft’s first concerto for timpani, but he’d never performed it. “It’s funny,” Wood recalls, “the first time I met him he was writing the second timpani concerto. I saw a draft on his piano. It was so cool to be there, and then 10 years later to be back in his studio, knowing that I’m going to perform it. But he really didn’t give me any ideas about how to go about doing it.”

During their visit last year, Kraft told Wood that “a lot of my sound world comes from jazz.” [see stlsymphony.org/blog, August 28, 2015, for video of Wood and Kraft] Wood understood immediately what he meant: “You can hear it in the score and even in the timpani part,

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where he's got stacked seventh and ninth and 11th and 13th chords. It's really cool.

"There's a little section in the epilogue," he continues, "with a reduced orchestration, and it has almost a jazz quintet feel to it. Very exposed, and more transparent. The timpani are muted, and I'm using Hot Rods—that's like a ruthe [pronounced ROOT-uh], which is just a bundle of rattan sticks bound together. It gives that kind of tappy sound, which reminds me of a jazz quartet or quintet, when the drummer is using brushes."

The concerto, which Kraft substantially revised a year after its 2005 premiere, is as multifaceted as its creator. As Wood puts it, it reflects "his years with the L.A. Philharmonic, and his love for jazz, and his love for composition."

Wood is a composer himself. Last year he wrote a quartet featuring

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English horn, cello, piano, and timpani for the St. Louis Symphony Community Program. More recently, he completed a commission for Mark Suter, a percussionist with Silk Road Project, which he'll debut later this year.

What Wood finds most appealing in the Kraft concerto is its melodic expressiveness: "Because of the number of drums Kraft has written for and all the times you have to change the tuning, there's so much opportunity for a lyrical line," he explains. "A lot of other timpani pieces just seem so *drummy*. There's no fun in that for me. I want to make music, and I want to shape lines instead of just making noise."

Being in the spotlight will take some adjustment, though. "Downstage is going to be such a different place to hear," he muses. "I'm not used to hearing the orchestra behind me."

As the featured soloist, he'll be more prominent than usual, yet still partially obscured. His Kraft setup, he points out, occupies the same onstage real estate as a concert grand piano. But in this case, he's surrounded on three sides by rows of timpani.

"I'm in my man cave, literally," he says, laughing. "Or maybe my man cage."

Shannon Wood performs Kraft's Timpani Concerto No. 2, "The Grand Encounter," with the St. Louis Symphony, David Robertson conducting, April 30-May 1, at Powell Hall.

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