

ON TRIAL
Concerto for Vibraphone and Chamber Ensemble
Robert Greenberg
(1994)

Program Note

- I. Trial by Fire
Intermezzo 1

- II. Trial by Water
Intermezzo 2

- III. Time Trials/Trial Run

Program Note

What the solo singer was to the eighteenth century and the pianist to the nineteenth, so the percussionist is to the second half of the twentieth century - the transcendent virtuoso, expanding both the instrumentation of the percussion ensemble and playing technique to ever new levels of virtuosity.

Even as we praise them, though, we must pity the late-twentieth century percussionists. They are virtuosi in search of a repertoire; all dressed up, not much to play. Unlike the eighteenth century singer, who had the popular medium of opera and the services of specialized composers to write for them, modern percussionists work in relative obscurity, are rarely soloists, and can count on relatively few composers to write for them. Unlike the nineteenth century pianist/virtuoso, the modern percussionist is neither a media darling nor the beneficiary of a huge and growing repertoire of instrument-defining etudes and concerti. It would seem that the percussionist's fate is to slave away within the bowels of the orchestra and the new music community, inventing, defining, composing and transcribing music for instruments that in many cases did not exist two generations ago.

I've indulged in this brief history in order to provide some background for David Johnson's request, first made in 1991, that I write him a vibraphone concerto. The vibraphone is not just an instrument in search of a repertoire but one in search of respect. It is most often perceived as a jazz instrument at best, a dance band instrument at worst; certainly not as a "genuine" concert instrument, like the piano or violin for example. However, the vibraphone's merits - its extraordinary tone, its clarity of articulation, the speed with which it can be played, and its ability to sustain pitch and provide variable vibrato - make it an instrument ripe for compositional exploitation.

Exploit it I have. In writing *ON TRIAL*, I have sought to create the sort of big, heroic, virtuosic, instrument-defining concerto characteristic of the nineteenth century. First and foremost, the piece is an etude - a study, a trial - for the performer. Speed, stamina, rapid changes in articulation and different modes of articulation, sustaining, and variable vibrato all play vital roles in the piece. The ensemble parts are likewise quite virtuosic; the third movement ("Time Trials/Trial Run") is, in particular, a concerto for everybody.

ON TRIAL is in three movements, with brief solo vibraphone intermezzi occurring between the movements. The first movement, "Trial By Fire" is organized around three fiery vibraphone cadenzas. The basic rhythmic grouping of the movement is rapid groups of six, and whether the mood is smoldering or conflagratory, the movement is characterized by high energy and explosive, percussive

articulation in all the instrumental parts. Movement II, "Trial By Water" features a bowed vibraphone. The rapid harmonic motion of the first movement is here slowed down, creating a series of impressionistic episodes through which the vibraphone weaves its path. Movement III, "Time Trials/Trial Run" is a series of high-speed races, three in all. The first, labeled "Heat #1: Foot Race" is a relatively simple contest ending in a dead heat between the vibraphone and flute. The second heat, labeled "Hocket, Skip and Jump" is a series of disjunct, interlocking and increasingly active phrases which test the timing and accuracy of the entire ensemble. Last and longest, "Heat Three" proceeds through a number of episodes, labeled "Steeplechase," "Running the Gamut" and "Relays." The concerto ends as it began with a blistering, rapid-fire cadenza and a reference back to the beginning of the first movement.

ON TRIAL was written between December 1993 and August 1994. It is dedicated, with great affection and respect, to David Johnson and the members of XTET.