

The Problem-Solving Percussionist: Navigating Giorgio Battistelli's *Il Libro Celibe*

by Zachary W. Webb

As percussionists, we often find ourselves in performance situations that require proper forethought and problem solving skills. Many times, there are simplistic solutions to these problems that may relate to exploring mallet selection, music placement, or instrument set-up. Other times, we must make difficult artistic decisions based on the information provided in the score and our own experience/intuition. It is our job as percussionists, artists, and performers to ensure that our interpretations are sound, and that they both: (1) align with who we are as artists and (2) meet the requirements and intentions of the composer. Giorgio Battistelli's *Il Libro Celibe* is a prime example of a work which must be approached in this manner. Battistelli asks the performer to build a book-like sound sculpture but provides only a minimalistic score/guide as to how to accomplish this feat. For this reason, the performer must interpret the intentions of Battistelli and how to best create these ideas into the physical structure of *Il Libro Celibe*.

I was first introduced to the music of Giorgio Battistelli several years ago by my former teacher and mentor Stuart Gerber. Since that time, I have spent many hours researching the wide-ranging musical creations of the obscure, Italian composer. Most well known for his contributions to the operatic genre, a key feature of his artistic style is his ability to blend different artistic mediums. For example, his monumental work *Experimentum Mundi* explores both musical and theatrical elements. While the work is scored for a multitude of performers, the only traditional sounds which occur come from a solo percussionist. The remaining “noises”

which fill the compositions come from a wide variety of tradesmen such as cobblers, masons, and bakers.

Il Libro Celibe is no exception to this multimedia approach from Battistelli as the work has both important visual and aural elements within its presentation. It could easily be said that what is seen is as equally important as what is heard. For this reason, *Il Libro Celibe* is a composition which is best experienced live, and not as an audio recording.

As mentioned previously, the instrument itself must be created by the performer following the minimalistic instructions provided by Battistelli in his unedited/unpublished score. This particular score is unique, in that it works as an instruction manual for the creation of instrument, only providing a few suggested performance notes for each of the book's pages. In addition to Battistelli's score, when building my own version of this piece, I was able to reference both Stuart's realization of this instrument, as well as a version performed by Antonio Caggiano (an Italian percussionist who has premiered many of Battistelli's solo percussion works as well as other chamber percussion works with his group The ArsLudi Ensemble). Both of these versions were helpful due to the fact that Stuart's book enabled me to have a real-life prototype to work from, and Caggiano's interpretation was likely either informed by his own interactions with Battistelli, or could have perhaps been one of Battistelli's own interpretations of this piece.

In total, there are fifteen pages which must be realized by the performer. Each of these pages involve different materials which must be prepared and organized so that they appear to be a page in a book. For many of the earlier pages, this is not a problem due to the fact that they are primarily — with the exception of the very first page, a metal sheet — all paper-like materials themselves: cellophane, wrapping paper, tissue paper, and other distinct papers. For my

interpretation of this portion of the work, I generally ensure that these materials are all cut to the same size, stapled together, and attached to the inner binding of the book. In this way, these pages can be flipped and turned as though they were pages in any ordinary book.

Other pages, however, are not as simplistic and require prior planning and problem solving. There are two pages which could be considered a part of the guiro family, one constructed from corrugated cardboard, and the other from three variations of twig-like elements with differing timbres. Both of these materials are glued onto a black cardboard rectangle which provide these pages with both a sense of stability and the ability to be easily lifted from within the book.

Following these two pages, the contents become even more idiosyncratic. A wooden thumb piano, an outstretched portion of a shower curtain, and a collection of resonant, metal tubes can all be heard from deep within the book's encasement. My personal favorite is a prepared page on which a guitar string has been mounted. Each of these pages require the performer/builder to carefully design each page in order to decipher how these sounds can be created and placed within *Il Libro Celibe's* depths.

In terms of the basic page layout, each page is constructed from a thin, wooden rectangle which easily fits inside the books casing. Pages such as the ones written for a wooden thumb piano, metal pipes, and shower curtain, are further cut in a way which allows the materials (wooden dowel rods, metal pipes, etc.) to hang freely all aided by a collection of screws, strings, and other elements which connect these materials to each newly prepared page. In the case of the prepared guitar strings, several screws have been attached to the wooden board, allowing the guitar string to zigzag several times creating numerous pitches. This pitches can be further

manipulated by pressing down on each string (similar to way pitches are created on a guitar's fret board) or by slightly bending the wooden structure of the page.

The final page, entitled "Ornitofoni: come un prestidigitatore" refers to the use of birdcalls by the performer and translates as "Ornithophones: like a prestidigitator," or like a magician. This of course begs the question, how does one play bird calls without using one's mouth? There are two solutions which I use as a part of my performance. First, I use friction bird calls — specifically an Audubon bird call and an old turkey call that belonged to my grandfather — as one way to achieve this end. I also use an assortment of traditional bird/duck calls. Because these types of bird calls are normally activated by the performer blowing into these instruments, a new solution needed to be discovered. Jewelry/watch cleaners are an excellent solution to this challenge and can be easily attached to these instruments allowing the performer to activate these bird calls with only the touch of their hand.