

Marie-Josée Simard

Percussion Soloist, Biography

The first Canadian woman to graduate with a university degree in percussion (1979) and the first percussionist to specialize in the interpretation of percussion keyboards (marimba, vibraphone, xylophone), Marie-Josée Simard has paved a path of innovation in once uncharted territory: “At the time, I must admit that I was disturbing people. Those people to whom I was speaking about my career objectives—to play solo rather than as part of an orchestra—laughed at me” (*La scena musicale*, no 9/3, November 5th 2003 - translation). Since then, Simard has been recognized as a virtuoso and an exceptional interpreter of percussion instruments. In this regard, this great artist has built a reputation for musical excellence on the national and international stage for over 35 years, and her music—as a soloist—has been heard in a great number of concerts held in countries such as Canada, Mexico, France, Poland and Belgium, as well as during tours in Korea and China.

This great artist was born in Saguenay and grew up on the Côte-Nord, or “North Shore,” of the province of Quebec, a region that is very proud to count her among notable artists from this area (as stated by the Minister of Culture and Communications of Quebec, <http://mcc.gouv.qc.ca/index.php?id=493>). To understand what she means to her region, it is worth mentioning this review of one of her recent concerts:

Two moments of pure ecstasy have been served to the public thanks to the presence of Marie-Josée Simard. The little girl from Baie-Comeau who has graced the biggest stages of the world, contributed to the tremendous growth of her favourite instruments—the vibraphone, xylophone and marimba, and pushed composers to write concertos just for her, did not lie about her reputation as a musical prodigy. Marie-Josée’s interpretation of Antonio Vivaldi’s *L’Estro Armonico* was breathtaking. She was luminous during the second movement behind her vibraphone! Known for her extraordinary, even sublime, mastery of her mallets, she led the orchestra to heights rarely matched until now [...] In perfect symbiosis, the musicians alongside the first from Baie-Comeau to emerge on the international stage offered an incredible intensity. (*Plein Jour de Baie-Comeau*, May 29, 2012, by Raphaël Hovington, translation)

The creation of the *Bourse Marie Josée Simard* by the Foundation of Arts and Culture of Comeau ought to be highlighted—six grants have been awarded in Baie-Comeau since the beginning of the 2000s. In 2003, Simard was awarded the medal of the National Assembly of Quebec. Born into a musical family, Simard discovered her talent for this profound vocation at the age of eleven: playing percussion keyboard solos and developing her musical potential. But many obstacles would stand in her way, the most significant of which was the fact that only very few solo pieces for percussion keyboards existed in the musical repertoire. Moreover, no women in Canada had, until her time, managed to break into the very masculine world of percussion as a whole. Simard would go on to overcome one obstacle after another. She led the creation of a large repertoire for percussion keyboards and stood out during her studies in percussion. Even before she began her studies at the Conservatory, she had already developed a unique and natural technique for playing. In 1979, she was awarded first prize from the Montreal Conservatory of

Music; this prize was granted with unanimity and with an unprecedented grade of 98.5% for her mastery over the ensemble of percussion instruments.

From here, her career has risen meteorically. In the year following her consecration at the conservatory, Simard was selected from over 800 Canadians who auditioned to emerge as one of the top winners on the televised contest *Du Maurier Search for Stars*, playing as a soloist with the CBC Radio Orchestra (1980). She received grants that permitted her to further her training in London, under the supervision of James Blades, a timpanist with the Royal Academy of Music, and Michael Skinner, a percussionist for the London Opera Orchestra. Later, in New York, she would gain valuable insights from the reputed four-mallet marimbist Leigh Howard Stevens. Simard has been awarded over a dozen grants and scholarships during the course of her career. In 1984, she was the invited soloist for the *Royal Gala Concert*, where she was accompanied by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in honour of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, and also for His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh at the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto. She represented Canada in 1992 at the great benefit concert for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

With her outstanding reputation as a soloist, Marie-Josée Simard has attracted the attention of top composers from Canada and other countries, resulting in the creation of more than thirty original works for the percussion keyboards dedicated to this virtuoso. This repertoire includes twelve concertos for marimba, vibraphone and an orchestra, seventeen for chamber music duos and trios, and one for multiple percussion instruments. Simard has herself adapted over thirty classical pieces (for example by Bach, Bartok, Dvorak, Poulenc) for these magnificent instruments. Other musicians around the world are currently interpreting these pieces as well. In this regard, Simard is directly responsible for considerably widening the overall repertoire.

Several Canadian composers including Clermont Pépin, Denis Gougeon, Jacques Héту, Serge Arcuri, Gilles Bellemare, François Dompierre, Maya Badian, Pétros Shoujounian, Alain Thibault Rachel Lauri, and François Bourassa have composed concertos for Simard for marimba and vibraphone that she has interpreted with symphony orchestras and string ensembles. The French composer Pierre Max Dubois created the “Simard Suite” for vibraphone and a full orchestra, and the Polish composer Joanna Bruzdowicz offered the *Quatre saisons pour solistes (Hiver pour marimba)* for the Poznań International Music Festival in Poland. Charles Papasoff, Karen Young, François Bourassa, François Richard, jazz composers and interpreters, have created chamber music works for Simard for vibraphone and marimba. Always looking for new sounds, she has pursued ongoing work with chamber music that includes other instruments such as flute, classical accordion, violin, clarinet, and piano. Her discography includes seven CDs on which she recorded seven original pieces and 21 adaptations of other classical pieces. One new CD will be released next Winter with ATMA Classique. Her concerts with orchestras have all been broadcast on either radio or television.

The reviews of Simard’s concert performances and recordings have been dithyrambic. *Le Devoir* has saluted her concerts a number of times, for example: “With an obvious mastery and a disarming assurance, she has lent the piece of Boucourechliev an execution of dazzling virtuosity” (Gilles Potvin, April 1980, translation); in New York: “Equally explosive mallet player, Marie-Josée Simard took off slowly with mystical tremolos, then burst into additive chord progressions and ripped out hectic lines in virtuosic unison” (*Village Voice*, November 1991, Kyle Cann). She is always celebrated as a virtuoso (La Presse, May 2012, Alain Brunet).

Marie-Josée Simard has also been an inspiration for several young women who, following Simard's lead, have also become professional percussionists. Simard has trained many young percussionists at the conservatory of music in Montreal, where she taught between 1992 and 2005; among these students, many have gone on to brilliant careers. She has also been invited to lecture at dozens of Master's classes at every Canadian university. She has been a muse for the five octave marimba since 1991 as a "Yamaha artist." Simard has also been a regular on jury committees, most notably for the Quebec Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the *Conseil québécois de la musique* where she has also acted as administrative council since 2011.

Another striking feature of Simard's career has been the remarkable adeptness she has shown for interpreting contemporary pieces in addition to the more traditional repertoire. She became a multidisciplinary interpreter before this tendency really existed. She has mastered the most complex contemporary pieces, both on keyboard and various percussion instruments, and has interpreted the classical and world music repertoires with great sensitivity. From 1991 to 1996, she was the percussionist for the contemporary ensemble *Bradyworks*, with the composer and guitarist Tim Brady who together played over forty concerts across Canada.

Simard recently added another string to her bow when she took an exciting foray into the world of Jazz by initiating the trio *En trois couleurs* that united her with the great pianists and jazz composers François Bourassa and Yves Léveillé. As a soloist, in May 2010, she played *3 Jazettes concertantes* by François Bourassa for vibraphone and marimba with the Symphony Orchestra of Trois-Rivières with conduction by Jacques Lacombe, and again on May 10th, 2012 with the *Orchestre Métropolitain* of Montreal with conduction by Mélanie Léonard. After they opened the *Jazz en Rafale* festival in 2014, the music critic Bélanger wrote the following: "The result of the performance: I was completely blown away. Marie-Josée Simard, a classical soloist little known in the Montreal Jazz scene, excels at playing with improvisations in a completely bewildering manner. From tubular bells to different types of vibraphones, marimba and other heteroclit instruments, the listener on this night has received much for its astonishment [...] Simard weaves like a cat between her instruments, and the two accompanying pianists steer her compositions back to her while sublimating their own compositions" (Camuz, *Le calendrier musical de Montréal*, March 22, 2014, translation). This new trio was awarded an Opus Prize in 2013, for concert of the year—in Jazz!

Simard's is truly a musical career that has run the gamut of genres and broken barriers of gender through pure innovation and genius. In so doing, Marie-Josée Simard has also become a role model for many young, aspiring musicians today, as well as a muse for established composers and musicians. Her opus will surely stand the test of time, while we, the fortunate audience, remain entranced by Simard's masterful command of sound.

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Discographie

2009 SIMARD/FABI *duo vibraphone et piano*, œuvres adaptées de

A.Dvorak/F.Poulenc/E.Grieg, Disques XXI – 21 RECORDS (3 adaptations nouvelles par MJ Simard)

2005 MUSIC FOR FLUTE AND PERCUSSION –PIAZZOLA * SHANKAR* DEVREESE

Marc Grauwels, flûtiste belge, & Marie-Josée Simard, Œuvres pour marimba, vibraphone & percussions, Flûte traversière, flûte alto & flûte basse Naxos 8.557782 (3 créations pour Simard et Grauwels - 2 belges, 1 canadienne; 3 adaptations)

2004 RENCONTRE : *Duo Simard/Sidorov*, œuvres pour vibraphone, xylophone & accordéon classique (bayan), Disques Tout Crin, TCDC 19087 (1 création, 4 adaptations)

1997 THE ENCHANTED DAWN / L'AUBE ENCHANTÉE, Marie-Josée Simard et Lise Daoust, œuvres pour marimba, vibraphone & flûte, Atma, ACD 2 2115 (1 création canadienne, 5 adaptations)

1990 MARIE JOSÉE SIMARD MIKI * TREMBLAY * LONGTIN * BRADY, œuvres pour percussions, flûte, harpe et piano, SNE, 572 (CD) (2 créations)

1986 MARIE JOSÉE SIMARD ET LOUISE ANDRÉE BARIL

Marcello/Dompierre/Stockhausen/Bartok, œuvres pour claviers de percussion et piano (3 adaptations)

1979 MARIE JOSÉE SIMARD *Bach/Bartok/Shostakovitch*, oeuvres pour marimba, vibraphone & piano, Percudisq, P 229 (3 adaptations)

Œuvres pour marimba, vibraphone et orchestres composées et dédiées à

Marie-Josée Simard – dates des créations mondiales :

- **Denis Gougeon** (Canada), « Dialogue », création 1982-03-05, avec l'orchestre des Jeunes du Québec dirigé par le chef Pierre Héту.
- **Clermont Pépin** (Canada), « Concerto pour marimba et orchestre », création 1988 -11-29, avec l'orchestre symphonique de Québec dirigé par le chef Gabriel Chmura.
- **Pierre Max Dubois** (France), « Simard Suite» pour marimba, vibraphone et grand orchestre, création 1986-02-17, avec la Symphony Nova Scotia's puis l'Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal, dirigés par le compositeur Pierre Max Dubois.
- **Maya Badian** (Roumanie), « Concerto for marimba, vibraphone and xylophone », création 1989-03-07, avec le Vancouver Symphony Orchestra dirigé par le chef Jahja Ling.
- **Petros Shoujounian** (Canada), « Suite concertante Sayate Nova » pour marimba, vibraphone et xylophone, création 1991-02-06, avec l'Orchestre Symphonique de Laval dirigé par le chef Paul André Boivin.
- **Joanna Brudzdovick** (Pologne), «Four seasons' Greetings - Hiver » pour marimba, création 1991.09.16 avec l'Orchestre à cordes de Poznan en Pologne.
- **Gilles Bellemare** (Canada), « Concerto pour marimba et orchestre », création 1992-09-28, avec l'Orchestre Symphonique de Trois-Rivières dirigé par le chef Gilles Bellemare.
- **Rachel Laurin** (Canada), « Concerto en sol pour vibraphone, marimba et orchestre à cordes, op.21 », création 1992-04-20, avec Orchestre de Chambre AMATI dirigé par le chef Jacques Lacombe
- **Serge Arcuri** (Canada), 1992-06-09 « Arborescences marimba et orchestre à cordes », création avec l'Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal dirigé par la chef Véronique Lacroix.

- **Alain Thibault** (Canada), « La théorie des catastrophes » marimba et orchestre à cordes», création 1992-06-09, avec l'Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal dirigé par la chef Véronique Lacroix.
- **Jacques Héту** (Canada), « Concerto pour marimba, vibraphone et cordes », création 1998-05-06, avec l'ensemble à corde I Musici dirigé par le chef Yuli Turovski, Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts, Montréal.
- **François Bourassa** (Canada), « 3 Jazettes concertante pour marimba, vibraphone et grand orchestre », création 2010-05-15, avec l'Orchestre Symphonique de Trois-Rivières dirigé par le chef Jacques Lacombe.

17 Œuvres de musique de chambre et solo percussion

- François Dompierre**, xylophone et orchestre « Xylo-Fun»
- Tim Brady**, piano et vibraphone «Change»; et flûte et vibraphone «Circling»
- Michel Longtin** – solo percussion multiples - «Venus de l'Est : Hiver 44»
- Michel Lysight**, flûte et marimba « Initiation»
- Karen Young**- flûte basse vibraphone et marimba «Ode to nature»
- Maya Badian**, marimba, vibraphone, piano «Suite sur des thèmes populaires roumains»
- François Richard**, duo vibraphone/marimba et flûte « Rhapsody »
- Charle Papasoff**, clarinette basse et marimba « Pour quelques instants de vie »
- Jean Lambert**, marimba et piano « M »
- Pétros Shoujounian**, marimba et orchestre « Suite concertante Sayat Nova»
- Richard Hunt**, violon et marimba «Suite Tango»
- Serge Arcuri**- violon, marimba et vibraphone « Monochrome »
- François Bourassa**, solo vibraphone «Méditation»
- Rachel Laurin**, marimba et piano «Divertissement Op.5 vibraphone»
- Louis Babin**, vibraphone solo «Papillonnage»
- Gabriel Ledoux**, vibraphone et enregistrement «Fragments de vibraphone»
- Gabriel Thibaudeau**, marimba solo « Mari' Mba »

Quelques autres exemples de concerts depuis 2002

- 2009-2010** Série Hommage de la SMCQ- Hommage à Gilles Tremblay, *Trio Jubilus* (flûte, harpe et percussions – cloches à vache), Salle Pierre-Mercure, 1^{er} octobre 2009 ; et Festival International du Domaine Forget, 11 août 2010.
- 2008** Duo Marie Josée Simard et Marie Fabi, piano et percussions. Déléguées par le Conseil Québécois de la musique pour représenter le Québec au salon international de la musique classique et du jazz *Musicora*, Carrousel du Louvre, 4 avril 2008.
- 2007** Concert comme soliste à l'Ambassade du Canada, Tokyo, Japon, 6 août 2007.
- 2005** Duo avec Marc Grauwels (flûte traversière) et marimba/percussions, Kumho Arts Centre de Séoul, Corée, 19 août 2005.
- 2005** Duo avec Marc Grauwels (flûte traversière) et marimba/percussions. XXVIII Festival Internacional de Música de Begur - Costa Brava, Espagne, *Musiques Del Mon*, 4 août 2005 (idem Séoul, Corée).
- 2002** *Concerto pour marimba et vibraphone*, de Rachel Laurin, Les Violons du Roy, Tournée du printemps de huit concerts au Québec.
- 2002** *Radio-Concerts* (Radio-Canada), Centre Pierre-Péladeau *Carte blanche* à Marie Josée Simard avec plusieurs invités et deux créations, 3 juin 2002.