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5:57pm
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Hammering it home

Matthew Coley brings marimba to Chicago, Iowa and Eastern Europe. By Mia Clarke



TOP CLEF Coley is hosting ZING, a contest for hammer dulcimer compositions, on his website. Composers must submit pieces before Nov 1.

"I grew up in a very rural part of Virginia," Matthew Coley says, "so I had to seek out experiences." As a high-school freshman, he discovered the marimba, a percussive instrument with xylophone-like wooden bars struck by mallets. It transformed the teenager's approach to music, offering a way into the big leagues. "After only 60 years, the marimba was still relatively new to the concert stage," the son and brother of electrical engineers says. "I couldn't be a concert pianist, but I could be a concert marimbist."

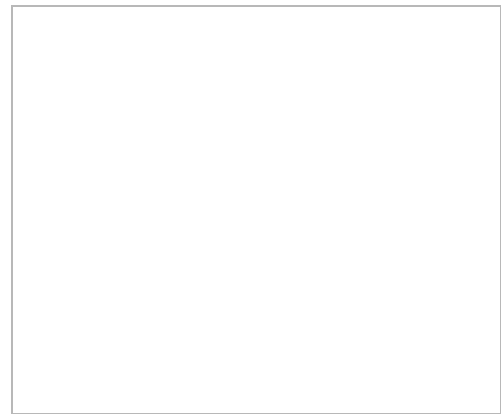
Coley's unconventional passion paid off. Last week, the 30-year-old marimba, hammer dulcimer and cimbalom expert, who's lived in Chicago since 2002, began a position as lecturer in percussion at Iowa State University. He'll have one hell of a commute, as he's entering his final year as a doctoral student at Northwestern University, where he studies percussion performance. "Music school is difficult," he says, "but it teaches you the persistence one needs to make it in today's unforgiving arts world."

Rhythmic talents also extend to Coley's other limbs: An established choreographer, he used to dance professionally for local modern-dance companies such as Thodos Dance Chicago and Inaside Chicago Dance. In 2004, he combined his dual interests to found Sonic Inertia, a collaborative arts ensemble that mounts new works of percussion, dance and electronic media. "Performing with dance is probably my biggest passion and connection to my full artistic voice," he says. The rabid cyclist blows off steam on long road trips. In June, Coley peddled more than 300 miles from Chicago to Crandon, Wisconsin, (way up north) over four days.

Somehow, Coley still finds time to curate the monthly Uncommon Sounds performance series at Uncommon Ground Devon, bringing in some of the city's best percussion performers. In addition to this series, he has three upcoming Chicago concerts in October, performing duo works with local pianist Mary Drews.

But first, the jet-setter heads to Eastern Europe in mid-September for a residency at the Days of New Music Festival in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova. The trip has been postponed once this summer due to a travel advisory warning of riots and upheaval.

In June 2008, Coley first visited the small landlocked country tucked between Romania and Ukraine. "It was a little bit of a gamble," he says of the visit. He had never been to the economically and politically unstable land and, more importantly, had never laid eyes on its orchestra's marimba, of unspecified quality. Guatemalan conductor Igor Sarmientos, who



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was stuck in Chisinau while his wife worked in the U.S. embassy, hoped to perform his father's 1957 work, *Concertino para marimba y orquesta*. An international search began for what Coley calls "a marimbist willing to go to Moldova for little or no money" and ended in Evanston. Bonus: The itinerant Coley, a bit of a beer connoisseur who samples local brews wherever he goes, got a chance to sip an obscure Moldovan quaff.

"The Department of Culture in Moldova paid for my room and board, as well as a small honorarium, which I still have because nowhere outside of Moldova can you exchange their currency," Coley says. "It will be going back with me in September."

Uncommon Sounds continues at [Uncommon Ground Devon](#) on October 11. Visit hearmatthewcoley.com for further dates.

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