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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Conducting, Teaching, Curating:
Re-channelings of a Percussive Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Jonathan David Hepfer

Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Schick, Chair
Professor Anthony Burr
Professor William Arctander O'Brien
Professor Jann Pasler
Professor Kim Rubinstein

2016

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This Dissertation of Jonathan David Hepfer is approved, and it is acceptable
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

DEDICATION

TO: Will and Cindy for three decades of selflessness, and for saying “yes” at some crucial moments when I was really expecting to hear “no.” ♦ My grandfather for showing me the wisdom that nine decades of curiosity can produce. ♦ Anthony Miranda, Jan Williams, Gordon Gottlieb, Michael Rosen, Steven Schick, Bernhard Wulff, Lewis Nielson, Brian Alegant, Tim Weiss, and William Arctander O’Brien for watering me.

THANK YOU ♦ Anthony Burr, Jann Pasler, Kim Rubinstein, Aleck Karis, Phil Larson, Ed Harkins, Susan Narucki, Jacob Greenberg, Olivia Mattis, Jon Nelson, and Jonathan Golove for the illumination. ♦ Christian Dierstein, Robert Van Sice, Anders Loguin, Bob Becker, Roland Auzet, and Pascal Pons for the encouragement. ♦ Jean-Pierre Drouet, Gaston Sylvestre, Maurizio Ben Omar, Christoph Caskel, and Sylvio Gualda for your bravery in carving out truly original paths, and your willingness to share your adventures with me. ♦ Pierluigi Billone, Steven Takasugi, Chaya Czernowin, Rolf Riehm, Roger Reynolds, Klaus Lang, Brian Ferneyhough, Vinko Globokar, Georges Aperghis, Alvin Lucier, Salvatore Sciarrino, Helmut Lachenmann, David Felder, Joyce Cutler-Shaw and Paul Griffiths for taking me seriously, and sharing your wisdom. ♦ Keith Szczepanski, Matt Jenkins, Ross Karre, Brian Archinal, Nick Tolle, and Zach Crystal for the unavoidable friendly competition. You’ve each made me so much better. ♦ Mark Menzies, Amy Knoles, David Johnson, Vicki Ray, and David Rosenboom for welcoming me to Cal Arts with open arms. ♦ Greg Stuart, Justin DeHart, Fabio Olivera, and Eric Derr for being out of control. Also for causing a sensation, and diffusing everything with laughter (“...ah tell yew whut...”) ♦ Brendan Nguyen, Richard Valitutto, Stephen Menotti, Curt Miller, Solon Gordon, Sam Dunscombe, Judith Hamman, Brian Walsh, Andrew McIntosh, Andrew Tholl, Ashley Walters, Christine Tavalacci, and Pavlos Antoniadis for your generosity in collaboration. ♦ Alexei Lubimov, Rei Nakamura, Jay Campbell, Séverine Ballon, Yegor Shevtsov, Natalia Pschenitschnikova, Nicholas Isherwood, Mario Caroli, Movses Pogossian, and Alexander Lonquich for the inspiration through example. ♦ Dustin Donahue, Ryan Nestor, Leah Bowden, Fiona Digney, Bonnie Whiting, Steve Solook, Kjell Nordeson, Julien Annoni, Louise Devenish, Julian Belli, Nick Reed, Chris Sande, and Max Riefer for tolerating me in my brattiest moments. ♦ Michael Hayes, Benjamin Genchel, Leanna Goddard, Brietta Greger, Kelly Furniss, and Tionna Brunson for affording me the inexpressible responsibility, privilege and satisfaction of being your teacher. ♦ Håkon Stene, Alex Lipowski, John Langford, Fredrik Wallberg, Justin Urcis, Sayan Benbady, and Alessandra Belloni for all the unofficial mentorship. ♦ Timothy McCormack, Mark Barden, Simon Steen-Andersen, Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, Evan Johnson, Aaron Helgeson, Rick Burkhart, Jason Eckardt, and Ian Power for giving me faith in the future of this art form. ♦ Artemisa Clark, Melinda Guillen, Samara Kaplan, Wanda Orme, Kylie King, and Mileece P’anson for showing me that the future is female. ♦ Jean Claude, Carolina Aboumrada, Susann Moore, Geisha, Alegre Bianco, Eve Smith, Jeni Ni, Donna Lew, Matthew Amendola, Aaron JPG, BJ Panda Bear, Andrew Dryden, Patrick Moss, Andrü Sisson, Andrew Tonkery, Alison Baar, Emily Wells, Nichole Fitch, and Jason Lev for making me feel welcome in the city I can now call home (“choose your tribe wisely, and protect your magic.”) ♦ Isaac Malitz, Valerie Stalvey, and Margaret Morgan for entrusting me with the responsibilities of my dream position, and showing me nothing but love and support. ♦ Peter Yates, Lawrence Morton and Dorrance Stalvey: I never got to meet you, but I will try to make you proud. ♦ Alice for a beautiful decade. You showed me the world and made me who I am today. ♦ Viktoria for your consistency and generosity in love. ♦ Belgica for reasons I will never be able to explain.

EPIGRAPHS

I write, and talk, in order to find out what I think.

~ Susan Sontag

“To be alive is just this pouring in and out. Find, lose, demand, obsess, move head slightly closer. Try to swim without thinking how strong it looks. Try to do what you do without mockery of our heartbroken little era.”

~ Anne Carson

“I don’t work on the poem, I work on the poet.”

~ Stanley Kunitz

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VITA

2001-2004	SUNY Buffalo (transferred before completion of degree)
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Major Field: Contemporary Music Performance

Studies in Contemporary Music Performance
Professor Steven Schick

Studies in the Philosophy of Music
Bernhard Wulff

Studies in Percussion Performance
Michael Rosen

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Conducting, Teaching, Curating:
Rechannelings of a Percussive Education

by

Jonathan David Hepfer

Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Steven Schick, Chair

This dissertation examines the ways that my formal training and education as a percussionist have provided a logical foundation for three separate vectors of activity in my professional life: conducting, teaching and curating. The document aims to demonstrate the unexpected ways that lessons on instruments historically considered to be at the periphery of classical music culture have provided me with a unique perspective on this art form's past, present and future. I describe my background and its effect on my recent activities as a conductor (both of classical and avant-garde repertory), my philosophies as a lecturer in percussion at the California Institute of the Arts, and my sensibilities as the artistic director of Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles.

Lebenslauf

"I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end."¹ ~ Michel Foucault

When I was in third grade, I faked being sick so I could stay home from school one day. After my parents left for work, I popped my copy of *Wayne's World* into the VCR and watched in awe as the character Garth played his drum solo. That was the awakening.

A few years later, a girl I had a crush on revealed to me that she really loved the band Nirvana. I managed to coerce my parents into buying me a drum set, so I might one day be able to play in a band like that. I took the parts of the set home, hastily attempted to assemble them, and tried my best to thrash my way through *Smells Like Teen Spirit*.

From that day, I took my study of the drums seriously, and I aspired to play in a punk band. As my musicianship improved, my tastes broadened (and vice-versa). My interest, however, was always confined to the drums and never included any instrument with a melodic or harmonic component. My objective was to be a virtuoso drummer, and to hell with the rest.

Over time, despite the broadening of my musical palette, I remained totally averse to classical music. I never participated in any school music programs, and I was oblivious to any

¹ Martin, L.H. et al. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. (London: Tavistock, 1988). 9-15.

tonal music theory. My focus was always on studying increasingly complex rhythms, as well as the idiosyncracies of history's great drummers.

When high school ended, I decided it would be a good idea to continue studying drums at university, so I enrolled at the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo), determined to work to claim my spot alongside Max Roach, John Bonham and Tony Williams. To my shock and dismay, I discovered that at university, studying drums entailed a compulsory study of tonal music theory and classical music.

Because of my cavalier ignorance of anything related to harmony or melody, I found myself totally unprepared in my first year, trying to catch up with all of my far more advanced classmates. I remember, for example, learning which notes made up a C major scale when I was seventeen. Since I felt that I was there to study advanced rhythm, I couldn't for the life of me understand why I was being made to learn about Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. I felt totally indifferent to their music, and in some sense felt like they had been put on this earth as a thorn in my side. I trudged my way through these classes, but in a perpetual state of diffidence and resentment.

I persevered at SUNY Buffalo because I was in love with the challenges of learning complex music as a drummer. I adored putting in long hours of practice and the feeling of consistent technical and cultural growth.

In my first semester, I was given a strange assignment: I was to play John Cage's *Living Room Music* in the school's contemporary music ensemble. It was the first time that my skill set as a drummer was really put to task in the context of a classical work. In this piece, the performers speak a text of Gertrude Stein, sweep brooms, and tap polyrhythms on books. The piece challenged me aesthetically, intellectually and technically. But I was fascinated.

With the discovery of John Cage, a new chapter of my musical life began. For me, his music functioned as the liaison between the punk aesthetics that I loved, and the world of

classical music that I had so long avoided. Cage was a late starter in the field of classical music – his writings and compositions led me to learn about literature, poetry, philosophy, religion, painting, sculpture, film, and dance. It is safe to say that this particular assignment was the genesis of my life as a “percussionist” as opposed to “drummer.” It was also the birth of my life as a (voluntary) classical musician.

* * *

Fast-forward fifteen years to the present. I live in Los Angeles, where I am the artistic director of the musical series Monday Evening Concerts, and I teach percussion at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts). My main musical activity as a performer for the past two years has been as a conductor, not as a percussionist – and mostly Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. How was this unlikely career destination reached?

I share my personal narrative here to illustrate the way that the process of *becoming* often entails circuitous or labyrinthine ways of getting from whence one starts to where one finishes. The subject matter of this dissertation concerns how the education I received as a percussionist has prepared me for things that I am doing today that are not directly related to the act of playing percussion.

At some point, I remember Steven Schick saying that “percussion is irrelevant.” I think that this lapidary and somewhat facetious statement may be the cornerstone of the ensuing text. Playing percussion is not necessarily the endgame of studying percussion. The skill sets that studying percussion cultivates can engender a student with a sense of curiosity, a strong technical foundation as a musician, an ability to solve problems (musical, logistical and otherwise), and a broad intellectual base founded upon inexhaustible curiosity. The following

chapters detail some manifestations of how my education as a percussionist prepared me for my activities as a conductor, director of a concert series, and a teacher.

I. CONDUCTING

“Every philosophy is the philosophy of some stage of life.” ~ Nietzsche

Growing up, I detested classical music. My parents took me to a performance of Händel’s *Messiah* when I was very young, and I cried silently the whole time out of boredom. Another time, I remember finding my mother watching Ingmar Bergman’s film version of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. I had heard the music from upstairs, and I went downstairs to see bizarrely costumed people singing in Swedish *bel canto*. Needless to say, I was horrified, and ran outside to join my friends playing whatever sport was in season at that moment.

Despite my original ambitions of becoming a punk rock drumming icon, in the past few years, conducting has become my main musical activity. When I began this pursuit, I was exclusively interested in conducting work from the second part of the twentieth century, and I have been lucky to conduct substantial works by composers like Niccolò Castiglioni, Luigi Dallapiccola, Luigi Nono, Salvatore Sciarrino, Gérard Grisey, Jo Kondo, Morton Feldman, Trevor Bača and Simon Steen-Andersen.

However, fortuitously, UCSD offered me the opportunity to conduct its undergraduate chamber orchestra as my assistantship for the last two years of my doctoral studies. Unlike my musical wheelhouse, this ensemble was devoted to performing canonical works of the classical and romantic eras. Although I had no significant interest in pursuing this repertoire professionally, I figured it would be a good etude for my abilities as a conductor, and it would also afford me an opportunity to stretch my abilities as a musician to centuries other than the one I had traditionally focused on.

When I was graduating from Oberlin Conservatory and deliberating upon what my next step should be, I decided to let go of dreams I had of attending a prestigious East Coast

conservatory, and resolved to go to UC-San Diego, where the path seemed less trodden. My then-future-mentor, Steven Schick, never demanded that I focus on my timpani playing, or that I work on my soft snare drum roll, or my ability to sight read Bach's *Inventions*; he encouraged me to follow my interests in avant-garde and experimental music as deeply as I wished. At that time, I had no interest whatsoever in music before the twentieth century, and I was grateful to have found a program that would let me carve my own niche.

What I didn't know when I accepted UCSD's offer was that Steve had just become the newly appointed director of the La Jolla Symphony, and that my graduate assistantship would be to serve as the principal percussionist of that ensemble, as well as being the teaching assistant for Steve's course on the history of orchestral music. When I learned all of this upon my arrival, my heart sank. It seemed that classical music was simply unavoidable in my life.

For the most part, my curriculum at UCSD was blissfully self-directed. I plunged into the avant-garde solo and chamber repertoire that I had longed to work on with reckless abandon. There were no compulsory classes on tonal theory and no music history exams to worry about. My responsibilities with the La Jolla Symphony were minimally intrusive, and the freedom allowed me to thrive.

At Oberlin, I had always been viewed as a new music specialist, and so was entrusted with relatively few responsibilities in terms of orchestral playing. Further, I was a transfer student, so I didn't really have a chance to complete my teacher Michael Rosen's fully fleshed-out course of study, which is supposed to take place over four years, rather than three. The one chapter of my education that I missed out on at Oberlin was an in-depth study of timpani playing. Serendipitously, this lacuna in my percussive training was exactly what I was able to address as principal percussionist of the La Jolla Symphony.

Playing timpani in this ensemble meant for me that I got to experience a lot of classical repertory as a participant, rather than a spectator, for the first time. Aside from Steve,

who, as the conductor, was often preoccupied with other issues in the orchestra, I had no supervision. Unlike at Oberlin, or some summer music festivals and workshops I had attended, there was no classical music expert watching over my shoulder to comment on my technique.

I spent most of my time in this ensemble trying to figure out what the big deal was about playing timpani. I used all of the things I was learning from my work in the avant-garde (extreme rhythmic precision, dynamics, rubato, color, integration of sound, tuning, etc...) to inform my work as a timpanist. What I loved most was being allowed to use my own sensibilities as an artist to try and produce what *I* thought was the most compelling sonic result.

Further, I spent a great deal of time trying to figure out what the fuss about classical music was all about. Why would so many people volunteer their time once or twice a week and give up their weekends to play Schubert? I began studying the scores to the pieces to occupy my time counting rests, and to figure out why I would be playing during certain sections and not others. Thanks to the development of YouTube, I would watch documentaries on the composers whose music I was playing, as well as some of the notable conductors of their works.

Outside of my work with the La Jolla Symphony, as I delved into the finer points and subtexts of the avant-garde works that obsessed me, I realized that in order for the avant-garde to be meaningful, I needed to possess a better understanding of the historical precedents to which it reacted. Think, for example of a watching a masterful game of chess. What makes the end result of the placement of the pieces at checkmate so impressive is the fact that one knows the original configuration of the pieces when the match began. The intervallic content of Webern, for example, is much more interesting if one understands the functional harmonic system (for example, that of Bach) from which it departs.

During these years, I can't remember a single instance in which I discussed my work as a timpanist with Steve in my private lessons. In our time together, we focused on the repertoire I had come to UCSD to work on. However, in orchestra rehearsals, I studied the music we were performing of my own volition, and on my own time. I began to build bridges on my own terms between the new music I cared so much about and the classical music I couldn't seem to avoid. The result of this was the genesis of my fascination with conducting.

Similarly to the way John Cage had been such a late starter in the field of composition, Steve did not begin his life as a conductor in earnest until several decades into his storied career as a percussionist. So far as I know, the first piece of classical music that he conducted was in fact Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4* at his inaugural concert as the music director of the La Jolla Symphony. Since I knew that Steve and I shared similar temperaments and aesthetic preferences with respect to modern music, I was surprised and a little flummoxed by his decision to steer his career in this new direction. Whereas I expected Steve to commission more complex, demanding works for solo percussion during these years, he (from my standpoint) inexplicably felt inclined to devote his time to Haydn, Berlioz and Brahms.

After spending two years in this environment at UCSD, I departed for Freiburg, Germany for two years to study with Bernhard Wulff, who was also Steve's teacher from thirty years ago. There, I went back to basics, studying Telemann, Bach, Haydn and Schubert, but this time through a philosophical lens, and always connected to the modern masters. The more I learned about older music on my own terms, the more I felt enriched by and attracted to classical music. It was during these years that I began my work in earnest as a conductor, directing works by Trevor Bača, Luigi Nono and Simon Steen-Andersen.

When I returned to UCSD to begin my doctorate, I saw my position with the La Jolla Symphony as a blessing rather than a curse. I continued to work to develop my knowledge of

the classical repertory on my own terms. In the latter half of my doctorate, because I had done plenty of conducting of new music, the department gave me the opportunity to conduct the university's chamber orchestra. I accepted the assignment with enthusiasm and threw myself into the work of figuring out how to conduct the classical and romantic repertoire.

This particular facet of my musical life in my early thirties struck me as a poetic arrival at a place in life diametrically opposed to what I would have expected growing up. During the two years that I conducted this orchestra, I led performances of symphonies, concerti, and overtures by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Mendelssohn – the exact composers I had earlier sought to avoid. Further, my interaction with this repertoire afforded me enough perspective to no longer ghettoize historical eras as though they were different art forms. My extensive involvement with classical music eventually allowed me to see the ways that Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were very progressive, and also the ways in which John Cage was quite conservative.

The following section is my attempt to summarize a few of the ways that my life as a percussionist has taught me crucial lessons in terms of growing as a conductor. I will also address the ways that studying new music (from the perspective of a percussionist) has informed the way I conduct older music.

BASIC PHYSICALITY

“A good technical exercise for a conductor is to conduct the same passage using only the shoulder, then only with the forearm, then only with the wrist, then only with the fingers.”

~ Bernhard Wulff

In my one and only conducting lesson with Bernhard Wulff, the first thing he did was to correct the position of my arms relative to my chest. Whereas I had always conducted with my ictus point around my navel, he instructed me to reposition this point to somewhere in front of my sternum. Instead of relaxing my arm, I was to keep my elbow more or less straight, thereby extending my arms in front of me.

There were two consequences of making this shift in my basic posture as a conductor: firstly, I developed much stronger back and shoulder muscles, and secondly, my physical presence naturally became more expressive, elegant and authoritative.

I gradually realized that Bernhard's advice with respect to my change in posture correlated directly to my first snare drum lessons with two of my earliest percussion teachers.

With Gordon Gottlieb, the physicality of playing snare drum was broken down into three components: arm, wrist and fingers. Similarly, as a beginning student at Oberlin, Michael Rosen spent the initial weeks of our time together focusing on getting me to use my entire arm and to "throw" the stick. The combination of their teachings has proven to be invaluable to me as both a percussionist and as a conductor.

The idea of using one's entire arm in both snare drum playing and conducting relates to the idea that making music benefits from maximizing the potential of one's entire body. Of course, this is not an axiom, and there are many examples of iconic performers yielding great results from very economical body motion (Otto Klemperer, especially in older age, comes to mind), but I would argue that it is easier to strip away motion from a body that is accustomed to it than to add motion to a body that is used to tranquility. If one watches great ensembles such as the Berlin Philharmonic, the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, or the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, or conductors such as Carlos Kleiber, Georg Solti, or Esa-Pekka Salonen or performers like Glenn Gould or Mario Caroli, there is a celebration of the full range of what the body can do. Music is not made only with the wrist and fingers, but with the knees, the

chest, the shoulders and the face. I am not advocating here a distasteful affectation of unnecessary histrionics, but rather an acknowledgment of the way that music flows through the body, and an embracing of using the entire body to express this.

In snare drum playing (and this pertains to virtually all struck percussion, actually), the use of the entire body is to me what distinguishes merely functional playing from vivid, colorful playing. In my experience, there is a direct correlation between the bodily motion that produces a sound and the quality of a sound produced. When heavy, *pesante* sounds are desired, one uses not just one's arm, but one's entire body to fall with the stick onto the instrument it is striking, for example a robust *tutti* moment in a Beethoven, Brahms or Mahler symphony, or certain passages in Xenakis' *Psappha*. Conversely, if one wishes for a lighter, finer sound, one would typically resort to the use only of the fingers, as though one were a surgeon with a scalpel.

With conducting, one is essentially functioning as a visualization of what is happening musically. A larger, broader gesticulation will generally produce a louder, fuller response from an ensemble, whereas a gesture refined only to the wrists and fingers will produce a lighter, quieter, more furtive sound. By raising the arm when conducting, as Bernhard instructed me, one essentially forces the entire body to interact with the music. I have found that the body will actually often show the ear how a given passage is meant to be played.

ANALYSIS / CREATING SHORTHAND SCORES

*"Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read
but to be learned by heart."²*

~ Nietzsche

² Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Portable Nietzsche*. (New York: Penguin, 1976), 152.

One of the first times I was conducting an ensemble, I received the feedback that my form was generally fine, but I always had my head buried in the score. The first time I watched video of myself conducting, I saw what this person meant. I didn't realize how unprofessional I looked with my head facing directly down and only occasionally looking up to check in with my collaborators.

I had experienced a similar phenomenon in the field of playing percussion; because I was a sub-par reader of music (for example, a marimba solo), I grew reliant on my musical memory to guide me through performances. I needed to have eye contact with the instruments that I was playing much more than I needed to see the scores that I was meant to be reading. Therefore, memorization became key in my life as a percussionist.

After I acknowledging this visual shortcoming in my conducting technique, I resolved to come up with a way to memorize, or at least reduce, my visual dependence, on the score that I was conducting. The good news was that my work as a percussionist (especially with respect to avant-garde music wherein structure is typically more labyrinthine than in its classical precedents) had equipped me very well for conducting, which, from the standpoint of memory, I have found considerably easier to navigate than percussion playing.

As a percussionist, I began analyzing and memorizing scores out of necessity. For example, in Salvatore Sciarrino's *Il legno e la parola*, the piece runs for twenty-odd pages without a single logical place to turn a page. Also, it is written for the full expanse of a five-octave marimba. In order to keep eye contact with the music, the performer would constantly need to crane his neck, attempt to decipher tiny black dots five feet away, and in so doing, lose a confident sense of visual contact with the instrument. I realized that in order to play the piece with adequate note accuracy, I needed to either memorize or to make significant alterations to my copy of the physical score. This led to me analyzing the piece and

subsequently creating a shorthand version, which was like a hieroglyphic version of the piece that fit onto two sheets of 8 ½" x 11" paper. I then learned the shorthand version of the piece, and found that the contents of those two sheets of paper were not all that difficult to commit to memory. Thus, I ultimately performed the piece without any visual aid whatsoever.

In the realm of conducting, the question of memorizing was raised in the same way: by necessity. The first time I had to conduct a symphonic movement "in one" (which is to say that an entire bar of music is encapsulated in one beat of the conductor's baton), I realized that I myself easily became disoriented in terms of following the score.

What I found with these particular movements was that the individual measures begged to be grouped into more conventional metric patterns – an analytical technique called "hypermeter." The term refers to several individual measures which are grouped together to form a single large-scale meter. Much in the way that Stravinsky uses odd meters to alter one's perception of predictable strong and weak beats in his *Rite of Spring* or *Histoire du soldat*, classical composers would use hypermeter to set up predictable repetitive phrase structures and then occasionally insert an irregular phrase, perhaps to keep listeners more engaged. Thus, hypermeters are very obvious at some points, and more ambiguous at others, thereby requiring some careful consideration with respect to how things are grouped during study.

I would analyze these pieces either by playing through them or listening to recordings, and I would ask myself where the phrases were clear and where they were more nebulous. Most of the time, the phrasing of these movements would be very lucid; the phrase lengths were usually predictable, and the beginnings of phrases were easy to spot. Further, these structures usually repeated with minimal variation later in the movement. Once all of these materials were accounted for, I could move on to the cloudier passages. Usually, the challenge in these sections would have to do with elided phrases (wherein a new phrase begins before

the preceding one ends). This would disrupt the predictability of the more clear-cut sections of these movements. Most of the time, my decisions were instinctual.

I would demarcate each hypermeter at its respective bar line with a vertical line drawn in red crayon on my scores. I would then determine what the normative length of these hypermeters was (most of the time it was groups of four individual measures). Wherever the phrase length was “normal,” I would write nothing. However, wherever the phrase length deviated from this norm, I would write the number of bars contained in that particular hypermeter (Figure 1). Beyond that, I would write in important cues or dynamic shifts wherever they might occur, and I would be able to conduct the piece more or less from memory, glancing down at the score only occasionally to check where certain cues or abnormal phrase lengths occurred.

45

Presto. $\text{♩} = 122.$

Flauti.

Oboi.

Clarineti in A.

Fagotti.

Corni in D.

Trombe in D.

Timpani in F.A.

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Violoncello.

Basso.

R. 7.

Figure 1: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 7*, Movement 3

This was the starting point for me with respect to navigating the terrain of shorthand scores or scores I might potentially conduct from memory. After I became adept at this practice for movements which were “in one,” this technique was easily applied to movements with more than one conducted ictus per measure.

The basic logic here is figuring out “what repeats and what doesn’t.” Since classical music is rooted in consistent phrase structures with various degrees of purposeful deviation, this question was really the primary one when analyzing classical and romantic repertory. The same mode of analysis that shepherded me through shorthand or memorized versions of solo percussion pieces by Georges Aperghis (Figure 2), Salvatore Sciarrino and Iannis Xenakis also turned out to be my greatest tool as a conductor.

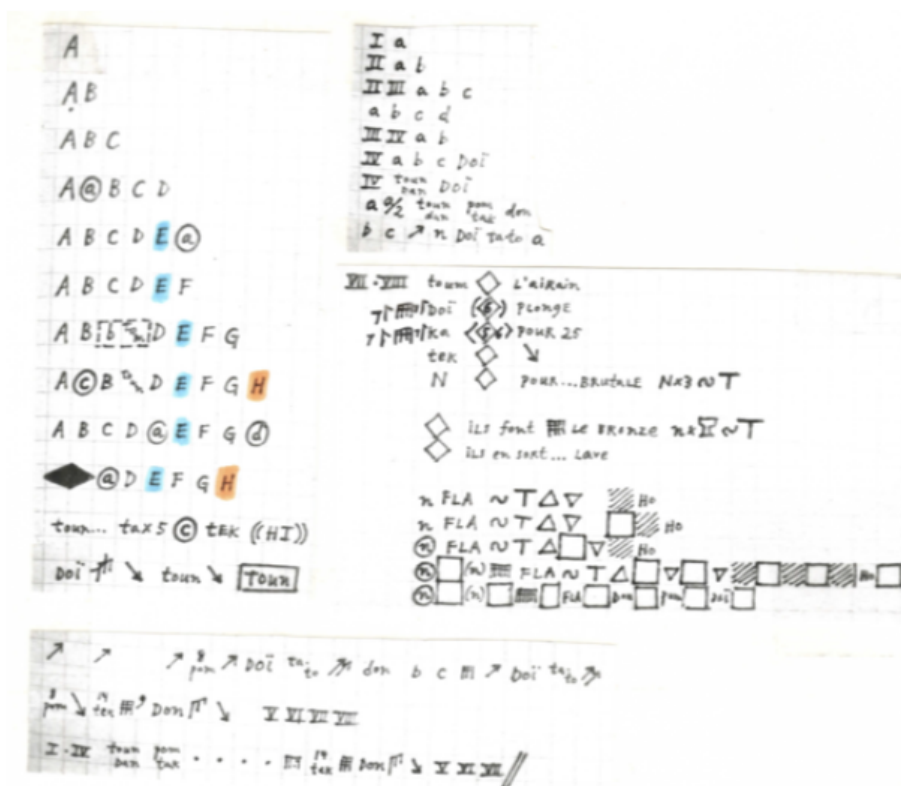


Figure 2: Shorthand Notation for Georges Aperghis' *Le corps à corps*

This practice of analysis can be traced back to the ancient concepts of *memoria rerum* (memory for things) and *memoria verba* (memory for words). These mnemonic techniques were developed for the sake of orators and practitioners of rhetoric. In essence, when memorizing long sentences, discreet words could be remembered individually (*memoria verba*), or they could be grouped into phrases, and then converted into images (*memoria rerum*). Based on personal experience, *memoria rerum* has been a much more profitable mnemonic technique than *memoria verba*.

In the coarsest terms, *memoria rerum* describes the way our minds possess the ability to convert many individual things into coherent, meaningful units, or images. When our brain wishes to recall certain information, it conjures one of the images and then unpacks its contents. When one asks the question “what repeats and what doesn’t?,” one addresses repetition and deviance. The predictable material functions effectively as straight highway, and the deviant sections function as curves in the road. Some stretches are windier than others. The mind can relax in the more predictable sections, and increase its focus during the more erratic ones.

By preparing scores via the application of *memoria rerum*, one can calibrate the degree of memorization that seems appropriate for a given project vis-à-vis factors such as preparation time, difficulty of a particular work (a Mozart overture is drastically different than a Brahms symphony) and the amount of rehearsal time one will have with the collaborating ensemble. If one has more spartan conditions in which to work, then it will be a good idea to simply stick to the score as is, and to be as traditionally functional as possible. However, if one has amenable conditions in place for a memorized performance of a work (i.e. proper rehearsal period, a responsive ensemble to work with), then one could certainly elect to go off-book in performance. Another alternative would be a sort of shorthand cheat-sheet version of the score denoting, for example, hypermeter, structurally significant details, and cues. This

way, one would have a safety net-style reference point without having to turn pages. However, since page turns are usually not very problematic for a conductor, this doesn't seem to be a particularly meritorious approach.

DEGREES OF INTERPRETATION

“The eye, the ear, the mind in action, these I value.”³ ~ Heraclitus

One possible consequence of receiving an education as a drummer *cum* percussionist is to learn to see strictness of pulse and rhythm as a universal musical desideratum. The drummer's function is to have perfect metronomic “time.” The orchestral percussionist's objective is to play with superhuman precision. The avant-garde percussionist's goal is to realize rhythmic acrobatics over an inaudible underlying ictus etched in stone. The omniscient eye affixed to the arm of a metronome in Man Ray's *Indestructible Object* comes to mind when thinking of the role of rhythm in the typical percussionist's education.

One example vis-à-vis this musical attitude occurred when I first arrived at SUNY Buffalo and was working on Frank Zappa's *The Black Page*. In this piece, the percussionist (in this case, drum set player) is to keep strict time in quarter notes with his left foot on the hi-hat, all the while realizing panoply rhythms (both simple and complex) with his other three limbs. One day, a few weeks into my learning process, I thought I would try to impress a professor who had worked with Zappa by demonstrating to him my ability to navigate treacherous rhythmic terrain. I didn't even get to the second measure of the piece before he

³ Heraclitus. *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*. Trans. Brooks Haxton. (New York: Viking, 2001), 9.

admonished me for having an unstable sense of rhythm and pulse. He was, unfortunately, correct. It was tough but valuable feedback to receive.

I spent years in conservatory cultivating an intimate rapport with the metronome and solidifying my rhythmic capacities so that professors like the one I mentioned above would have no cause for such criticism in the future.

However, on my first day at the Lucerne Festival Academy in 2007, where we were rehearsing Pierre Boulez' *Le marteau sans maître*, I had come in almost neurotically over-prepared to realize the percussion part to this modernist *chef d'oeuvre*. I had precisely terraced and calibrated every dynamic and articulation and also exactly learned every note against the grain of a metronome.

At the opening rehearsal, I nervously and robotically made my way through the *tambour sur cadre* portion of the second movement, when my mentor at the academy, Michel Cerrutti, stopped me. He asked me why I was playing so rigidly and tensely, and I responded that I was simply trying to articulate the text as faithfully as possible; there were myriad markings on the page, so why would I not try to respect them?

Maybe I am romanticizing the story in my memory, but I recall Michel, wearing a pink Lacoste sweater tied around his shoulders, grumbling something under his breath, taking a deep drag off of his cigarette, exhaling and saying “non, non, non” and demonstrating, “in fact, it is more like this.” He then proceeded to play a sinuous, slinky, almost feline version of the passage that I had just played so mechanically. From then on, I understood that a text is a text, and music is music. One must always realize that interpretation requires a sense not of blind obedience, but intelligent insight. Just as figurative painting has a spectrum ranging from the highly realistic to the highly distorted, different forms of music ask to be interpreted differently.

The elements that comprise Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet* for solo percussion taught me a lot about the nature of expressive interpretation. In the roughest description of the piece imaginable, Ferneyhough's text makes excessive (and often contradictory) demands on an interpreter as if to intentionally create hermeneutic Gordian knots. Using steady, rather conventional meters with slow icti, he maps unfathomable rhythmic labyrinths (often between two and four of these superimposed), schizophrenic dynamics, counterintuitive articulations and seemingly paradoxical affective markings (e.g. *rigoroso*, *in modo analitico*, *piacevole*, *capriccioso*, *intransigente*). As yet another layer, Ferneyhough occasionally writes *accelerandi* and *ritardandi* so as to skew the idea of strictly gridded temporal time (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet* (measures 49 and 50)

When I got to UCSD in 2007, I had read Steven Schick's article on learning *Bone Alphabet*, and my curiosity was piqued. Steve had described the wrenching process of wrestling with the piece for nine months, and his daily practice regimen that included mapping every measure of the piece onto graph paper. Everything about this process to me screamed *rigoroso* and *in modo analitico*, while nothing seemed to register as *piacevole* or *capriccioso*. In the fall of that year, I began working on the piece in earnest, diligently graphing each note in each measure, decimal point after decimal point, until I finally performed it the following summer.

Around the time that I was finishing my learning process of *Bone Alphabet*, I performed an excerpt of the piece at the Darmstadt Summer Courses where Ferneyhough was lecturing. After neurotically performing my version of the piece, I sat back and listened to Ferneyhough voice his thoughts about the piece. I was appalled to hear him say that he would not recommend a performer use graph paper to decipher these rhythms. How then, I wondered, was one to parse out when to play which note? What about the rhythmic precision the score demands?

I reflected back at this point to an important lesson I learned from my teacher at Oberlin, Michael Rosen. In our first year together, he grilled me incessantly on the finer points of my musicianship, making sure that I was capable of being as regimented in my playing as anybody could ever ask of me. However, in our first lessons, I asked him for listening recommendations of musicians outside of the field of percussion. He recommended Rubinstein playing the *Nocturnes* of Chopin, arias sung by the tenor Jussi Björling, and Claudio Abbado conducting Rossini overtures. The point, according to Rosen (whose wife was on Oberlin's voice faculty), was to learn to think like other instrumentalists. This way, the dry sound world of the snare drum could take on a new life.

Another friend of mine, the soprano Carol Plantamura, once described her first encounter with Pierre Boulez in the late 50's or early 60's, in which she was singing one of the *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, and Boulez went through the entire score with her at the piano, checking note after note. After finishing this painstaking process, Plantamura revealed that the composer told her "now sing this as if it were Mozart." The idea was to learn something with as much integrity as possible, and then to depart from or transcend the text into a less literal, more fluid sounding result.

Back to *Bone Alphabet*: I realized, after reflecting upon these lessons from Rosen and Plantamura, that what Ferneyhough is essentially doing by flooding the performer with this

surfeit of instructions is that he is asking the performer to push the boundaries of his own musical intelligence. Since there is no way to be a fully obedient interpreter, one *must* make decisions. Interpreting Ferneyhough is like standing on ground that is constantly shifting beneath the performer's feet. Ferneyhough purposefully inserts glitches which subvert some aspect of his own musical text. Therefore, the performer is forced to create hierarchies of musical salience in the way he interprets each bar. When the music is marked *rigoroso*, then in painterly terms, one strives for "rhythmic realism." When the marking is *capriccioso*, one attempts something more along the lines of "rhythmic impressionism."

Objective Conducting

How does any of this relate to conducting? The opera and theater director Peter Sellars once said that he could sum up his job in three words: "does this help?" As a conductor, the question is always to what degree one should strive to be objective and simply get out of the way of the music, and when one should intervene with one's own interpretive preferences and idiosyncracies.

There are two basic scenarios in which I found that sobriety or "objectivity" was advantageous as a conductor: 1) when one is functioning as a silent, visual ictus (in other words, a human metronome) to which everyone orients himself, and 2) when the ensemble needs no extraneous visual shaping.

Concerning the latter of these cases, in my first year at Oberlin, I had the privilege of playing Mahler's *Fourth Symphony* with the then-chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Sir Simon Rattle. At one point during rehearsals, he told the orchestra that if he ever stops conducting mid-performance, we shouldn't be alarmed – it was, in fact, the highest compliment he could pay an orchestra. One often sees examples of the great conductor Carlos

Kleiber remaining stationary for extended periods of time before resuming articulating pulse. Often, a conductor simply needs to set music in motion and then allow the ensemble to make music. Two examples that come to mind here are the famous lush melody in the second movement of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* and the funeral march at the beginning of the second movement of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*. Neither of these iconic moments really benefit from any visual beating nor expressive gesticulations once they have begun.

Further, there are also moments when the music is so demanding that beating anything other than the bare bones of the pulse structure would be superfluous and therefore detrimental. Think of Gergiev conducting the scherzo to Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Brad Lubman conducting Steve Reich's *Tehilim*. This is also true for large sections of Igor Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*; the players and conductor must work together as one well-oiled machine. There is simply not room for musical expression in these instances.

Yet another case would be music that functions like clockwork. In works of this sort, there is nothing to "express" on the behalf of the conductor. Rather, the conductor is more or less there along for the ride, and might simply facilitate certain entrances and cut offs over the course of the piece. Aldo Clementi's *L'orologio di Arcevia* and Simon Steen-Andersen's *On and Off and To and Fro* come to mind.

The final scenario is one that occurs (to the best of my knowledge) exclusively in modern music. In this case, the conductor demarcates time visually by beating the patterns designated by the composer, and the ensemble plays "around" these icti. In other words, the players in the ensemble, instead of orienting themselves to a common audible pulse (as one would in any classical symphony), watch the ictus of the conductor and perform their part relative to this visual information. Examples of this include works like Pierre Boulez' *Dérive*, Brian Ferneyhough's *Funérailles* and Trevor Bača's *Krummzeit*.

Expressive Conducting

When I began conducting, I felt assured when it came to all of the aforementioned “objective” modes of beating. Since I was working exclusively on pieces that had been written since 1945, the skill set I had cultivated as a percussionist equipped me thoroughly. However, when I began my tenure as the conductor of the UCSD chamber orchestra, I was in for a surprise. In principle, there is really not that much difference between conducting a given modernist piece and conducting a classical symphony. Both have the same basic meters – pulse is pulse, and rhythm is rhythm. On a basic level, conducting a classical symphony is considerably easier than conducting a work of, say, Elliott Carter.

During my first quarter as the conductor of the UCSD chamber orchestra, I was hanging out with a friend of mine named Justin Urcis. Justin is an amateur pianist, but possesses one of the most cultivated senses of musicianship of anyone I know, always pointing me in the direction of musicians like Celibidache, Cortot and Sokolov. I was at that time conducting Haydn’s *Symphony No. 95*. I showed Justin my technique, thinking he would admire my precision. Instead, he shook his head and told me I was doing it all wrong. He mimicked my motions for me, demonstrating beating along to the music in an unconfident and overly stiff manner. He then said, “*this* is how I would try to do things if I were you,” and proceeded to gracefully sweep at certain moments, emote at others, and rise and fall as the music dictated. His example had almost nothing to do with delivering clear beats. Rather, it had everything to do with expressing the gestures inherent in the music, amplifying certain details, and revealing hidden layers within the music. It was, despite the colloquial nature of the exchange, to this day one of the best music lessons of my life.

From that point on, I watched all of the great conductors I could find to see how they handled the question of choosing which visual information they were going to convey. Some

conductors, such as Pierre Boulez, were very beat-oriented, whereas others, such as Georg Solti and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, were considerably more concerned with gestures. And yet they all managed to conduct the same repertoire beautifully.

Upon discovering Carlos Kleiber's electrifying version of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* with the Concertgebouw Orchestra, I asked Steven Schick if he had ever watched this performance, and if so, what he had learned from this master, who might better be described as a cheerleader than beat provider. He responded in the affirmative and said, "I learned that the Concertgebouw is a very good orchestra." The point was that even though a conductor might wish to rid himself of the responsibility of clearly demonstrating beats (for the sake of foregrounding musical gesture), he must always first and foremost acknowledge *what the orchestra needs in order to get through the piece*. In this case, the Concertgebouw had clearly been playing this piece for a century, and with perhaps a few exceptions, would be capable of playing the piece without any conductor at all. The Concertgebouw's capacity then meant that Kleiber was much freer in his ability to visualize the more decorative aspects of the score rather than the quotidian task of keeping time.

All of this is important to consider, because as a conductor, if one is to employ Peter Sellars' mantra ("is this helpful?"), one must always prioritize the needs of the orchestra. The degree to which one can be expressive or flexible in cases such as conducting a Beethoven symphony is predicated upon several factors such as the experience level and the size of the ensemble, the difficulty of the repertoire, and how much time one has to rehearse. Beyond his own tastes as a musician, a conductor must always analyze the situation and find the appropriate balance of stable scaffolding versus ornamental details in the way he rehearses his ensemble.

In all of these cases, the musicianship that is required of a developing percussionist serves as an ideal precursor to a life as a conductor, since a percussive education is so

typically rooted in pulse and rhythm. When one invests oneself in the rigor of modernist scores with an adequate degree of seriousness and intensity, one demystifies questions of rhythm and ensemble playing for good. I believe that if one studies the traditional undergraduate curriculum (i.e. the orchestral literature, Bach and Telemann on keyboard instruments, etc...), and then supplements this education by playing more recent solo and chamber music (iconic ensemble works like Reich's *Drumming*, Xenakis' *Pléiades*, all of Cage's *Constructions* come to mind, as well as solo pieces like Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*, Stockhausen's *Zyklus*, and Xenakis' *Psappha*), then one will, with practice and diligence, certainly be in a position to conduct virtually anything.

FINDING SUBTEXT: BILLONE / TARKOVSKY / CRAZY HORSE

*"Genius is what a man invents when he is looking for a way out."*⁴ ~ Sartre

The cultivation of an eye for discovering subtext is a unique aspect of a musician's skill set. It is different than the others I have written about thus far, because it is not something easily demonstrable when one is on the podium, nor even necessarily something that can be explained in verbal language. Digging for subtext in a musical score is a deeply enriching process, and borderline crucial to making one's work worthwhile. When the performer is aware of a given work's subtext (by this I mean its underlying *raison d'être*), the performance cannot help but be subtly elevated.

At the end of my first year of graduate school, I found myself in a deep depression. I realized that I was learning a lot of music very quickly, but never really taking the time to

⁴ Carruth, Hayden (1964). Jean-Paul Sartre, ed. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions. p. v – xiv.

enjoy whatever I was working on. It was as though I were guzzling vintage Bordeaux instead of sipping and appreciating tannins. By the end of the academic year, my enthusiasm for new music had been depleted, and I realized I needed to change strategies, lest I become a hostile, alienated laborer in my own field. At that moment, I met my then-future mentor, Bernhard Wulff, who told me that I ought to “grow my garden deeper, rather than wider.” I interpreted his advice as advocating an intentional slowing down of my metabolism as far as learning pieces so that I might develop a more meaningful relationship with them.

From then on, I tried to find and read accompanying texts for every solo piece I learned. I read Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* while I was learning Ferneyhough’s *Bone Alphabet*, which proved to be perfect companions. If I were playing Feldman, I would read Proust. If I were playing Xenakis, I would read Homer, the Pre-Socratics and Attic Tragedies. If I were playing Globokar, I would read Brecht and Char. Somehow, reading an accompanying text always made my long days of practice feel worthwhile. I noticed different details in the scores than I would discern ordinarily. This practice fundamentally changed the way I thought about my work as an interpreter.

During my second year of doctoral studies at UCSD, I gave my first DMA recital, which was, in effect, a Pierluigi Billone portrait concert (with interludes by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf). On that concert, I performed three pieces by Billone: *Mani.Matta*, *Mani.de Leonardis* and *Mani.Mono*. Each piece was around twenty minutes long.

Whereas *Mani.Matta* and *Mani.de Leonardis* used colorful instrumentations (marimba, log drums and woodblock in the former, and naturally amplified spring coils and glass in the latter), *Mani.Mono* employed a single instrument, a spring drum, typically used as a humble children’s toy or sound effect. I predicted that I could reliably captivate my audience during the two pieces with the more elaborate instrumentations, but I felt that it was borderline cruel of me to ask people to sit through twenty minutes of a solo for a small tube designed to

produce the effect of thunder. I knew that in order to feel okay about what I was asking of my audience, *I* had to be sure that it was worth their time.

During a moment of self-doubt in my learning process of *Mani.Mono*, I noticed that Billone had dedicated the score someone named Tashunga Wikto. I had never heard of this person, but an internet search yielded results about the Native American general Crazy Horse, whose name in his native language was Tashunga Witko. Upon learning this, I wrote to the composer, who sent me a note about how the piece is an homage to California's Mono Lake, which was sacred to certain tribes of Native Americans. The lake itself is beautiful because it is half-desiccated; its reduced water levels reveal spectacular tufa formations, which look like the ruins of an abandoned city.

Pierluigi then told me to read about the life of Crazy Horse in the classic text *Black Elk Speaks* by Nicholas Black Elk and John Neihardt. He drew parallels between the life and ethics of Crazy Horse and those of the character "Stalker" in Andrei Tarkovsky's film of the same title. After learning all this, I returned to learning the piece with a totally different perspective on what was happening musically. Because I found the background story of the piece so interesting, I knew what details to bring out, how to comport myself as I played it, and what sort of psychological space I needed to go into in order to make the piece "speak." Everything about the piece's strange affect now possessed some form of rationale to me, including the work's duration, which I had previously thought to be excessive. If an action in the piece was violent, or startling, or jarring, or boring, I had material to draw from in order to give the gesture a conviction, much in the way a method actor might learn and deliver his lines. I would constantly ask myself how questions of interpretation related to the film *Stalker* or Black Elk's descriptions of Crazy Horse.

II. TEACHING

“Do not be in too great a hurry to get to the end of Heraclitus the Ephesian’s book; the path is hard to travel. Gloom is there and darkness devoid of light. But if an initiate be your guide, the path shines brighter than sunlight.”⁵ ~ Epigram on Heraclitus

When I arrived at SUNY Buffalo, I felt very unsure of myself in terms of whether studying music would be a good idea. However, I was such a late starter with respect to tonal theory that much of what I encountered at the university produced a sense of alienation and hopelessness within me. Classical and romantic repertory simply did not interest me, and the new music being written by graduate students felt equally distant and obfuscating. It was Cage’s work that was my savior at the beginning of my course of studies, as his music was immediately inviting, graspable, and challenging.

During that time, I met several people who served as mentors to me, among them the percussionists Jan Williams and Gordon Gottlieb, and the trumpet player Jon Nelson. Each mentor supported me and challenged me in a different way. Further, these mentors *humanized* for me an art form which had largely seemed previously impenetrable.

This theme extends to all of the mentors who have entered my life over the past one-and-a-half decades. Each of these teachers demonstrated to me how to simultaneously work within the rules of classical music, and also how, when and why to go outside of them. Maybe, better stated: they showed me how to loosen the grip of the perceived iron laws of the medium and find loopholes that celebrated my individuality. Further, they used simple,

⁵ Steiner, George. *Martin Heidegger*. (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1991), 11.

colloquial language and gave me insight into how music related to my everyday life. Once that scaffolding of accessibility was in place, I found that I was able to make whatever music I was working on *personally* meaningful, and therefore able to find new layers of insight through the idiosyncracies of my imagination.

At UCSD, I was given the opportunity to teach private lessons for two years, and when I moved to Los Angeles, I was fortunate enough to be asked to join the faculty at Cal Arts. I have to say that even in my short career, teaching has been amongst the most rewarding endeavors I have undertaken. I find myself constantly referring to the myriad special lessons I had with my own mentors, and in the process of sharing them with my students, translating them into my own voice.

This chapter will catalogue some of the most important lessons I've learned from my mentors, describe how they have shifted many of my musical paradigms, and articulate why I think these viewpoints are important to share with a new generation of students.

* * *

When I updated my biography for my website a few years ago, I decided that I was sick of well-behaved classical music practices. If I were going to devote my life to an art form predicated upon breaking rules (i.e. experimental and avant-garde music), then why was I placing such value on following the templates of those around me? As I began listing my teachers, I realized that I was dealing with an embarrassment of riches. I also realized that I couldn't really formally state that I had studied percussion with all of them. The way it usually works in these biographies is that one lists the teachers with whom one has taken extensive private lessons at the institutions one has formally attended. But this is not necessarily how true learning takes place. Any perspicacious student will learn from anyone with wisdom.

Starting with this thought in mind, I decided I would pay tribute to the people who most influenced my life and say what *I* felt I had studied with them (at the core). The list I came up with read “Michael Rosen (craft), Steven Schick (interpretation), Bernhard Wulff (metaphysics), Jan Williams (aesthetics), Brian Alegant (analysis), Lewis Nielson (ethics) and William O’Brien (philosophy).” There are of course many other special people in my life who have contributed irrevocably to my intellectual and artistic development, but for the sake of my biography, this was the group that felt right.

Amongst this constellation of mentors and subject matter, I had the feeling that there was (at least in my conception), the recipe for a fully mature, insightful musician. Since my studies with each mentor were not confined to any single subject, listing them as such was intended to honor some aspect of art, life and music that was foregrounded during our work together.

A sage friend of mine, the guitarist Pablo Gómez Cano, once told me that life was like breathing; sometimes one must inhale deeply, and other times, it is crucial to exhale. I feel that this collection of mentors has been crucial to this respiratory pattern of inhaling (with this I associate rigor, discipline, difficulty, concentration) and subsequently exhaling (allowing for creative wandering and the pleasure of discovering freely) always propelling me to move forward and continue growing into each new stage of my life.

Ever since the end of my first year in graduate school, I’ve considered the two most important questions in my percussive life to be 1) *how?* and 2) *why?* The two questions (insofar as they can be considered separate questions) are inextricably bound to one another. This is what I mean when I use the metaphor of respiration, which contains an inhalation and an exhalation. The two actions work together to produce one result: breathing. In the case of the life of a percussionist, I believe that the constant alternation of the questions “how” and

“why” are necessary to the process of developing a mature musical praxis. This is exactly what I believe each of my mentors contributed to in my own life.

In the following paragraphs, I will address a few of the important lessons I learned from each of my mentors, and how I’ve tried to impart those lessons to my students both at UCSD and Cal Arts.

Gordon Gottlieb – Prelude

“One must discipline oneself only to have relatively noble temptations.

And then it is urgent to succumb to them.”

~ Jacques Brel

The summer after I finished high school, I visited New York City with my mother, and upon the recommendation of my then-teacher Anthony Miranda, (although it seems impossibly anachronistic in retrospect) looked up the name Gordon Gottlieb in the Manhattan phone book. I had learned about Gordon through his work with the band Steely Dan. He was known as a great studio musician, and I later discovered he taught at a school called Juilliard. On a public payphone, I pushed in a quarter and dialed his number. To my astonishment, he answered.

I asked Gordon if he might be able to see me for a lesson while I was in town. He said that was possible, and we set up an appointment. I arrived expecting to learn about auxiliary percussion instruments like shaker, tambourine, triangle and congas. However, during the course of my (life-altering) lesson, Gordon kept referring to the snare drum and showed me some basic technical principles, which he said were applicable to all of the instruments we had worked with that day.

I went home stunned. I researched what Juilliard was (I had been oblivious) and looked up the many facets of Gordon's career. Besides his work in the pop and film music recording industries, he was also a world music expert, a new music aficionado and the first-call extra percussionist with the New York Philharmonic. I became infatuated with Gordon's career, and I made a point of visiting him as often as I could for lessons.

As I continued studying with Gordon, I gained an awareness of the importance of acquiring a solid classical foundation. I grew to feel that unless I received this, I would continue running into musical hurdles that I would be incapable of clearing. With Gordon, my lessons were so sporadic that I can hardly consider him an official mentor, although he lit the spark that caused me to try and study classical percussion in earnest. I learned so much from him about the basics of mechanics of the body relative to sound production, and about how high of a standard I needed to learn to demand of myself.

The most significant artifact I kept from these lessons was a short booklet of exercises for snare drum written by Gordon. This booklet was intended to function as a sort of condensed bible for a percussionist. The idea behind the booklet was to create a truncated series of musical calisthenics that serve as a sort of daily training regimen for oneself. I feel that I can benefit as much from these pages that Gordon gave me today as I did when I was studying with him in my late teens. Further, I liked that this collection of pages was written in Gordon's own handwriting – it demonstrated to me clearly that it was the result of his own assessment of what was important as a musician; an acknowledgment, perhaps, of what he thought *he* needed to work on during the time that he was conceiving these exercises. Following in his footsteps, I fashioned a version of these pages for myself in my own handwriting and modified Gordon's exercises to keep myself challenged and engaged. Spending time with these pages exercises is like doing yoga; it is a constant struggle to improve one's form and find one's center.

Michael Rosen – Craft

“People who don’t work with their hands are parasites.” ~ Jenny Holzer

After three years at SUNY Buffalo, I transferred to Oberlin Conservatory, where I began studies with one of the true gurus of my art form, Michael Rosen. To be brutally honest, Oberlin was my third choice when I was attempting to transfer to a conservatory. I desperately wanted to study in New York City at either Juilliard or the Manhattan School of Music, but I was rejected from both. My mentality at that point was that I was eager to start a career of freelancing and trying to get work in a bustling metropolis in order to try to make a name for myself.

I expressed all of these ambitions to Mr. Rosen when I entered the program at Oberlin, and he looked at me in disbelief and confusion. *I*, a twenty year-old beginning transfer student who could barely make his way around his four mallet audition repertoire had the audacity to think that I was ready to go out into the world of freelance percussion and thrive? Mr. Rosen admonished me to get back to basics.

The first year of Michael Rosen’s legendary percussion curriculum focused solely on the snare drum. The first ten or so lessons began with the most maddeningly elementary exercises imaginable. One was to examine desirable technique and exaggerate it. I don’t know whether I was simply less developed than the other incoming students, or whether Mr. Rosen just wanted to exert extra control on me because I had arrived with delusions of grandeur, but I felt he was holding me back more than my (younger) peers.

This was, of course, a blow to my ego, since I had already played a few significant pieces in the repertoire (for example Berio’s *Linea*) at SUNY Buffalo. I was hungry to dig my teeth into all the heavy repertory I could, and yet Mr. Rosen implored me to show restraint. He

would constantly tell me that my mind at that time existed on a higher musical plane than my technical abilities did. Until my hands caught up with my mind, I would encounter artistic obstacles. It was his pedagogical mission to make sure my technique would eventually be capable of articulating my musical ideas.

I was in that first year confined to a small corner of a practice room with a snare drum, a pair of sticks, copies of orchestral excerpts, books of etudes, and a metronome for five hours a day. During that time, I was solidifying the foundations of my musicianship and learning to squeeze every drop of sonic juice possible out of a single drum.

By the end of that year of study, I had developed a snare drum technique and sense of craft with respect to my musicianship that was no longer lightweight. Unlike most things in life wherein I had allowed myself to be lazy and to cut corners, Mr. Rosen would allow no such thing. At certain points, I felt like my hands could fly, while at other points, I felt they could perform neurosurgery on a drum if necessary. His training allowed me to be as wild or precise as the music called for.

Mr. Rosen never showed his cards to me, and I always felt I had to work ten times harder than my colleagues to earn his approval. When I was graduating from Oberlin, I was sure that my career as a percussionist had come to an end and that no graduate school would want me. To my astonishment, I was accepted everywhere I applied. Mr. Rosen's ethos of education as a slow burn had paid off. Further, I was admitted to the Lucerne Festival Academy that summer, which had been my ultimate dream. Upon learning all of these results, I remember having coffee with Mr. Rosen and expressing my shock. He gave me a perplexed look and said, "you know, I think you're the only one who is surprised by all of this."

Mr. Rosen's form of tough love made me into the musician that I am today. He was always kind but demanding. He knew how to hold the carrot of his endorsement just out of reach enough to keep me motivated and focused. Further, he taught me that there was a time to

be a professional and a time to be a student. The point was not simply to *get work*, but to become a musician in the deepest sense – when the student was truly ready, a lifetime of interesting employment would be available to them.

Years later, I realized that earning Mr. Rosen’s validation while I was at Oberlin was a process I eventually learned to transfer onto myself. Since he taught me to be my own harshest critic, after I left, I felt that the only approval I really needed to earn was my own. By setting the bar higher than I could imagine for several years, he helped me to permanently expect only the best from myself. Nowadays, I feel that my greatest asset as a musician is my ability to think and be creative. However, I believe that the only reason that anyone (including me) respects my mind is because I possess hands capable of communicating my thoughts – the result of unrushed hard work replete with integrity. *This* is what Mr. Rosen gave me.

Steven Schick – Interpretation

“A piece of music, no matter who writes it...goes through a variety of experiences. I think some people take it too seriously, I think some people don’t take it seriously enough, and other people play it just right (laughter).” ~ John Cage

During my tenure at Oberlin, Steven Schick visited twice – the first time for a masterclass and solo concert, and the second time for a masterclass and concerto performance of Lewis Nielson’s *Axis – Sandman* for solo percussion and string quintet. I corresponded sporadically with him over the course of those years via email, occasionally asking questions about how he handled certain conundrums related to interpretation of pieces in his repertoire. I also managed to see him lecture on the percussion duo pieces of Xenakis when I was visiting

the Manhattan School of Music. Each visit was like an electric shock to my developing artistic world.

Steve's first visit totally upended for me everything that I thought I knew about percussion. He gave a talk to composers and percussionists on how to navigate the dense forest of symbols in Stockhausen's *Zyklus*, which was by far the most interesting score I had ever seen at that point. He worked with my colleague Ross Karre on Stockhausen's *Kontakte* and played a concert of the solo works of Stockhausen, Globokar, Ferneyhough, Lucier and Xenakis (the first time I had seen any of those works performed live.)

Before Steve came to Oberlin, I knew of his reputation as one of the world's great percussionists. I didn't know quite what that meant – maybe he could play faster, or more precisely, or louder than everyone else. I had no clue what distinguished him from his colleagues, but I sensed that he was somebody worth paying special attention to.

Not wanting to miss what I viewed as a crucial opportunity to interact with him, I signed up to play in a masterclass for Steve only a few months after arriving at Oberlin. Because of where I was in my education at that point, I wasn't working on anything particularly well suited for this situation. However, I knew I would regret it if I let the occasion pass. Before I left Buffalo for Ohio, I photocopied a cabinet full of interesting percussion scores from Jan Williams' collection. I found one score dedicated to Steven Schick called *C/Ch* by David Dramm, and I decided to learn a portion of it for Steve's visit.

I worked my way through the jungle of Dramm's complex polyrhythms to the best of my ability, and played an excerpt in the masterclass. Receiving Steve's feedback, I began to understand why he was so respected as a musician. His comments had nothing to do with right or wrong notes. Rather, he was focused on the way the polyrhythmic elements interacted with each other on the level of affect. Polyrhythms were, in Steve's conception, placed somewhere on a spectrum of tension and release. 3:2, for example, would be considered a round, or

smooth rhythm, whereas 6:5 would be comparatively jagged or angular. Aspects of rhythm in the score were not clinical – rather, they were embodied. They were to be interpreted psychologically by the interpreter, and articulated through the comportment of the body in performance.

Steve said that when he was a student, he had to learn the glockenspiel excerpt to the Glazunov violin concerto, first “with the grain” of the meter (in 3), and then “against the grain” of the meter (in 2). This approach meant that he was capable of hearing the rhythms in either of two psychological states, each with its own form of friction. Neither one nor the other was necessarily preferable for the player. However, the two contrasting modes of playing the same material were meant to demonstrate the subtle ways one rushes or drags certain rhythms based upon how one thinks of them in relation to a pulse.

A classic example of this that I have used both with myself and with my students is that of Ravel’s *Bolero*. In this piece, the sextuplets that comprise the snare drum rhythm can be felt either in groups of two or three. The music is of course set up so that one necessarily would in performance think of the sextuplets in groups of two, but I have found that practicing this rhythm (which is also the basis of a common test piece in the percussionist’s repertoire) is useful in groups of three. One is playing the exact same material, but one inflects it differently depending on how one conceives of the rhythm (Figure 4, left).

Another germane example of this principle would be any of Steve Reich’s music that is based upon the idea of a grouping of twelve notes, which could be felt in either three or four subdivisions. Pieces like *Clapping Music*, *Drumming*, *Music for Pieces of Wood* and *Piano Phase* are founded upon this principle (Figure 4, right).

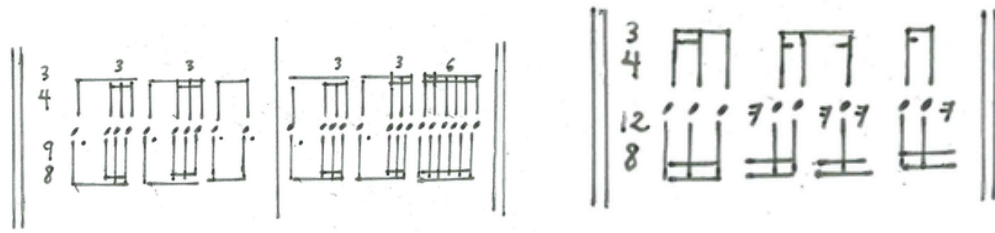


Figure 4: Ostinati from Ravel's *Bolero* (left) and Reich *Clapping Music* (right)

* * *

In the two years following Steve's first visit to Oberlin, I worked feverishly towards playing some of the repertoire that he had shared with us in his concert. During my second year at Oberlin, I gave my first ever percussion recital, which was comprised of Globokar's *Toucher* and ? *Corporel*, Xenakis' *Rebonds*, and Werner Heider's *Pendant*. Although my quandaries about these pieces were never-ending, there was one obstinate issue that I just couldn't wrap my head around: the question of how to handle the interludes in Globokar's *Toucher*.

I got out my graph paper and my metronome. Nothing made sense to me. The rhythms were so far beyond the scope of my playing capacities, I felt hopeless. In an attempt to gain some insight into how a master had handled these passages, I wrote Steve an email asking for advice. In response, I got a very literal, thoroughly unhelpful message telling me that there was, in principle, no difference between a polyrhythm of 3:2 and 79:126. That may have been an obvious point in terms of logical discourse, but it left my twenty-one year old self bewildered.

My recital date came and went. I did my best with the Globokar interludes given my physical and mental limitations, and life went on. From then on, every time I would learn a

new piece with a seemingly unsolvable problem, I would I write Steve a long, thoughtful email, and stop just before hitting send. In that moment of hesitation, I stopped and thought about what response I could expect if he followed suit with his literal retort to my original Globokar question.

What I found was that I could actually answer my own questions in the terse, point-of-fact style that Steve had answered my first email. Essentially, I realized that I was just going to have to figure out the answers to those questions myself. I resolved, from then on, to take the attitude that if I was adult enough to be playing a piece, then I would have to be mature enough to make certain artistic decisions and stand by them, right or wrong. I had to forge my own path, absorb inevitable future criticism, and amend my interpretations as I learned through experience.

A few years later, on Steve's second visit to Oberlin, I played *Toucher* in a masterclass for him. Despite the fact that I felt very proud of my work on the piece (having even studied it with its dedicatee, Jean-Pierre Drouet, in France), I was very self-conscious about the interludes, which I still had never really figured out. At the beginning of my performance, somebody asked Steve if he'd like a score to watch as I played, and he said something to the effect of, "no thanks, I think I know this one well enough by now." I made my way through the piece, and it went very well. In the discussion that followed, Steve and I spoke about the dramatic scenes in the piece, not the interludes. After the masterclass was over, I privately thanked Steve for not publicly embarrassing me about the inaccuracies of these interludes. When he nonchalantly replied, "oh, I remember trying to learn those when I was first working on the piece, but for the past few decades, I've just improvised those," I was shocked, perplexed, illuminated and elated.

What I learned from Steve in all of these instances was that he wasn't necessarily any more of an expert on certain topics than I was. What he possessed was the ability to abstract

interpretive issues and work through them by changing the lens through which he looked at the problem. In pieces like Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*, certain passages of Xenakis' *Psappha* and *Rebonds*, and the interludes of Globokar's *Toucher*, there were certain rhythms I found "uncountable" on a personal level. In order to continue to move forward and maneuver my way through the piece, I needed to learn to recognize when it was important to change the lens (or at least the resolution on the lens) through which I was viewing the piece.

I saw this particular form of interpretive myopia quite frequently with my students at Cal Arts this past year as they prepared for their recitals. As the dates of their concerts got closer and closer, I asked them to step away from the score (metaphorically) more and more and to try and observe themselves from the point of view of an audience member. The truth is, it is irrelevant if one plays certain measures of highly complex music "accurately" or not because what the composer is after is in fact a chaotic gesture. In fact, if one plays too literally in these moments, one risks losing the desired musical effect. With Steve as my mentor, I learned to trust my sense of where these instances occurred and let myself *embrace* the disconnection between the literal score and my rendering. More often than not, I would tell my students at Cal Arts that they simply needed to loosen up, because their versions of their recital repertoire seemed stiff and overly calculated, thereby diminishing a given work's dramatic potential.

* * *

The last anecdote I would like to relate about Steve also came during his second visit to Oberlin. We arranged to meet privately, since he knew that I was applying to UCSD. Michael Rosen advised me to share my best work with him, since the meeting was meant to function as an unspoken audition. Instead of playing my well-prepared version of Philippe

Manoury's *Solo de Vibraphone*, I opted to play a work that had been confounding me for months: Franco Donatoni's *Mari* for marimba solo.

I was preparing the Donatoni for my audition tape for the Lucerne Festival Academy that summer. I kept working and working, trying interpretive strategy after interpretive strategy, but nothing seemed to get me closer to a version of the piece I could be proud of. My lesson with Steve lasted an hour; in the first five minutes, I fumbled my way through the piece. For the remaining fifty-five minutes, we talked about Kafka, and by a week later, I was playing a compelling version of the piece.

From then on, I realized that sometimes, thinking about things other than the piece itself is exactly what is necessary to make an interpretation come to life. This has been an immense part of my cultivation as a musician and intellectual, and is something that I try to instill in my students. If one is going to create interesting interpretations, one benefits from having a surplus of interesting ideas floating around in his or her mind at all times.

Bernhard Wulff – Metaphysics

“The purpose of art is the same as that of alchemy –

it is the transformation of non-precious materials into precious materials...”

~ Bernhard Wulff

In the summer of 2006, Alice Teyssier and I decided to go to Europe together to study at Centre Acanthes in Metz. The faculty that year was very special, with Mario Caroli teaching flute, Jean-Pierre Drouet teaching percussion, and composition teachers that included Georges Aperghis, Olga Neuwirth, Toshio Hosokawa and Gérard Pesson. We both had an extraordinary time having our minds blown by all of these luminaries for two weeks.

In the aftermath of this incredible gathering, Alice and I decided to travel to Freiburg, a city with an immense sense of gravity in my musical life. Thus far, I had met or become interested in several extraordinary musicians, all of whom happened to live in this small German town – James Avery (the late pianist and leader of Ensemble SurPlus), Olaf Tzschoppe (percussionist in Les Percussions de Strasbourg), Christian Dierstein (percussionist of Ensemble Recherche) and the great Bernhard Wulff (the former teacher of percussionists such as Steven Schick, Olaf Tzschoppe and Christian Dierstein.)

I had never met Bernhard before, but it seemed to be imperative that I meet him, since he was revered by so many of the great percussionists I had come in contact with. I was lucky to find an occasion to meet with him on this short visit. In our first meeting, I remember being face to face with his formidable frame, white beard, gap-toothed smile and sparkling blue eyes and thinking that I had never met anyone like this in my entire life.

From our first conversation on, I never thought of Bernhard as a professor, but rather as a shaman. He was someone in touch with a spiritual plane that one encounters in life only rarely. He spoke of the sacred paths of instruments – a set of timpani requires the slaughter of four baby cows; the tuned rosewood that comprises the marimba is the result of deforestation for the sake of the arts. It was not that Bernhard was trying to advocate the use of synthetic materials as instruments. Rather, he was impressing upon me the profound respect that one must have for the materials one uses as a musician – respect for the journey of the instrument itself. One must possess a deep sense of purpose in the way that one makes music on these materials. It was impossible to make a careless sound on timpani or a marimba after this conversation.

The lessons I learned from Bernhard are far too numerous to list comprehensively, but there was one significant area of his teaching that impacted me on the deepest level. This was his approach to teaching snare drum, which totally changed the way I make music. When I

share Bernhard's concepts with my students, I can see in their eyes that their lives are forever altered.

Similarly to when I first showed up in Oberlin, my studies several years later at the Musikhochschule Freiburg entailed me returning to the very basics of playing percussion. Whereas I resented being held back by Michael Rosen at Oberlin at that stage in my life, I was quite happy to come back to the fundamentals when I arrived in Germany. During my master's degree in San Diego, I had spent so long working on the most complex, difficult, challenging repertoire I could find that I felt a great relief to be devoting hours to the meditative side of my craft; I felt that I was trying to find my center again.

In one early conversation I had with Bernhard, he said to me that at this point in musical history, a percussionist's task was no longer to expand his field, but rather to grow it deeper. While of course the statement is hyperbolic and controversial, at that time I found great solace in my teacher's words. After plowing through so much daunting music, I felt like a weary traveler, and I was looking for a quiet place to collect myself before going back out into the world.

Our snare drum lessons felt like they took place in a foreign universe. I was required to purchase Heinrich Knauer's book of etudes for the snare drum, which has a near-biblical status amongst young percussion students in Germany. At first, I didn't understand. The etudes were not particularly difficult or memorable. For the most part, they were easily sight-readable.

But once Bernhard and I sat down with the book and a drum, the insights began. At one point, Bernhard told me that he considered the harpsichord to be "the typewriter of the Baroque era." What he meant by this was that, in his opinion, all of the music written for solo harpsichord during the Baroque era was simply meant as a pencil sketch or etude – all of this music was intended to be made colorful and sensuous through orchestration.

In his conception, this is how these etudes of Knauer were meant to function. The individual etudes were like little sketches – in general, there were only vague tempo markings, few dynamics, if any, and no articulations to speak of. Bernhard first asked me to reimagine a given etude as a sketch of a piece for orchestra – first, I was to demarcate the phrases, then I was to imagine each phrase as belonging to a different instrumental group (i.e. tutti, strings arco, strings pizzicato, trumpet, oboe, clarinet, harp, tuba, etc...) After these were in place, I would mark in the dynamics and affect of each section (*maestoso, con moto, etc...*) I would also mark in whether a given passage was meant to be played slurred, staccato, marcato, or tenuto. Sooner or later, through this type of re-imagining of the musical materials, this humble etude became Wagnerian in scope.

Bernhard didn't stop there. He would push the imagination to go even further, re-conceptualizing the instruments of the orchestra as the animals in a jungle. The tubas became elephants, piccolos songbirds, oboes gazelles, et cetera.

After this mode of fantastical “orchestration” was in place, Knauer's quotidian sketches for snare drum were as alive as a Rudyard Kipling novel or a painting by Henri Rousseau. My relationship and level of engagement changed so much with these etudes once these transformations had taken place – psychologically, I entered a different state with each new phrase, my body and, by extension, my sticks reacted to the music differently, and a new, more vibrant music emerged.

At another point in Freiburg, I spoke to the harpsichord professor at the Musikhochschule, the American-born Robert Hill, about his teaching praxis. He told me that he has his students learn their harpsichord pieces first on clavichord. The logic here is that if they can find color and life in such a comparatively subdued instrument, then when they return to the harpsichord, the sound world will be positively explosive. I realized that this was directly analogous to Bernhard's practice of asking his students to work on snare drum in this

way. I found that when I applied the logic of these transformed snare drum etudes onto pieces with more substance to them (for instance, any piece in my solo repertoire), I was able to engage with the musical materials on a much deeper level than I ever had previously.

Jan Williams – Aesthetics

“Safeness lurks everywhere around us. Someone show me DANGEROUS music!”

~ Lukas Foss

I never formally got the chance to study with Jan Williams during my years at SUNY Buffalo. He had been the professor of percussion there for many years, but had, unfortunately for me, retired years before I arrived. Nevertheless, in the various percussion cabinets and practice rooms, I would constantly see artifacts from his time at the university (special instruments and scores, beautifully weathered, and marked with an unmistakable “J.W.”) and hear of his legendary status in the world of contemporary music.

The first few times that I met him, I was awe-struck by this man with the intense blue-green eyes, thousand-yard gaze, and singular voice. Once I got over the initial shock of meeting this then-reclusive Western New York celebrity, the thing I grew to appreciate most about Jan was that he was the first person to make me feel completely at ease and invited into the world of new music. He would ask me if I had heard about this or that piece and tell me how great it was. Every word he uttered was animated by his curious, benevolent and impassioned spirit. Unlike so many of the new music cognoscenti I had encountered in Buffalo thus far, Jan wasn’t afraid to be enthusiastic about the things that excited him. His colloquial way of speaking was refreshing and charming – it was a totally captivating

experience to hear first-hand anecdotes concerning John Cage, Morton Feldman and Iannis Xenakis from a guy who often ended his sentences with the word “man.”

I realize that the above description must seem out of place in a dissertation. However, to me, there was a nearly anthropological element to the way I observed Jan. What I saw in this man was the flame of a certain culture – a cultural flame that now hopefully burns within me. As I mentioned earlier, my interest in classical music was really sparked by John Cage. Jan felt like my living liaison to that world.

The thing I learned most from Jan, however, always came back to the simple pleasure of making music. He taught me how to return to earth after over-intellectualizing something. Most of the greatest lessons I learned from Jan came in the form of him falling silent and looking at me with a raised eyebrow after I had asked some elaborate question. To Jan, music was not something deeply cerebral – rather, it was a phenomenon more like a work by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, a simple thing that produced inexplicable joy.

Once, when I was preparing the glockenspiel part to Morton Feldman’s *Why Patterns?*, I asked Jan if I should try to count all of the sixteenth notes in everyone’s part so that we could discern whether we were playing the piece correctly in rehearsals. Jan looked at me as though I had grown a third eye and replied, “the piece is three independent solos.” Enough said.

He told me that the piece had been written leading up to a tour that Feldman had organized with him and a few other musicians. Feldman wanted to participate in the concert as a chamber musician, but because he suffered from extreme myopia, was unable to both read the sheet music in front of him and also coordinate cues with his collaborators. Thus, he had written a piece that begins together and then permanently diverges. The parts were to be played simultaneously, but not together. This was an important shift of paradigm for a young, ambitious percussionist like me who valorized control and precision.

Another time, Jan organized a concert of Morton Feldman's trios for piano, flute and percussion, all to be performed on the same day. He invited me to play *Why Patterns?* and *For Philip Guston* (Jan himself played *Crippled Symmetry*.) It was an extreme day for everyone involved, and towards the end of our five-hour rendition of *For Philip Guston*, there was a total breakdown in our ensemble communication, and all of the musicians felt lost for about sixty seconds. Eventually, we regrouped and finished the piece beautifully.

After the concert, during backstage talk with Jan Williams and Nils Vigeland (who had premiered the piece), my colleagues Alice Teyssier, Jacob Greenberg and I expressed remorse for having had our moment of bad ensemble playing. Jan cut off our apologies and said, "that's the power of the piece, man! Morty wouldn't have written a piece that long if he didn't want the musicians to struggle!" Jan had a way of helping me understand that finding the spirit of a work and being true to it was more important than statistical accuracy.

On yet another occasion, Jan invited me to collaborate on a concert of graphic music with scores by Earle Brown, John Cage and Edgard Varèse. I was assigned to play one of the pieces from Brown's *FOLIO*, and I was lost with respect to how I should prepare the piece. I learned many things during my time in conservatory, but interpreting graphic music was not one of them. I remember trying a variety of practice techniques, diligently mapping the piece onto graph paper, drawing flow charts and so forth. I sheepishly brought the score to Jan before my first rehearsal of the piece and asked him what I should do. "It should *sound* how it *looks*," was all I got out of him. I remember later watching Jan work through the part of Brown's *FOLIO* that he was playing. I saw a bunch of squiggly lines drawn on to the page in front of him, and he chose to realize those squiggles by letting a bunch of marbles roll around in an overturned frame drum that he was manipulating like a ship on a stormy sea or a game of Labyrinth. I don't know if it really sounded how it looked (at least to my eye and ear), but I will never forget Jan's boundless enthusiasm and purity of spirit while he was playing.

Mauricio Kagel once said that the difference between good music and great music is that great music is always something that children can appreciate; great music is never something made for, nor confined to, the intelligentsia.

This is not to say that Jan was anything less than extremely intelligent. To the contrary! To me, he had simply found a way to find the heart of what was beautiful about everything that he worked on, and he always managed to cut away that which was superfluous. He had managed to make a career on the forefront of the musical avant-garde without ever descending into the pretentious. Everything about Jan bespoke a style of sophistication, elegance, naïveté, and wisdom simultaneously.

Lewis Nielson – Ethics

“It is said that art is a matter of life and death.

This may be melodramatic, but it is also true.”⁶

~ Bruce Naumann

During my years at Oberlin, I experienced a wide range of emotions regarding the composition professor Lewis Nielson. At first, in the context of his introductory talk to all of the young composers applying to the conservatory, I thought he was extremely well behaved and dull.

When I was assigned one of his pieces in the context of Oberlin’s contemporary music ensemble, I didn’t know what to expect. I received a part with a bizarre font at the top and

⁶ Quoted by Marina Abramovic: Abramovic, Marina. "Marina Abramovic at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden." *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 Apr. 2011. Web. 04 Sept. 2014.

about a million awkward stick changes I couldn't make. I found the part aggravating beyond belief.

However, when rehearsals actually began, a curious thing happened: Lewis changed into a different person entirely. In classes and lectures, he was consummately professional and composed, but in rehearsal, I had the impression that each measure of his piece was a matter of life and death to him. He paced like Muhammad Ali around the room, score in hand, performing almost Elaine Benes-style jagged body motions with every jab and jut he had written into the music.

I found myself so frustrated trying to navigate my way through his score, which was extremely difficult and nearly incomprehensible at certain points. My enthusiasm for his music was beginning to flag, but I was fascinated by his intensity in the rehearsals. At one point, I must have done something he liked, because he ran all of the way across the room, looked at me dead in the eye, and placed something on my music stand. It was a single Altoid.

From that point on, I felt that Lewis and I were on the same page. I figured out how to prioritize certain aspects of his writing that made his parts more coherent and fun to play. To my surprise, he was not precious about what he had written – rather, he was happy that I was “editing” his music. I realized that Lewis was like a big, goofy kid in many ways. Unlike his understated demeanor in the classroom, when it came to his own music, he wasn't cool or detached at all. He was either elated or devastated – he was never ambivalent. I respected his utter commitment to his own work, and I realized that I never wanted to work with anyone who didn't treat their own music as though it were a matter of life and death again. I loved how much he *cared*.

Brian Alegant – Analysis

“But motion undermines meaning with meaning...” ~ A.R. Ammons

As I alluded to earlier, I received nearly failing grades in virtually every music theory class I ever attended. When it came to tonal music theory, I possessed neither talent nor patience. I always put in just enough effort to sneak by. When I arrived in Theory IV at Oberlin (which focused on 20th Century music) with Brian Alegant, I felt both excited and intimidated. Finally, after suffering through the 18th and 19th centuries, I was on familiar and beloved territory.

During the year that I studied with Brian, he had received a grant with which he procured iPods for each student in his class. Each iPod that he distributed was pre-loaded with significant works from roughly 1900 until the present. It was the student’s job, after each class, to spend an hour with that iPod doing “unguided listening.” In other words, one could use the iPod as one wished – one could revisit an old favorite, or press “shuffle” and discover something entirely new. Whatever one encountered on that iPod, one was to listen carefully and write a page of feedback for the next class.

Requiring this practice of students was simple but clever, and ultimately, very effective. Giving students innumerable hours of music to choose from at random meant that we were forced to engage as listeners in a very different way than usual. As a student, one learns standard modes of analyzing tonal music. There are conventional forms, harmonic sequences, et cetera. However, with this iPod, one could wind up listening to Stravinsky, Webern, or Bartók (for whom there are well-established modes of analysis), or one could listen to Furrer, Ablinger, or Ferneyhough (for whom modes of analysis are currently less well-established.)

The sheer quantity and diversity of the music, and the resulting plethora of listening techniques these works demanded, were meant to disarm a confident listener. Sometimes one knew exactly how to listen to one of these pieces, other times one did not. Nobody, including Brian himself, was expert in all of this music. During these listening sessions, one was to simply remark on some salient aspect of whatever one had listened to and comment upon it. What this process of listening without a “correct answer” showed me was that I was a lot better at identifying things in music that *I* thought were cool than identifying things in music that a given curriculum had taught me were important. For the first time in my entire life, I felt empowered in the realm of music theory.

The way these unguided listening sessions ultimately manifested themselves in terms of this particular course was in the form of what Brian called “road maps.” The road map was his umbrella term for a visual analysis of a given piece based on intuitive audio-visual correlations. Despite the fact that I was on the threshold of failing his class, Brian offered to co-author a paper with me on Jason Eckardt’s *Transience* for solo marimba. I made a visualization of the piece that changed my life forever. It showed me that if one’s analysis was good enough, it was possible to turn virtually any piece of music into an easily followable visual form. This became useful in my practice of converting my solo repertoire into shorthand scores as a means for obviating page turns and cultivating aided memory. I found these road maps to be both artistically illuminating and ultimately very pragmatic.

The final lesson I took away from Brian came one night when I was sitting in the hallway outside of a concert that I was ushering. The concert was already underway when Brian passed by and found me plotting points on a piece of graph paper (in fact, I was doing the groundwork for the interludes to Globokar’s *Toucher*) and he asked me what I was up to. I told him that I was methodically converting the polyrhythms generated by the different tempi into a single line so that I could see how the parts were meant to line up mathematically. Brian

smiled and raised an eyebrow as if to say, “okay, man.” He then gave me a gentle pat on the back and said, “remember, no music should ever sound as though you’re reading it from a page.”

Coming from a professor of music theory, this was an especially profound moment for me. I immediately realized that what he was saying was that no music should ever sound like it is the result of clinical study. Interpretation is an inherently human act, and a score is meant to be a liaison between the composer’s thoughts, the performer’s body and the listener’s ear. Just as one wouldn’t wish to see a performance of a Shakespeare play in which the actors sounded like they were reading a script, neither would a listener like to hear something that doesn’t sound like it has passed through the mind, soul and body of an interpreter. I found this concept to be very liberating as I played more and more scores which were built upon the idea of the notation transforming into something greater than itself (i.e. *Bone Alphabet, Transience*)

William O’Brien – Philosophy

“What most musicians lack is the sense of the cultural background to what they’re doing. It’s not their fault. None of this is taught at the colleges, and you can go through those places knowing nothing except how to make your reeds and how to play the notes. It’s frightening. They didn’t even teach foreign languages at the academy.”⁷ ~ Sir Simon Rattle

I arrived at the Musikhochschule Freiburg with two primary objectives: to learn a lot of challenging music, and to read a lot of interesting books. Thanks to the *Deutscher*

⁷ Kenyon, Nicholas. *Simon Rattle: The Making of a Conductor*. (London: Faber, 1987), 98-99.

Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), I had two years and absolutely no courses to take with the exception of my private lessons with Bernhard. Those years were like intellectual heaven for me; I read Homer, Plato, Spinoza, Lévi-Strauss, Thoreau, and others as I wished. I had no tutor, and I was happy about that.

I had planned to stay in Germany permanently, but at the end of a year and a half, I found myself missing the energy of Southern California. So, I reapplied and was admitted to the doctoral program at UCSD. I was genuinely excited to formally continue on my scholarly path, and before school started I read Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* cover to cover.

During my first year back at UCSD, I resumed my normative approach of signing up for as few classes as possible so that I could just focus on doing my own work. However, in my second year, I heard about a course being taught entitled "Marx, Nietzsche, Freud." Not since my general education requirements at SUNY Buffalo had I taken a course outside of a music department, but with a course title like that, given my interest in philosophy, I had to sign up.

I had never met anybody quite like the professor of this course, William Arctander O'Brien, or as I eventually grew to know him, "Billy." Week by week, I sat in awe of a man with side-by-side copies of whatever text we happened to be working on (English and German versions at the very least, and potentially more than one edition) who would pause our reading to show us the etymologies of words in German or Greek, or diagrams of how dialectics or deconstruction worked, all the while peppering his lectures with hilarious asides and juicy anecdotes.

I remember walking out of those weekly seminars unsure if I wanted to try to solve the world's problems and read the entire oeuvres of these three authors, or whether I wanted to go in the shower and cry. Swings between wild optimism and abject pessimism were common

as a result of that course, and bespoke the power of both the texts and the intensity of the person guiding us through them.

Besides having virtually every axiom I grew up with as an American kid from the suburbs shattered, I learned that being an intellectual was a lot more powerful when one figures out how to relate the texts that one is reading to the world that one lives in. In other words, when I had read Marx, Nietzsche and Freud on my own, the texts seemed like they had been written by dead guys over a hundred years ago. However, when I read them with Billy as my guide, I felt like I was having a conversation with the people I would encounter in my daily life. These authors, when read with the support of an intellectual sherpa like Billy, broke one down and then built one back up.

What I feel I learned most from Billy was the art of being simultaneously informal and razor-sharp. I think that as a student, I always responded most to the professors who had a way of teaching their material as though it were an interesting conversation one was having over coffee or a drink. Despite the fact that we were working our way through some of the heaviest literature in history, Billy had a way of demonstrating clearly that the words we were processing were directly impacting our lives.

In my own teaching (privately, in lectures or as the conductor of an orchestra), I have found that it is important to be able to simultaneously be relaxed, crack jokes, and foster productive wandering. When this learning environment is coupled with an intense awareness of the material one is teaching, it makes for students who feel thoroughly engaged, motivated, comfortable and happy on their educational paths.

Another art that I learned from Billy was that of allowing for profitable diversions from the material one has set out to cover. On one occasion at Cal Arts, I had intended to talk about various composers of the high-modernist tradition, and instead ended up talking about the Hegelian / Marxist lineage in German philosophy for an hour. Strangely, while this sounds

like a situation in which one is offered ice cream and is instead brought steamed vegetables, my students specifically told me that they *craved* more of this type of information. After all, how can a student effectively work on the solo repertoire of Globokar, Xenakis or Ferneyhough without having some knowledge of Marx, Brecht, Sappho, or Benjamin? A deeply rooted sense of culture and history is imperative to any student's success as an interpreter of modern music.

Returning to my original construct of the vacillation between *how* and *why*, I think that what both I, and eventually, my students, responded to was an elevated sense of *why* one would put so much energy into making music. As I mentioned, Billy's mode of teaching (through the shifting of paradigms, and making far-away philosophical heavyweights feel as though they were local, and therefore relevant to one's life) ignited a fire in me, which I now try to pass on to my own students. Addressing the question of *why* is relatively rare amongst percussion teachers. Typically, a student plays one's scales, etudes, excerpts and recital repertoire, and that is that. I may be getting ahead of myself, but I believe that when a student faces a plethora of questions with the gravitas that figures like Marx, Nietzsche or Freud represent, the student has no choice but to raise the level his technique, critical thinking and interpretive abilities to find answers to those questions through the music one is involved with.

III. CURATING

In my first year at UCSD, a colleague of mine, Ross Karre, was preparing for a performance of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Axe Manual* with Aleck Karis in Los Angeles. I loved that piece, and I asked him who was presenting this performance. He told me that there was a concert series in Los Angeles called Monday Evening Concerts (MEC), which, in his opinion, had the best concert programming on the continent.

I had a deep respect for Ross, and I took his words seriously. I couldn't make it to Los Angeles for that concert, but I resolved to go to the next one. I had never been to Los Angeles, and honestly I didn't know what to expect. I knew the city only insofar as it had been represented in films and on television. I expected vapidty, traffic and smog.

The first MEC event I attended astonished me. Somehow, they had stitched together a concert that included the Italian accordion virtuoso Teodoro Anzellotti playing works by Luciano Berio and Vinko Globokar, as well as the legendary Japanese percussionist Kuniko Kato playing a work for Mbira and violin by Keiko Harada, interspersed with works of the *Ars Subtilior* played on period instruments. It was an explosion of aesthetics that I am still trying to wrap my head around to this day. I remember being absolutely floored by the concert. The hall was packed. The audience was enthusiastic. The repertoire was illuminating. The performances were brilliant. The space was gorgeous. It was a euphoric experience for me.

I met the director of the series, Justin Urcis, a few months later. We discussed the fact that I knew the percussionist Christian Dierstein, who would be coming to Los Angeles soon to premiere works of Pierluigi Billone and Klaus Lang on an MEC concert mostly devoted to the Russian composer Galina Ustvolskaya. The pianist Marino Formenti would be directing the performance. Again, I was in stunned by the caliber of the program, and I offered to do what I could to help.

When the time came, I coordinated some rides and procured some instruments for Christian, and I wound up at a bar with Justin and the musicians after the concert. We mused about the possibility of bringing in the flutist Mario Caroli in from France to perform Sciarrino's *La perfezione di uno spirito sottile*, which was one of my favorite pieces of all time. I begged him to let me play the optional bell solo at the end, because I had had a vision of exactly how it was meant to take place the first time I heard of the piece, and I wanted to realize my dream. With a healthy degree of skepticism, Justin could see that I was serious, and he agreed to let me perform the part.

The performance was a resounding success, and from that point on, Justin trusted me as his first call percussionist for MEC, with me flying back twice from Germany to play concerts. Soon, I began conducting concerts for the series. I learned an immense amount from Justin about quality of interpretation, stage presence, and the gravity that certain pieces of music carry when performed live. Justin could be idiosyncratic to the point of eccentricity, but I learned a tremendous amount through his example. We would talk about which pieces we dreamed of seeing programmed on the series, and with time, many of my suggestions gained traction. I became one of his trusted advisers with respect to the artistic direction of MEC. When I returned to UCSD after my European sojourn, because I had access to resources like percussion instruments and rehearsal spaces, I became the logistical coordinator for many of these concerts, which led to me becoming involved as a concert producer.

In the fall of 2014, I was named associate director of MEC. Then in 2015, Justin stepped down as artistic director, and I stepped into his role. Since then, there has been a very steep learning curve in terms of what makes for good curating, concert production, marketing and fundraising. I discovered that the lessons I had learned through my formal training as a percussionist had prepared me very well for many aspects of the job. I honestly cannot imagine how anyone other than a percussionist would be equipped to run a series like this.

* * *

My earliest attempts at curating musical events were mixtapes I would make for my crushes in middle school. A blank tape has a fixed length; this duration was to be filled with songs I personally thought were special, and that I hoped the object of my affection would also like. I would strive to make the songs similar enough so as to give the tape a sense of coherence, but diverse enough to avoid monotony. I would, for instance, not put the Sex Pistols next to Bob Marley. I would also not make a mixtape entirely of Joy Division and New Order unless I knew my crush was a British New Wave superfan.

In a sense, my life as a curator has simply been an extension of this logic. In my first year at Oberlin, Alice Teyssier and I were itching to put on our own concert. We selected repertoire that we were dying to play, formed a pickup ensemble, and booked the hall. The program, which was a dramatic event in which one piece flowed seamlessly into the next, went: George Crumb's *Idyll for the Misbegotten*, Morton Feldman's *Christian Wolff in Cambridge*, Matt Jenkins' *Trio for Flutes*, Steve Reich's *Drumming Part III*, and George Crumb's *Lux Aeterna*. There was also modern dance sporadically peppered throughout the program. Our group for the night was called "The Ray Johnson Chamber Players."

For a couple of students just beginning their journeys at Oberlin and not having any idea what they were doing, I still think that this was an incredible program. The composers were all American, providing some level of coherence, but they were also stylistically diverse. The instrumentations were varied but felt logical from piece to piece, and the program had a beautiful symmetry, as well as dramatic arc. The Crumb pieces served as bookends, the two mallet pieces (Feldman on vibraphones and Reich on glockenspiels) as inner bookends, and then the trio for flutes as the keystone. Further, all of the pieces were rather ritualistic in

nature, and so the seamless connection between the pieces added to this element of the concert. Finally, *Lux Aeterna* ends with masked players whispering “*lux.*” To heighten this effect, we left all the lights off in the concert hall (which had windows providing plenty of natural light) throughout – the sun set perfectly for our program – natural lighting took care of the first part of the concert, and during *Lux Aeterna*, we lit candles which were blown out at the end of the performance. The concert was a true etude in handling many facets of logistics and production. We were off to a good start.

The concert was hard work to put together, but the result was addictive. From then on, it was impossible not to demand that sort of curatorial rigor from any concert I was involved in.

* * *

CURATING SOLO CONCERTS

The following is a list of solo concerts that I curated for my recitals at Oberlin, UCSD and the Musikhochschule Freiburg, as well as some brief observations about the strengths, weaknesses and obstacles involved in each undertaking.

Junior recital (Oberlin Conservatory)⁸

[December, 2005]

Iannis Xenakis – *Rebonds B* (1989) [6']

Vinko Globokar – *Toucher* (1973) [10']

Werner Heider – *Pendant* (1980) [8']

Vinko Globokar - ? *Corporel* (1985) [10']

Iannis Xenakis – *Rebonds A* (1989) [8']

Form: A B c B A

If I could do this recital over again, I would remove the Werner Heider piece and replace it with something that fits better aesthetically and geographically. In my opinion, the ideal substitution would have been Xenakis *Psappha*. Alas, school recitals are also functional and need to cater to the development of young musicians. It was important that I play a work for a mallet instrument on this concert because it was meant to be reflective of the work one was doing at conservatory, and I had been studying mallet repertoire that year. Given my ability level, aesthetic preferences and the placement of the two Globokar pieces, Heider's *Pendant* was the best fit I could find.

In this quasi-symmetrical program, I paired the works of two Eastern-European French composers (Xenakis was Greek-Romanian, and Globokar is Slovenian, but both lived

⁸ A word about the formatting of the programs I am listing in this section: I have denoted premieres with asterisks – one for a world premiere, two for a premiere in the country in which the performance is taking place, and three for a local premiere. Additionally, I have indicated where pauses (intermissions) have taken place with dashes. Lastly, I have attempted to demonstrate the structure of each concert through some sort of letter-based representation in bold in order to show something about the logic of each given concert's structure.

substantial parts of their lives in France) who both possessed a fascination (at least in my mind) with the relationship between art and science, and the proportions of the human body. The splitting up of the Xenakis pieces (*Rebonds A and B*) as opposed to performing the movements back to back (as the composer instructs) was a conscious effort to give the concert a sense of peregrination and return.

Senior Recital (Oberlin Conservatory)

[April, 2007]

Gérard Grisey – *Stèle* (1995) [8']***

Franco Donatoni – *Mari* (1992) [7']

Iannis Xenakis – *Dmaathen* (1976) [12']***

Philippe Manoury – *Solo de vibraphone* (1987) [7']

Georges Aperghis – *Le corps à corps* (1978) [10']***

Form: A b A B A

As with my junior recital, Donatoni's *Mari* is really the odd piece out on this program. Donatoni is the only non-French composer on the program, and, unfortunately, it showed. Again, this decision was the result of my stage in my education; the Lucerne Festival Academy required I learn certain repertoire for my audition tape, and I worked very hard on *Mari*, so I let it slide onto the program.

What I think worked well was the flow and scope of the program. I began by playing the Grisey duo for bass drums, *Stèle*, on the opposite end of the concert hall (the audience and all my set ups were on stage, and we performed the piece about fifty yards away.) The concert

started as a surprise with no formal entrance, and the piece set the stage perfectly for the dramatic arc of the next hour. This concert, which alternated between the drums of Grisey, Xenakis and Aperghis, and the keyboards of Donatoni and Manoury, had something of a symmetrical form.

Master's Recital (UC – San Diego)

[October, 2008]

Peter Ablinger – *Weiss/Weisslich 31e* (2013) [20']**

Salvatore Sciarrino – *Il legno e la parola* (2004) [8']**

Brian Ferneyhough – *Bone Alphabet* (1991) [12']

Georges Aperghis – *Le corps à corps* (1978) [10']

Lewis Nielson – *Iskra* (2006) [15']***

Form: A B C D e

This concert was an interesting experiment for me, and ultimately I realized that Lewis Nielson's piece *Iskra* was the program's outlier. Despite the stylistic diversity represented in this assemblage, there was a certain sense of compatibility amongst the four European composers that was interrupted by Lewis' piece. I don't say this as a value judgment – each piece was gorgeous on its own, but from my perspective, Lewis' piece just struck me as not quite belonging. It was also the only brand new piece on the program, so perhaps it was also history talking.

Sometimes, however, personal loyalty trumps purely aesthetic decision-making, and it was crucial to me that Lewis' piece was represented on this program. Despite the fact that

Ablinger's piece for dripping rags was more of an installation than a traditional recital piece, I still felt that it fit. The rest of the pieces had a certain sense of cool detachment to them, which I suppose is a trademark of the European avant-garde, whereas Lewis' piece hit one directly across the face with a unique brand of political urgency.

Abschlußkonzert (Musikhochschule Freiburg)

[July, 2011]

Vinko Globokar – *Toucher* (1973) [10']

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf – *Trema I* (1994) [2']

Morton Feldman – *King of Denmark* (1964) [10']

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf – *Trema II* (1994) [2']

Pierluigi Billone – *Mani.de Leonardis* (2004) [20']

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf – *Trema III* (1994) [2']

Iannis Xenakis – *Psappha* (1975) [14']

Form: A i B ii C iii D

This was the first of two recitals I gave that featured a unique piece in my repertoire, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf's *Trema* for solo percussion. The piece lasts about two minutes, and is to be performed three times over the course of a program, always as interludes, never back to back. Thus, while this concert had seven pieces on it, I really considered it as having four main courses with three sorbets in between. This was the first concert of my life that I think I got completely right as a curator.

The four main pieces on the program were all heavyweights in the percussion repertoire, which meant that all of the pieces were capable of standing next to each other as equals. The composers were each from different countries and had absorbed different stylistic traditions, which meant that there was complete stylistic diversity. Paradoxically, there was a sort of cosmopolitan sense of coherence amongst these pieces. I was very happy with this concert.

DMA Recital No. 1 (UC – San Diego)

“BREVE STORIA DELLA MANO”

[January, 2013]

Claus Steffen-Mahnkopf – *Trema I* (1994) [2’]**

Pierluigi Billone – *Mani.Matta* (2008) [20’]***

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf – *Trema II* (1994) [2’]**

Pierluigi Billone – *Mani.Mono* (2007) [20’]***

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf – *Trema III* (1994) [2’]**

Pierluigi Billone – *Mani.de Leonardis* (2004) [20’]***

Form: i A ii A iii A

Of all of the solo percussion concerts that I’ve given in my life, I would say that on the levels of both curating and performing, this one was by far the strongest. It would have been less noteworthy if it had been presented in central Europe, where Billone and Mahnkopf are far better known. However, to have presented this in southern California at a time when these two composers were virtually unheard of in the US was something I was very proud of.

With the exception of *Mani.Matta*, which Christian Dierstein premiered on Monday Evening Concerts a few years earlier, all of these pieces were West Coast premieres.

DMA Recital No. 2 (UC – San Diego)

“VOM STEINEN UND STERNEN”

[January, 2014]

*Entrance music: John Cage – *Ryoanji* (in memoriam János Négyesy) (1983)

Daniel Tacke – *Abend* (2012) [12']*

Walter Zimmermann – *Glockenspiel* (1983) [20']**

-

Lewis Nielson – *Herzplatten* (2013) [35']*

Form: * **a b C**

The theme of this concert, which featured two premieres of pieces written for Alice Teyssier and me by Daniel Tacke and Lewis Nielson, as well as the US premiere of a solo percussion work by Walter Zimmermann, was that all of the pieces contained texts by great poets. In the case of Tacke, it was Rilke. In the case of Zimmermann, it was Jean Paul. And in the case of Nielson, it was Dante (and a host of other writers, though not necessarily poets.) The performance of Cage's *Ryoanji*, which was performed antiphonally from offstage, was a last minute addition, meant as a tribute to the violinist János Négyesy, who had passed away recently.

DMA Recital No. 3 (UC – San Diego)

“BRUJO”

[November, 2015]

Georges Aperghis – *Le corps à corps* (1978) [10’]

Alvin Lucier – *Silver Streetcar for the Orchestra* (1988) [10’]

Giacinto Scelsi – *Ko-tha* (1967) [15’]

James Tenney – *Having Never Written a Note for Percussion* (1971) [10’]

Luis de Pablo – *Le prie-dieu sur la terrasse* (1973) [20’]

Form: **A B A B A**

Despite the fact that this concert was significantly less ambitious from a technical performance perspective than any of the other programs I’ve listed here, I was very proud of this program. This was the first solo performance I had given since moving to Los Angeles, where aside from Cal Arts (which is quite remote from my apartment), I didn’t have an actual practice room. The concert was the result of having to work under serious constraints in terms of material resources. For the most part, I had to use my own apartment (which is not set up for loud practicing) as my primary rehearsal space. This entailed a lot of quiet mental practice, which is a valuable skill for any percussionist to learn.

I decided to make the concert an homage to my friend Kevin Sims, who had moved back to New York City after attending the Musikhochschule Freiburg. When I asked him how living in New York and being forced to work in his apartment affected his practice, he told me that he felt that the limitations of his situation actually *increased* his creativity. In this case, since the primary practice space I had to work in was also my apartment, I tried to embrace

this as a chance to celebrate certain repertoire that I had always avoided while I had the luxury of a university practice room.

Thus, the concert became about pieces for single instruments. For the most part, I found that I could work on Aperghis' piece for zarb and voice, as well as Scelsi's piece for guitar, in my apartment without disturbing anybody. The de Pablo was a largely improvisatory graphic score that I had performed several times over the past year, so the piece needed only touchups, rather than a from-scratch learning process. The other two pieces by Lucier and Tenney were, respectively, works for solo triangle and tam tam (at least in my version), which did not require a great deal of dedicated practice time – rather, they were pieces for which one needed to have a cultivated sense of musicianship and aesthetics. Insofar as those elements were in place, one could spend an hour or two working on each and they would be ready to perform.

In the end, I feel that with this concert, I found a way to turn my limitations into an elegant and logical program that I was capable of executing at a standard I could be proud of. The three pieces for somewhat athletic drumming (Aperghis, Scelsi and de Pablo) were interspersed with two meditations on the sonic capacities of seemingly simplistic percussion instruments (Lucier, Tenney).

CURATING ENSEMBLE CONCERTS

In one of his columns as “the Minimalist” in the New York Times, the food critic Mark Bittman once wrote that, “To me, the question was not, ‘would I cook this as a native would?’ but rather, ‘How would a native cook this if he had my ingredients, my kitchen, my

background?’⁹” This philosophy has proven to be one of the main tenets of my work as a curator.

As I mentioned in my description of nearly each concert above, each program possessed what I would think of as a sort of Platonic ideal version of itself and then a modified one based upon certain compromises that needed to be made at that specific point in time (e.g. the inclusion of the Heider on my junior recital, the Donatoni on my senior recital, and the entire premise of my final DMA recital). One’s goal as a curator in those cases should be to accommodate the reality of a given situation in the most compelling way possible. In other words, one makes the most delicious meal possible with whatever ingredients happen to be in the kitchen.

It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that the problems of curating multiply when one involves a group of several people. I will describe here two examples of concerts that I curated for my chamber ensemble Echoi before I formally discuss work as the artistic director of Monday Evening Concerts, and how my experience as a percussionist enabled me to handle the issues that arose.

⁹ Bittman, Mark. “The Minimalist Makes His Exit.” New York Times, Jan. 25, 2011.

Mehrklang Festival (Freiburg, Germany)

“SCHREIE UND FLÜSTERN”

[June, 2011]

*Stefan Prins – *FITTINGinSIDE* (2009) [10’]

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Rick Burkhardt – *Alban* (2010) [8’]**

Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri – *Untitled II* (2010) [10’]

Evan Johnson – *Hyphen* (2002) [1’]

Evan Johnson – *Reaktionmaschine II* (2005) [8’]

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Thomas Meadowcroft – *Pretty Lightweight* (2001) [8’]

Evan Johnson – *Hyphen* (2002) [1’]

Klaus Lang – *the whitebearded man. the six frogs.* (2008) [10’]

Simon Steen-Andersen – *On and Off and To and Fro* (2008) [20’]

Form: **X – A b * C – C * b A**

Being a student in the Advanced Studies Diploma program at the Musikhochschule Freiburg was an interesting, yet often frustrating experience. For example, in my solo percussion repertoire, I felt very accomplished. I was playing many of the most difficult works in the percussionist’s repertory with confidence by that point. Further, I was getting a lot of opportunities to play high-profile concerts in the US during those years. Sometimes, though, I felt like a toddler. My limited facility in German, my lack of long-term friendships with local

musicians, and my status as a student rather than a professional all inhibited my sense of artistic agency in Freiburg.

While there were moments when I felt very happy to be studying with a master teacher such as Bernhard Wulff, there were other moments when I longed to cut the cord and to embark on a professional project of my own, without any Musikhochschule-related supervision. Thus, Alice Teyssier and I dreamt up a proposal for Freiburg's annual new music festival, *Mehrklang*, which was accepted by the festival's committee with a budget of \$10,000 Euros.

Despite the fact that Freiburg is one of the world's epicenters for contemporary music, and home to Ensemble Recherche, Ensemble SurPlus, Ensemble Aventure, and the SWR Rundfunk, Alice and I noticed what we felt was a lacuna in the city's concert programming that we felt we could fill. Our vision was to put together a concert focused exclusively on our favorite "young" or "emerging" composers (whatever those nebulous terms might mean.)

Our goal was to find music that we felt was capable of changing audiences' lives, but music from our own generation, which had not yet found suitable representation in Freiburg. We had the deepest admiration for the musicians and concerts of Recherche and SurPlus – we were simply trying to add our own perspective into the musical landscape of Freiburg.

We began by thinking of which pieces we most urgently wanted to put on. At that time, Simon Steen-Andersen's *On and Off and To and Fro*, as well as Rick Burkhardt's *Alban*, were on our minds. We then thought about other composers whom we loved, whose music was capable of adding contrast to the program, while still being within the aesthetic world of the aforementioned composers. Through listening libraries, the internet, our past experiences as concertgoers, and our friends' recommendations, we immersed ourselves in all the repertoire we possibly could, and created a list of ten or so composers whose works we wanted to include.

We thought about the instrumentations of the Steen-Andersen and Burkhardt and tried to figure out how to keep the cast of musicians as small as possible so that we could stay within budget and pay our players a reasonable fee. We had already been planning to work with our close friends Rei Nakamura (piano) and Stephen Menotti (trombone), so their participation was already a factor in the our programming. The program we eventually came up with, with works by Stefan Prins, Rick Burkhardt, Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, Evan Johnson, Thomas Meadowcroft, Klaus Lang and Simon Steen-Andersen, was perfectly suited to our vision. Six years down the road, this list still reads like a who's who amongst this generation of composers.

One feature of our programming that proved to be very advantageous personnel-wise (and also budget-wise) was the idea of programming certain repertoire wherein virtually any well-trained and sensitive musician would be able to execute a part not specifically written for their instrument. For example, the Steen-Andersen included three virtuoso parts for vibraphone, clarinet and double bass; it, however, also contained three parts written for megaphone players, which could theoretically be any trained musician. Similarly, Rick Burkhardt's *Alban* was for speaker and ensemble. As anyone who has tried to program a chamber music concert with a trombonist involved knows, the repertoire involving that instrument can be a bit limiting. In this scenario, however, our trombonist played the concert's prelude by Stefan Prins on trombone, and then spent the rest of the concert first as a speaker, and then as a megaphonist. Programming pieces with that type of latitude vis-à-vis instrumentation provides a curator with much more flexibility than rigidly scored pieces.

Happily, we were able to invite our friends, the composers Simon Steen-Andersen and Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, in from Berlin to take part in the concert and to speak to the audience prior to the event. This extra expense was justifiable, we argued, because Simon was needed to deal with the many finicky aspects of the megaphones in the piece of his that

we were playing. Further, we got him not only to coach the piece as it was being rehearsed, but also to perform one of the megaphone parts. Perhaps even more importantly, he needed to be at our performance in order to take the megaphones back to Berlin with him, since there was only one working set in the world, and he didn't trust them to be shipped.

Marianthi's presence, likewise, was essential because she needed to bring all of the components of her piece (viz. eight glass tubes with membranes, fishing line and motors) in person. As with Simon's megaphones, her physical materials were so fragile that to ship them through the postal system would have been unthinkable. Further, Marianthi is something of a shamanistic presence. Her music focuses upon the concept of the cusp of audibility. I felt that it was necessary that she come and coach me as a soloist (her piece was not specifically written for a solo percussionist, but my skill set made me a good candidate to be its performer) in order to get the magic of her compositional language to speak.

The concert, which was called *Schreie und Flüstern* ("Cries and Whispers"), was meant to celebrate some of the extreme contrasts of new music. Whereas Rick Burkhardt, Stefan Prins, and Simon Steen-Andersen's pieces were frenetic and often ear-splittingly loud, Evan Johnson, Klaus Lang and Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri's pieces were comparatively glacial, and often on the threshold of audibility. While the surface of each composer's music was different, the pieces complemented each other and were convincing as a unit.

Monday Evening Concerts (Los Angeles, California – Zipper Concert Hall)

“NEW VOICES II: APPARATUS”

[May, 2014]

Thomas Meadowcroft – *Cradles* (2013) [10’]

Joseph Lake – *Almost There* (2013) [10’]

Simon Steen-Andersen – *String Study No. 2* (2009) [4’]

Sabrina Schroeder – *He cuts snow.* (2012) [6’]

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Timothy McCormack – *Apparatus* (2009-10) [30’]

Rick Burkhardt – *Alban* (2010) [8’]

Simon Steen-Andersen – *Next to Beside/Besides #4* (2004-06) [4’]

Thomas Meadowcroft – *The Great Knot* (2011) [20’]

Form: **A B (c) D – E F (c) A**

Following the success of our Echoi concert in Freiburg, I decided to try and repeat the format of the concert in Los Angeles a few years later. Since returning to California, I had been involved in various aspects of Monday Evening Concerts; I had become a consistent performer, a percussion coordinator, a concert producer and a trusted adviser with respect to programming. As my roles and responsibilities within Monday Evening Concerts increased, I was given more opportunities. For our 2013-14 season, I proposed a follow-up to our previous year’s “New Voices” concert, which featured Aaron Helgeson, Cassandra Miller, Robert Wannamaker and Rick Burkhardt, which I had also proposed, but only half-curated.

The second time around, I was given, for the first time, complete control over the programming and production of this concert. The concert was called “New Voices II: Apparatus,” and was meant to again focus on “young” or “emerging” composers. Programming this concert was important to me for two big reasons: 1) It seemed uncouth to me that a concert series predicated upon the notion of “new music” would not provide some opportunity to showcase some of the incredibly gifted young composers writing music today, especially when their music was some of the most sophisticated currently being written. 2) While I felt I could be sure that these composers would connect with audiences in Freiburg, I wanted to find out what would happen when this aesthetic point of view was shared in Los Angeles.

With respect to my first point, I began to realize how problematic certain designations were as a curator. What was “new” music? What was “contemporary” music? Which composers are “emerging?” Which composers are “young?” Are the categories of youth and emergence synonymous? Aren’t there plenty of examples of composers who reach the peak of their fame during their youth, and examples of composers who “emerge” as household names only later in life?

I still don’t have answers to these questions, but I am grateful for these issues being raised, because they shed light on the inherent ambiguity of artistic selection. Curating is a necessarily blurry domain – *especially* for a concert series like MEC, which is known for its celebration of unconventional, or even marginalized compositional paths. There is no science to curating. A deeply cultivated, encyclopedic aesthetic sensibility will help, but of course, a curator’s selection will always be highly subjective, and therefore anathema to many.

A curator must not take offense at an inability to connect with certain audiences.

Although it is certainly not the avant-garde's responsibility to attract the mass public, I still believe in trying to open doors for those who might be interested. While some in my position might feel the desire to use their platform to make turbulent waves, I feel that I am trying to build stable scaffolding. I often try to talk to audience members who disliked certain aspects of my programming so that I can avoid certain offenses in the future, or at least make them feel that their interests are being recognized. I would never alter my core values to appease anybody, but I am not against the concept of listening to intelligent, sensitive points of view and evolving as time goes on. I believe that this is how one gets better at one's job as a curator.

I began planning this concert with two basic objectives: 1) to find pieces I was interested in performing, and 2) to find a group of extraordinary musicians I was interested in collaborating with. The second part was easy: since I would be producing the concert out of UCSD, my collaborators were already built in to the fabric of our community. Unlike in Freiburg, where I had to reach out beyond the Musikhochschule and into the community, UCSD effectively provided me with an inspiring group of collaborators from the beginning.

As for the first item, when the concert was being programmed, I had recently heard and enjoyed two significant pieces by the Australian composer Thomas Meadowcroft via social media postings of the Australian ensemble, Speak Percussion. The pieces were imaginative, playful, and simultaneously heavy and light. They were absolutely extraordinary to me, and I felt confident that the Los Angeles new music public would love them. I then came up with a list of other composers who seemed important to showcase on MEC, and whose works would complement those of Meadowcroft.

My final list included about ten composers, and was whittled down based upon factors

of personnel and budget. Besides Thomas, the composers who made the final program were Timothy McCormack, Sabrina Schroeder, Rick Burkhardt, Joseph Lake and Simon Steen-Andersen. Like *Schreie und Flüstern*, this concert had a conscious concept behind its curation – the concept of “apparatus.” The following is the program note I wrote for the concert booklet:

An “apparatus” is defined as 1) the technical equipment or machinery needed for a particular activity or purpose, or 2) a complex structure within an organization or system.

As I was assembling pieces for this concert of young composers’ works, I noticed that the program’s unifying trope was a fascination with the notion of the transparent and tactile apparatus. In some cases, this meant the raw physical mechanism of the instrument in relation to the body of the performer (McCormack, Steen-Andersen), in others, the reinvention of well-known instruments through the intervention of a lo-fi device (Schroeder, Lake, Meadowcroft). On a political level, this theme deals with the power relations between a government and its individual subjects (Burkhardt). I would venture to say that on some level, each piece presented on this program contains a constellation of these three modalities of ‘apparatus’.

As technology and society continue to advance, their respective operational mechanisms are hidden ever more elegantly. Our planes and automobiles are nearly completely automated, and our commodities are now sleeker, lighter, faster and more portable than their counterparts of yesteryear. A digital piano may be easy to move, but it has none of the beauty of felt, hammers, or strings. In accepting the wondrous and covert conveniences of modern technology, we also lose touch with the charm of the tactile; our bodies are increasingly alienated from the very things that allow our lives to function so fluidly. This program seeks to reclaim the lost and naïve joy of the ‘hands-on’.

Whereas the program for *Schreie und Flüstern*, which bore many resemblances to that of the concert I am writing about (Rick Burkhardt, Simon Steen-Andersen and Thomas Meadowcroft are common to both), I felt that this concert was more aware of its purpose. The curating, in this case (in my opinion), brought forth the subtextual political agenda of the avant-garde, and thus what unifies all of these composers, despite the differences in the surfaces of their respective musics.

CURATING MONDAY EVENING CONCERTS

“Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of flame.” ~ Gustav Mahler

The big difference between curating one-off events, as opposed to a concert series, is that in a concert series not only must one carefully consider every single program, but one must also plan the aesthetic flow over an entire concert season. It is a bit like suddenly being responsible for curating collections for a museum when one had previously been used to filling single-room galleries. Having more space to work with (or in musical terms, time to fill), means that one can construct a more elaborate labyrinth.

Further, there are all kinds of other concerns at play: is the program capable of filling the hall? Is there a healthy mixture of large, medium, small ensembles and soloists? Is the concert radical enough to shock people? Is the concert traditional enough to not alienate audiences? Is any other concert organization in the area likely to put forward a similar program? Are female composers represented adequately? Are minorities given a voice? Do the programs empower or disenfranchise the musical community of Los Angeles? What is the role of MEC as an aesthetic weathervane beyond Los Angeles? Nationally? Internationally?

What repertoire is unavailable to our audiences because of the confines of Zipper Hall? Is there a way to produce that music in another context better suited?

The last big difference between running Monday Evening Concerts, as opposed to every concert I have described so far, is that, for the first time in the discourse of this dissertation, older music is also on the table as far as programming is concerned. Whereas the earliest piece in the eight concerts I've described so far comes from 1964 (Feldman – *King of Denmark*), the very first concert I saw on MEC contained music from the 14th Century. Taking over Monday Evening Concerts meant learning about its long lineage of coupling very new music (i.e. Schoenberg and Stravinsky while they were alive and active) with quasi-unearthed older music (such as Monteverdi and Gesualdo). Thus, both the recent and older music that found a home on Monday Evening Concerts was always “new” in the sense that it was either a premiere or a rediscovery.

The following is the repertoire I chose for my first season as Artistic Director of Monday Evening Concerts, on which there were four subscription concerts and one fundraiser:

Concert No. 1 – “VIENNA / NEW YORK / LOS ANGELES” (Zipper Concert Hall)

[December, 2015]

Arnold Schoenberg – *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) [35']

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Steven Kazuo Takasugi – *Sideshow* (2015) [52']***

Form: **A – A**

I wanted my inaugural concert as Artistic Director of MEC to serve as a sort of personal mission statement. The genesis of this particular program came in the form of a discussion with one of my best friends and long time collaborators, Alex Lipowski. I first met Alex when we both auditioned at Juilliard back in 2003. He got in, and I didn't. However, that summer, we wound up as roommates at the Aspen Music Festival, and became extremely close. Since then, we have traveled to Switzerland, Germany, Japan, South Korea and Israel working on various projects with one another.

In the years since our serendipitous meeting, Alex has become the Executive Director of New York City's Talea Ensemble, which has established itself as one of the premiere groups of its kind in the world. Today, it is perhaps the ensemble best suited to my preferences both ability-wise and aesthetically.

Alex came to me with the idea of programming a piece that Steven Takasugi was in the process of writing for Talea called *Sideshow*. He sent me a recording of the electronics, and I was intrigued. I had known Steve for many years, albeit from a distance. I always admired the pieces I heard of his, but frankly, I didn't know if they could connect successfully with MEC audiences. Nevertheless, I asked Alex many times if he really thought the project was worthy of putting on the same stage as contemporary masterpieces such as Hans Abrahamsen's *Schnee*, Fausto Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip*, or Georg Friedrich Haas' *In Vain*, which were pieces of a similar scope that MEC had programmed in years passed. Alex assured me that he believed *Sideshow* would be on this level, and I put my faith in his judgment.

Although a performance of *Sideshow* had not yet been realized, the electronics revealed that it was a work of exactly 56 minutes and 50 seconds. While this would be considered an evening-length work by many standards, it seemed strange to me to go to all of the trouble and expense of bringing nine musicians in from the east coast just to play an hour

of music, especially when MEC only presents between four and five concerts per year.

Further, Talea is a group of musicians trained at many of the world's finest conservatories. It struck me as a shame to program a piece that revealed only one dimension of their staggering collective musicianship.

I thought a companion piece was needed, and so Alex and I began brainstorming: what could pair well with an epic piece of expressionistic avant-garde music theater, in which the voices of the musicians are treated in novel ways? Further, what piece could we program that wouldn't require many changes in personnel? After a few volleys back and forth, we finally came up with Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). When we proposed the pairing to Steve Takasugi, he was elated.

Coupling these two pieces worked well on many fronts. For one thing, I think Steve (with good reason) didn't think that more contemporary music on the same program would be a good idea. *Sideshow* is a universe unto itself – what it needed was contrast.

Since MEC has had a long history of programming non-contemporary music alongside contemporary music, *Pierrot* was a perfect companion piece to *Sideshow* in the sense that it allowed us to honor that tradition, and in so doing, show how far the series had come in the past seven decades. The series was founded in 1939 on a Rudolph Schindler-designed rooftop in Silverlake, coinciding with the arrivals of European luminaries like Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, both of whom made substantial contributions to MEC in its early years. That the audience was able to hear the Schoenberg *as* the canonical historical piece (which was first performed on MEC in 1944), rather than the new, radical work on the program is a testament to the series' legacy.

Further, there were many interesting connections between the composers. Arnold Schoenberg was from Vienna and moved to Los Angeles. Steven Takasugi was born in Los Angeles and was obsessed with Viennese culture, having lived there for several years and

constantly setting texts by figures like Karl Kraus and Robert Musil. The words in *Sideshow* were in fact aphorisms of Karl Kraus.

Sideshow is a piece about the grotesquerie of mass civilization as personified by the Coney Island freak shows. The freaks in question are outcasts – anomalous, marginalized humans that arouse fear and awe. Similarly, *Pierrot Lunaire* is a piece about a forlorn clown shunned by those around him. The two pieces, which were composed a century apart from one another, revolve around similar themes and locations, both topically and musically.

Concert No. 2 – “SONGS FOR CROSSING THE THRESHOLD” (Zipper Concert Hall)

[January, 2016]

Salvatore Sciarrino – *Un fruscio lungo trent'anni* (1967-1999) [15']***

Salvatore Sciarrino – *Le voci sottovetro* (1999) [15']***

-

Gérard Grisey – *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* (1999) [35']***

Form: **a b – C**

“Now a general comment: there are greater artists who change the course of history by taking maximum risks (in particular, they find the courage to be themselves) and thus anticipate the authors of the next generation. This group of exceptional people stands out from the mass of authors since they make up a kind of family with very close family ties and similar tendencies notwithstanding the centuries separating them. This also holds true for such an artist and refined author as Gesualdo. The cultivated listener feels attracted to him in a special way: a plethora of the most modern composers are hurled at him. Gesualdo reveals the extravagance

*typical of Vivaldi and Domenico Scarlatti, or Schubert and even of later Beethoven, we recognize the scent of late romanticism or France at the onset of our century, the atmosphere of expressionism.*¹⁰”

~ Salvatore Sciarrino (notes on *Le voci sottovetro*)

This was the musical event that I am most proud of in my entire life. When I was given the artistic directorship of MEC, the one piece that I felt was mandatory to put on in my first year was Grisey’s *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*, which had never been performed in Los Angeles, despite being nearly two decades old. Part of me knew that this season might very well be my only one as the artistic director of MEC, since the board might want to replace me at the end of the season with someone more experienced. I knew I had one shot at programming this piece, so I had to make it happen.

The original idea for this concert involved bringing in Steven Schick to conduct his San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (SFCMP), who already had the piece on their agenda for their concert season. While the idea made considerable progress, I was just beginning to get my bearings with respect to understanding how to budget these concerts effectively. After a month or two of talking with the administration of SFCMP, it became clear to me that bringing in players from San Francisco was not going to work logistically. Without going into too much detail, no ensemble would really wish to take a bus from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and flights (especially with instruments like double bass, contrabass clarinet, baritone saxophone and two tubas to consider) would be prohibitively expensive. Further, there was the enormous obstacle of procuring the myriad percussion instruments involved in the piece, as well as a harp.

¹⁰ Sciarrino, Salvatore. *Le voci sottovetro* (CD Liner Note). Vienna: Kairos, 1999.

Thus, there needed to be a change of plan. After careful consideration, I realized that there was no reason we couldn't produce the piece out of UCSD. Most of the ensemble could be put together from players at the university, and the missing players could be found either in San Diego or Los Angeles. In one case, we brought in Ryan Muncy, a saxophone player living in New York, but that was only because he was eager to play the piece and agreed to do it for the same fee as anyone else. For a singer, I was very happy to bring in a very special guest, my longtime collaborator and ex-partner, Alice Teyssier, who was in the process of writing her dissertation about the piece, and was scheduled to perform it in the fall with Steve in San Francisco.

Doing the piece in southern California meant that we could simplify our transportation needs. This may sound like a small thing, but when one is dealing with so many large instruments, from a budgetary standpoint, it makes an immense difference. Further, we were able to rehearse at UCSD for free, and have access to the university's vast collection of percussion instruments.

The next step, once I felt that I had gotten the logistics of the Grisey worked out, was filling out the rest of the program. Despite its emotional profundity, *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* is really not all that long.

Years ago, I discovered a book by Grisey that showed the composer clowning around with the composer Salvatore Sciarrino. Like Grisey, Sciarrino is one of the great musical poets of the past century. While I considered them to be artists of the same echelon, I never imagined that would have had any substantial interactions. Evidently, I was wrong, and they turned out to have been good friends while Grisey was still alive.

From then on, I started listening to Sciarrino and Grisey differently. I realized that, despite the fact that Grisey was appointed the leader of the French "spectralist" school, and Sciarrino was an iconoclastic Italian autodidact, their music bore many similarities to one

another's. Thus, two of my favorite works of Sciarrino: *Un fruscio lungo trent'anni* for four percussionists, and *Le voci sottovetro*, which were Sciarrino's arrangements, or "elaborations" of pieces by Gesualdo for voice and ensemble, became part of the program.

To me, this pairing made perfect sense. Grisey's piece was all about the threshold of life and death, as treated in texts from four historical world cultures (modern France, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and ancient Mesopotamia). As with pieces like Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* which carry the historical burden of real-life death accompanying music about death, Grisey's piece was mythologized by the composer's untimely death via aneurysm before the piece was premiered.

Sciarrino, on the other hand, is still alive and producing new work. His pieces, which displayed radically different sides of his compositional interests, dealt with many of the same issues as the Grisey. *Un fruscio lungo trent'anni* ("A Long, Rustling Thirty Years") is a percussion quartet that begins with rustling leaves, and gentle rubbed sounds, and ends with breaking glasses and an apocalyptic four-way pistol battle. Conversely, in *Le voci sottovetro*, Sciarrino is simply orchestrating the gorgeous music of the Renaissance visionary composer Carlo Gesualdo. Besides being one of the enduring composers of music history, Gesualdo was also a notorious madman who murdered his wife and her lover *in flagrante delicto*.

In between the two Sciarrino pieces, we had a reciter speak the text of a letter the Italian Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso sent to a doctor friend concerning phantom voices he had been hearing. The letter effectively served as a precursor to the insanity that eventually gripped the great poet. Originally, I dreamed of getting Werner Herzog to read this text, since he made a documentary on Gesualdo called *Death in Five Voices*. However, Mr. Herzog's brother Lucki informed me that he would be busy, and I luckily found a wonderful young Italian poet named Gian-Maria Annovi, who taught at the University of Southern California. Gian-Maria read the text in Italian, and was absolutely ideal.

On a musical level, pairing the Sciarrino with the Grisey was also successful. Despite the fact that Sciarrino and Grisey come from different compositional traditions, their music is bizarrely similar. Grisey's music, while being consummately modern, elegant and sophisticated, contains something primordial, or archaic, within it. His subject matter was several ancient civilizations, and there were moments of the piece (for instance with the harp at the beginning of the second movement) where the piece sounded like it was conjuring one of those times and places. There were also many parts of the piece that sounded prehistoric, with ritualistic blasts of drums and rumblings from low winds and brass like the shifts of tectonic plates.

Similarly, in Sciarrino's *Un fruscio*, he employs the most naturalistic sounds imaginable, such as leaves rustling and bass drums which conjure thunder. At many points, it was hard to tell whether this was a piece of contemporary music or an ancient ritual. In *Le voci*, Sciarrino's technique of "elaborating" Gesualdo is elegant, visionary, and fully assured – simultaneously modern and true to Renaissance ideals.

Fundraiser: "MORTON FELDMAN – PIANO AND STRING QUARTET"

(Private Residence in Los Feliz)

[February, 2016]

Morton Feldman – *Piano and String Quartet* (1985) [80']

Form: **A**

This concert was obviously easier to curate than the two programs I've described so far, given the fact that the Feldman stood alone on the program. Truthfully, this concert, as

well as the remaining two I will describe, were the result of confronting the reality of our budget for the season. While I would have been happy programming five blockbuster concerts of large ensemble works (as was the case in the first two concerts of the season), I realized that I had to scale back the remainder of the year financially in order to stay within MEC's budget.

Morton Feldman has been my favorite composer for well over a decade, and I was eager to program one of his major works in my first season as Artistic Director of MEC. A few factors led to the realization of this concert under these particular circumstances:

- 1) As the director of a series in Los Angeles, I am very reliant upon the good will of the new music community that sustains the series. For the two big projects of the season, I had contracted musicians first from New York City, then from San Diego. For the two concerts yet to come, I had already invited guest soloists from Russia and France. I felt something of a civic obligation to give at least one concert of the season to some of Los Angeles' finest musicians: the Formalist Quartet and the pianist Richard Valitutto.
- 2) Programming a very quiet and static piece lasting eighty minutes proved to be difficult with MEC's normative resources. There was never a question of whether the aesthetic was appropriate for the series – rather, the question was whether the piece was appropriate for our standard venue of Zipper Concert Hall. My experience has always been that pieces forty five minutes or longer are most comfortably (and therefore profitably) experienced in an environment in which one can feel free to move around or even to lounge. It is not uncommon for people to bring sleeping bags or reclining chairs to performances of some of Feldman's longer works. Since Zipper Hall features only standard concert seating, it seemed ill conceived (perhaps even antithetical to the piece) to ask people to pay twenty-seven dollars to sit still and upright for nearly an

hour and a half. Further, the piece seemed designed for a more intimate venue than the 400-seat venue of Zipper. Consequently, we explored other options in Los Angeles.

- 3) Ultimately, we came up with the solution of presenting the piece in the gorgeous Los Feliz home of one of our board members. Her home contained a very suitable space for an intimate salon concert. She also happened to own a gorgeous Bösendorfer piano, ideal for Feldman. Because the venue was small and private (we determined that the home could comfortably seat forty guests), we realized that this might be an optimal time to hold a fundraiser. We turned the concert into an event with hors d'oeuvres, wine and conversation and raised ticket prices to an amount designed to help sustain MEC into next season. We also held a silent auction, where guests could bid on artwork.

Programming the Feldman in the context of a fundraiser was risky because this was a crowd composed not necessarily solely of new-music enthusiasts, but of philanthropists. Perhaps a smarter move would have been to program shorter, lighter pieces that were not quite so demanding for a non-afficionado's attention span. Nevertheless, I realized this only too late, and so the concert went as planned. It was every bit as exquisite as I had hoped, and judging by the warm response and lively conversation in the performance's aftermath, the attendees agreed.

Concert No. 3 – “ALEXEI LUBIMOV: HOMAGE À MARIA YUDINA”

(Zipper Concert Hall)

[February, 2016]

Franz Schubert – *Four Impromptus op. 90, D.899* (1827) [20’]

Valentin Silvestrov – *Post Scriptum, a Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1990) [15’]***

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Alexandre Rabinovitch-Barakovsky – *Musique triste, parfois tragique* (1976) [7’]**

C.P.E. Bach – *Fantasia in C Major, Wq 59/6, H.284* (1785) [5’]

Galina Ustvolskaya – *Sonata No. 6* (1988) [8’]

Franz Joseph Haydn – *Trio No. 45 in E flat Major, Hob. XV/29* (1797) [20’]

Intended form: **A B A – B A B**

Final concert version: **A B – B A B A**

A few years ago, I had the honor of collaborating with the pianist Alexei Lubimov on the US premiere of his friend and collaborator Alexandre Rabinovitch-Barakovsky’s *Récit de Voyage* for piano, percussion, violin and cello. The piece was incredible – I had never heard anything quite like it. It was like Terry Riley meets Schubert meets Scriabin. During the rehearsal process, Alexei (who was in his seventies) explained that during the Soviet era, he used to sneak scores back into his homeland after visiting the West. For this reason, he was able to give the Soviet premieres of major piano works by composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and John Cage. Besides his activities as a subversive, he developed a formidable reputation as a fortepianist and harpsichordist. Through focusing upon

early music on period instruments, and very recent modernist music for the piano, Alexei was in effect actively avoiding the route of Russian pianists like Rachmanninof and Richter.

During our rehearsals and performance together, I had gleaned that Alexei was an extraordinary musician. However, I was always so focused on playing my part that I didn't notice quite *how* special he was. It wasn't until the performance, when I could finally sit in the audience and hear his solo contributions to the program, that I realized that he was operating on a level of pianistic skill and interpretation that I had never quite experienced live before. His versions of pieces by Satie, Cage and Debussy consistently took my breath away, not figuratively, but literally.

I realized, at a certain point, that Alexei was like the mascot for Monday Evening Concerts – his career as a pianist seemed to valorize the same things as MEC. Both he and MEC focused primarily on very new and very old music, trying always to provide as authentic and vivid an experience as possible. We actively avoided the more conventional, mainstream approaches to classical music (the Los Angeles Philharmonic took care of this for MEC in Los Angeles, whereas someone like, say, Alfred Brendel took care of that for Alexei.) Despite the fact that neither Alexei nor MEC was an expressly political entity, there was something inherently subversive about both. Thus, when I heard from his manager that he was coming to the United States in the spring of 2016 and was interested in performing for MEC (his third visit), I jumped at the opportunity.

Because it would be his third visit in five years to MEC, I wanted to be very careful in plotting out this particular program with Alexei, since I wanted to be sure that our audience would feel as though they had discovered something new this time around. As I mentioned, after the two expensive concerts at the beginning of the season, I really had to be very economical with our funds. At first, I had thought about asking Alexei to play harpsichord and fortepiano, as well as recent music on the modern piano. There were a few problems with this:

first the rental prices for the harpsichord and fortepiano, which were not provided by Zipper Concert Hall, would be unaffordable for us, and secondly, I remembered hearing that keyboard players don't typically like switching between instruments with different pressure sensitivities (actions) during the same program. Thus, I resolved to create an entire program that focused only upon a single piano.

I was thinking about my initial impression of Alexei's career, which had paralleled the long-term mission of MEC so well, and it occurred to me that it might be wise to ask Alexei to play a program comprised half of classical music, and then half of modernist works that he felt had been significant in his life as a performer.

One day, while researching Alexei's past, I came across an article in which he described his mentor during adolescence, the pianist Maria Yudina. As Alexei described her, Yudina was an absolutely singular figure in music history. Despite her renown for her interpretations of composers like Mozart and Schubert, she was a staunch advocate of composers like Bartók, Stravinsky and Ustvolskaya. When it came to the mainstream romantic piano repertoire, she would say "leave that to Richter!" She was a friend of Boris Pasternak's, whose funeral she played at, and whose poetry she used to read in between pieces at her concerts. She was beloved by Stalin, despite being diametrically opposed to everything about him, and when she won a huge sum of money from the Stalin Music Prize, she immediately donated the money to the Orthodox Church in order to "pay for Stalin's sins."

As soon as I learned about this extraordinary woman, I asked Alexei if he would be willing to conceive of his program as an homage to her spirit. He thought it was a great idea and happily agreed. I asked Alexei for input with respect to the repertoire he felt comfortable offering MEC, and I worked with him to carve out a program that I felt was coherent, poetic, and worthy of the late Ms. Yudina's blessing. Originally, the concert was supposed to be an alternation of old and new pieces throughout, but towards the concert, Alexei proposed a

change in the ordering of things, and I think he was right to do so. Because (with the exception of the Ustvol'skaya *Sonata No. 6*), the historically contemporary pieces on the program (Silvestrov and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky) contained so many traditional elements, I hoped to shed light on these works by pairing them alongside standbys of the classical era, namely Schubert, Haydn and C.P.E. Bach.

Similarly to the way I felt a civic obligation to invite the Formalist Quartet and Richard Valitutto to MEC's stage this season, I felt the same compulsion toward the outstanding Los Angeles-based violinist Movses Pogossian, with whom I had worked many times, and who I knew venerated Alexei's playing. Thus, I asked him to collaborate first on Valentin Silvestrov's duo for violin and piano, *Post Scriptum*. After Movses was on board, I proposed the idea of adding a Haydn trio to the program (specifically *Trio No. 44*, which I thought would bridge well with the Silvestrov, since both pieces have prominent passages with pizzicati.) Both Movses and Alexei liked the idea, and Movses managed to bring in Clive Greensmith of the Tokyo Quartet to join the project as the cellist on the Haydn.

I was very happy with the concert. Alexei (and Movses and Clive) played very beautifully throughout, and I thought that the chosen repertoire was riveting in the hands of a living legend. Alexei also gave a touching and informative speech on the effect Madame Yudina had had on him in his youth. He also read carefully selected poems of Pasternak in Russian between pieces, a special touch that I felt made the concert unforgettable.

The two negative points of feedback that I received after the concert were that 1) it was far too long, and 2) the idea behind the programming was not clear.

The first criticism I fully own up to. A curator must have a realistic idea of how long a concert will be, calculating the timings of the pieces, the time in between pieces, and the length of the intermission. In my opinion, a (normative) concert should never last longer than two hours. In other words, if the concert starts at 8pm, the audience should reliably be released

by 10pm. In this case, I knew I had already programmed a lot of music, but I didn't take into account factors like the concert's late start, how long Alexei's introductory speech on Yudina would go, and the added time of reading four poems of Pasternak. In the end, the concert let out around 10:30pm, and I accept the blame for that shortcoming.

As for the second point, neither the Los Angeles Times critic Mark Swed, nor my board member Don Davis, understood my vision for the program as an alternation of modern and classical elements as a celebration of what MEC, Alexei and Yudina held as sacrosanct. Therefore, to them, the concert seemed like a total farrago.

Concert No. 4 – “SÉVERINE BALLON: SOLITUDE” (Zipper Concert Hall)

[March, 2016]

Rebecca Saunders – *Solitude* (2013) [16']***

Mauro Lanza – *La bataille de Caresme et de Charnage* (2012) [14']***

Liza Lim – *Invisibility* (2009) [14']

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Chaya Czernowin – *Adentium capullus veneris no. 1 / SONGS OF THE MUTED ONE* (2015)

[13']*

Brian Ferneyhough – *Time and Motion Study II* (1973-76) [18']

Form: **A B C – D E**

For our season finale at MEC, it was my privilege to invite the brilliant French cellist Séverine Ballon to perform. I first saw her play in Freiburg on a program presented by the *Sudweströndfunk*. Séverine was a member of the ensemble they had put together for that

concert. There was nothing soloistic about the parts she was playing, and yet I was transfixed by her presence on stage. I remember walking away from that concert wondering who this extraordinary musician was.

As time went by, I realized that other people apparently had similar reactions, since she wound up with major extended residencies at Harvard and Stanford, and was also invited to write a book on contemporary cello techniques for a major publisher. As I followed her phenomenal young career (she is only in her mid-thirties), I found out that virtually every composer I knew of who was writing interesting music (in the genre that MEC typically presents) either had already written, or was writing pieces specifically for her. When I discovered that she would be living in Palo Alto this year, it seemed propitious to invite her for a solo concert so that she could share some of her groundbreaking work with MEC audiences.

One fear I had when I invited Séverine to play was that her repertoire might be too one-dimensional. To a cultivated ear that has spent decades discerning between finer points of aesthetic difference between Klaus K. Hübler and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, of course the stylistic difference between pieces in her repertoire would be enormous. However, I feared that nearly two hours of avant-garde repertoire for the cello (in which a scratch tone was something of a “tonic key”) would be draining and yield diminishing returns from an audience whose trust I was beginning to earn.

I therefore proposed that she intersperse bits of Marin Marais’ works for viola da gamba throughout the program. Unfortunately, Séverine informed me that the range of the instrument was different, and therefore those pieces wouldn’t work on a proper cello. Further, whereas for Alexei, alternation between older music and newer pieces came naturally, Séverine doesn’t feel as at home with the music of another century (a perfectly respectable

attitude, which frankly, I would share, were I in her shoes.) I would have to work exclusively with her repertoire and hope the audiences didn't feel it was exhausting.

I purposefully kept the concert on the shorter side, since I felt the works might be taxing to listen to. Two hours is an upper limit, not necessarily a goal to shoot for. I think in all, there were about eighty minutes of music (not counting intermission or breaks between pieces) on the program.

As was the case with Alexei Lubimov's concert, which was a tribute to a female mentor, and a celebration of Galina Ustvolskaya, I was extremely happy that Séverine's concert also highlighted contributions of women to modern music. Obviously, there was Séverine's involvement as a visionary cellist, but also there were three outstanding female composers on her program, each of whom had written their pieces specifically for her.

I recognize that having four female composers in the context of an entire season of music is hardly adequate, but I wanted to acknowledge that it is an area that I am trying to cultivate as time goes by. The same is true of composers of color, which I did not do a great job of representing in this concert season.

Back to the concert: I collaborated with Séverine to select four pieces from her repertoire that were specifically written for her. I did, however, want to hear her delve into one of the classics of contemporary cello. I thought about asking her to play Lachenmann's *Pression*, or Xenakis' *Kottos* or *Nomos Alpha*. Instead, since I knew she would be in residence at Stanford, I asked her to prepare Brian Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II*, since she could theoretically easily coach the piece with the composer while they would be neighbors in Palo Alto. She enthusiastically agreed, and we had a program.

In the end, all of my fears with respect to audience's reactions to the harsh or strident nature of Séverine's repertoire proved to be totally unfounded. Several of my friends who attended every concert of the MEC season informed me that hers was their favorite. Some

people actually told me that when they came to hear Alexei's concert, they were actually *disappointed* that it wasn't *more modern*. While I thought I was opening doors to audiences by softening the blows of the avant-garde, it turned out that they were in fact craving to get hit even harder. I still hear raving about Séverine's concert every time it gets brought up. Perhaps she will become MEC's new mascot in the years to come.

CONCLUSION:

MUSIK ALS EXISTENTIELLE ERFAHRUNG

“I owe my life to these sounds...they gave me a life.”¹¹ ~ Morton Feldman

In order for an art form to move confidently into the future, it needs leaders, practitioners, teachers, and organizations capable of presenting compelling work. The Buddhists say that there are two ways to do nothing – one is to try and do everything. I would never claim to be in a position to determine the future of an art form, but I intend to do as much as I can to that end during my time on this planet.

Classical music (especially, but not exclusively, avant-garde and experimental classical music) has shown me how to be a more complete human being. It has confronted me with so many challenges on technical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual levels. Without Cage, I might not know Cunningham or Suzuki. Without Feldman, I might not know Beckett or Rothko. Without Xenakis, I might not know Le Corbusier or Aeschylus. Without Nono, I might not know Hölderlin or Tarkovsky. I feel very fortunate to have come into contact with some of history’s greatest novelists, poets, playwrights, philosophers, choreographers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers and architects via classical music. I will spend my lifetime repaying my debt to this art form.

¹¹ Feldman, Morton. *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987*. Ed. Chris Villars. (London: Hyphen, 2006), 55.

At this stage in my life, I have chosen to devote my energies where I think they serve the world of classical music best, which is through the artistic direction of projects that I believe are worthwhile (specifically, as a conductor), teaching a new generation of students in a way that I believe is unique, and through presenting poetically curated, extremely well-produced concerts in hopes of attracting new audiences and reinvigorating older ones.

I believe that each aspect of my artistic life informs and enriches the others. I become a better percussionist when I conduct. I become a better conductor when I teach. I become a better teacher when I write. I become a better writer when I play percussion. Just as Heidegger said that the work of art originates in the artist, and the artist originates in the work of art, I have found that all of these activities nourish one another in the same cyclical fashion.

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