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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Thoughts on Contemporary Percussion

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of

Arts

in

Music

by

Jonathan David Hepfer

Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Schick, Chair
Professor Aleck Karis
Professor Anthony Burr

2009

The thesis 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

2009

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Thoughts on Contemporary Percussion

by

Jonathan David Hepfer

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2009

Professor Steven Schick, Chair

This thesis is a compilation of program notes that I wrote for my Master's Recital. The writings document different aspects of my learning process with these pieces as well as my thoughts about what they have come to mean to me after having performed them. The pieces included are Peter Ablinger's *Weiss/Weisslich 31e*, Salvatore Sciarrino's *Il Legno e la Parola*, Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*, Georges Aperghis' *Le Corps à Corps* and

Lewis Nielson's *Iskra*. Objectively, the pieces share little in terms of surface texture. However, for me, they became intrinsically linked with one another simply because of all of the enormous technical, interpretational, philosophical and even emotional challenges they posed through my working process. In short, the pieces were so problematic to learn that the primary question became "why should I perform this?" The following is my attempt to answer this question in a subjective way, describing how the act of working on and living with these pieces ultimately enriched my life. I found that these pieces taught me an enormous amount about myself as an interpreter, percussionist and human being, and I hope that these writings provide some insight as to why that was.

I. Introduction

In a lesson I had very early during my studies at UC – San Diego, Steven Schick remarked to me that I seemed to have an attraction to pieces that were “failures.” I think that this perhaps explains why I’ve enjoyed working with Schick so much since coming to UCSD – he actually meant this as a compliment – and I gladly received it as such.

I will confess that before that instant, I had never really thought of myself as having a penchant for pieces that contained major flaws, but I immediately realized that it was true. The pieces that I have gravitated towards as an interpreter are all paradoxical in the sense that for me, they contain profound insights into the nature of human existence, but when I step back and view the pieces from an outsider’s point of view, the aural projection of these insights is quite spare, as though in each instance, the piece itself represented the fraction of an iceberg that is visible above water.

Since this realization, I have learned to take great pride in acting as a sort of guardian of these pieces, as Werner Herzog says about his films “...when this one has a limp...”. It is the idea of somehow alluding to something greater than what can be observed by one person playing a marimba can possibly project within the confines of a concert hall that attracts me. After all, this is what all truly profound music does.

Morton Feldman once said that “for me, sound was the hero, and still is. I feel that I listen to my sounds and do what they tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my life to these sounds. Right? They gave me a life.” I have realized that this is the way I feel about the repertoire I have chosen; my role as an interpreter is simply to work in an

objective way with the text until I feel that it tells me something about how to interpret it. I never impose a predetermined interpretation onto a piece. In the case of pieces like *Il Legno e la Parola* and *Bone Alphabet*, this has taken a great deal of patience, sometimes with a year passing before the piece begins to really begin to “speak.” In any event, through these periods of waiting,

In the case of the works on this recital, the pieces share virtually nothing in terms of surface texture, or compositional language or intent. Nevertheless, I am convinced that they share a great deal in common. They all have elements of overwhelming complexity (though not necessarily *complicatedness*), but also aspects of beautiful simplicity. They are all at once both refined and coarse – containing characteristics both Apollonian and Dionysiac. The works are all enigmatic and inscrutable. I am convinced that none of these works will ever have a “definitive interpretation,” but then, what piece does?

II. Thesis : Program Notes

Weiss/Weisslich 31e (2002): Peter ABLINGER (b. 1959, Austria)

My material is not sound.
My material is audibility.

While others work with sound
perhaps set a sound and then a pause
I set audibility then inaudibility.

Inaudibility can arise through various means.

Through quietness but also through loudness.
Through too low notes and through too high notes.
Through slowness but also through swiftness.
Through too little occurring but also through too much occurring.
Through too much closeness and through too much distance.
Through too short durations and through too long durations.
Through emptiness and through fullness.

– Peter Ablinger

The *Weiss/Weisslich 31* series is comprised of five works intent on simply encouraging listeners to appreciate the sonic phenomenon of rain falling in various settings. In *Weiss/Weisslich 31a* and *c*, the “piece” occurs when one goes to a rain shelter in a public place, or stands under an umbrella and simply listens. Similarly, *Weiss/Weisslich 31 b* and *d* occur when one puts the components of drum set or various glasses out in the rain and observes. In both cases, the listener decides when the piece begins and ends (insofar as it is raining.) The aim in these works is explained in Ablinger’s short essay “Recitative and Aria,” in which he explains that there are fundamentally two kinds of things in the world: those that are consecutive and those that

are simultaneous. According to Ablinger, the consecutive (the sequential) is inherently linked to language, and the simultaneous (the all-at-once) is linked to the unutterable, and is therefore more profound. He argues that we as listeners have trained ourselves to conceive of hearing eternity in a linear fashion as though there were a beginning and end. However, in Ablinger's words "I maintain the opposite. That eternity is everything at once. Is beginning (taking up, starting) and ending (stopping) now in this instant. Is the condensed, compressed, infinitely thick Now of this moment - in every moment. And the series of these moments again and again in every moment. Now and always." The result of hearing all music simultaneously, would then be similar to a waterfall – white noise. In the case of the *Weiss/Weisslich* (White/Whitish) series, Ablinger seeks to create *situations* rather than *pieces*, making us aware of *what is*, rather than *what one creates*.

Weiss/Weisslich 31e is the "concert piece" of the series, meaning that unlike *31a-d*, the work fits into the concert hall convention of having a performer, an audience and a score with performance directions and a formal design with an approximate duration. In the piece, the performer is required to drip water onto eight graduated glass tubes with close amplification. The performer does this by suspending small washcloths that have been soaking in a water-filled bowl in a specified order. While this act requires no technical virtuosity from the performer, the music that is produced is extraordinarily complex. What begins as a single steady drip from a washcloth onto a tube suddenly turns into a turbulent polyrhythmic forest with the one-by-one additions of several washcloths dripping out of phase with each other. It is astonishing to notice how differently the listener perceives the "music" that is occurring at any given moment depending on how many rags are dripping. For instance, when one is dripping, we

perceive *pulse*. When two to five are dripping, we perceive *melody* and perhaps even *rhythmic* and *melodic counterpoint*. When we hear six to eight tubes ringing simultaneously, we perceive *harmony* and *texture* (e.g. that which we call “white noise”). In any event, it is sure that we no longer hear *pulse* or *melody* unless we resolve to do so by listening selectively. Although it seems as though the rates of dripping are quite steady, the cloths are of course drying out as they drip, and therefore are perpetually becoming imperceptibly slower.

Il Legno e la Parola (2004): Salvatore SCIARRINO (b. 1947, Italy)

“Not all instruments can sing – only some are capable – but which ones can speak?”

– S. Sciarrino

Il Legno e la Parola (the wood and the word) was composed for solo marimba and one bell plate. It is unique to the marimba repertoire because it treats the instrument not as a simple wooden descendent of the clavichord, but rather as an *object with sonic potential*. The piece is centered around the marimba’s capacity to take on different vocal characteristics, such as murmuring, calling, moaning, shouting violently or speaking in tongues. Sciarrino creates these effects by focusing upon extreme registers and dynamics, writing for the very highest and lowest notes of the marimba, as well as both the loudest and softest sounds the instrument can produce. In addition to these extremes, Sciarrino introduces the technique of rolling using only the right hand on one key at a

time in the low register of the marimba while pressing a hard mallet with the left hand and sliding the mallet, thereby modifying the pitch and changing timbre of the bar.

The material generates its interest primarily from juxtaposing predictable patterns with sudden extreme registral, dynamic and temporal contrasts, giving the piece a rather schizophrenic quality. There is no tempo indication whatsoever – only the marking “quickly murmured.” The main motivic material in this piece is comprised of chains of descending individual three-note groupings, each of which Sciarrino writes “to be grouped as a single sound.” Over the course of the piece, there is a general transition toward these individual three-note groupings turning into a single fluid grouping (from nine to over thirty notes), played as a flurry at tremolo speed. The climaxes of the piece come with the two bell plate notes (played with a metal beater on the very edge of the plate, so that only a very complex series of harmonics are produced), which seem to be almost supernatural within the context of the rest of the work.

Throughout Sciarrino’s compositional output, one can surmise that he has an interest in historical figures with extreme emotional issues, such as Gesualdo – the prince of Venice who murdered his cheating wife and her partner – and Maria Maddalena da’Pazzi, after whom he wrote the text for *Infinito Nero* for Mezzo-Soprano and eight players. The story behind da’Pazzi was that she was from an aristocratic 17th Century Italian family, and she began experiencing ecstatic visions in her early teens. She became a nun by age 16 and apparently was eventually followed around by at least eight scribes at all times in order to copy down her ravings in hopes of capturing some divine vision when she would burst out in a form of glossolalia. Perhaps in this sense, *Il Legno e la*

Parola, like *Infinito Nero*, could evoke a mad woman who is constantly murmuring nonsense to a crowd of novices simply waiting for her next outburst of “ecstatic truth.”

Bone Alphabet (1992): Brian FERNEYHOUGH (b. 1943)

Cut to pieces by the media, drowned in over-information, measured in this age of zapping and clips, this time, the time which Bataile called ‘sacred,’ the time of Art, Love and Creativeness, the instant when something unprecedented happens, can only be preserved by the artist if he completely resists this late 20th Century environment. Paradoxically, however, these are precisely the rhythms which feed and inspire him. This is the only world which calls forth his questions. And so, the response to the discontinued flood of information will be a music finding its unity and continuity. Its wintry slowness will be the reversed Echo of a stress-ridden world rushing toward its end.

– G. Grisey (*Conjectures and Ideas in Two Paragraphs*)

If there is one thing I learned from playing Vinko Globokar’s *? Corporel*, it is that every percussionist should learn Brian Ferneyhough’s *Bone Alphabet* during his lifetime. In short, Globokar’s piece culminates in the performer reciting the following phrase: “Mankind is a long succession of synonyms for the same word. It is a duty to disprove this.” I understood this rather cryptic message to mean that humans seem to be creatures of habit. The habit of daily routine in each of our lives carries the possibility of converting us from thinking individuals to cogs in a cultural machine. When we consider all of the ways that the world we live in can desensitize us by overwhelming us with floods of stimuli (desired or not), it is highly likely that we as a society would learn to prefer simple, efficient solutions to problems rather than complex ones that solve problems thoroughly, as well as entertainment that allows us to decompress by shutting

off our brains. As an effect of personal complacency, we as a society can become quite dangerous in the sense that we fail to react to injustice.

While *Bone Alphabet* may not change the health care system in the United States, or have kept us out of Iraq, it *is* a healthy reminder that there is beauty in complexity. There *is* something wonderful about being confronted with problems that seem to have no easy solution. There *is* reward in taking the time to do something with almost torturous slowness and with the utmost care for the smallest details. *Bone Alphabet* *forces* the interpreter into a situation in which he knows no answers – he can only reflect on the questions asked and grope for solutions – and this takes time. The lesson learned from ? *Corporel* is that the actions of one person may not change the world, but by resolving to overcome the mechanical danger of the habits we acquire, we may inspire others to join us in embracing our potential as free thinkers, and thereby, one-by-one, overcome the complacency that will inevitably lead to man’s downfall.

The prospect of having the time and artistic freedom to learn *Bone Alphabet* may have been the deciding factor when I chose to come to UCSD for a Master’s degree. The score to *Bone Alphabet* presented a type of uncharted territory for me, which is to say that I had never worked on a score with such hyper-calibrated notation, nor such polyphonic density. Ultimately, the only way that I could trudge forward with this piece was to turn it from something I was *thinking about learning* to something I was *actually learning*. There were no theories I could develop simply by studying the score that would allow me to learn the piece more expeditiously. There was no “ideal instrumentation” that would solve the technical problems for me. I could only simply set up the instruments and tenaciously *start to fail*. Only near the end of the learning process did I read the

following phrase, from Nietzsche's *Maxims and Arrows*: “ ‘*On ne peut penser et écrire qu'assis* [One cannot think and write except when seated]’ (G. Flaubert). There I have caught you, nihilist! The sedentary life is the very sin against the Holy Spirit. Only thoughts reached by walking have value.”

This piece resides in the percussion repertoire as something of a Mount Everest in the sense that it is considered “the most difficult work ever written for solo percussion.” After taking nearly a year to learn the piece, I can attest that this statement may be true, but it is also irrelevant. Generally speaking, when one refers to the performance of “difficult music,” one is implying that the piece requires a great deal of virtuosity to be responsibly realized. However, even in the early stages of working on *Bone Alphabet*, I found that instrumental technique was more or less an obsolete factor in the learning process, as there were no etudes or scales I could practice to prepare myself for any given measure. Rather, I found that creativity and perseverance were the only two elements of “virtuosity” that really factored into my learning process. In sum, as a musician who did not begin his formal music studies until age 17, I found it refreshing to work on a piece in which the word “difficult” in this case, actually meant “demanding” – and likewise “talent” (the quality that is so often associated with ability) could be translated as “discipline.”

Although learning this piece has not solved all of the problems in my life, nor has it earned me any invitations for recitals in prestigious venues, it has enriched my life immensely. As Werner Herzog said of his film *Fitzcarraldo*, in which he and his crew literally pull a steamship over a mountain, “it is a great metaphor...though I am not sure

for what...” Learning *Bone Alphabet* was the best waste of a year of my life that I can imagine.

Le Corps à Corps (1978): Georges APERGHIS (b. 1945, Greece)

As was the case in Sciarrino’s *Il Legno e la Parola*, Georges Aperghis’ *Le Corps à Corps* (*pour percussioniste parlant et jouant du Zarb*) explores the relationship between the possibilities of an instrument (in this case the Iranian goblet drum known as “the Zarb”) and the possibilities of the human voice. Another similarity between the two pieces is the tendency toward the schizophrenic, in the sense that from moment to moment, there exist vast shifts in the emotions the performer displays, register of the voice, speed of rhythmic materials, etc...

In the simplest terms, this piece is a sort of melodrama in which the percussionist recounts the events of an intense race, including details about the participants’ wounds, heroic leaps, clouds of dust flying and spectators erupting in cheer. The following is the main text that is recited at the end of the second section of the piece, first in the original French and then in an English translation.

Avant dix heures, autour du cadavre, ils étaient déjà répartis tout le long de la course, des deux côtés, au corps à corps. Les seules actions visibles avaient lieu à la ligne Départ-Arrivée, où de temps à autre un chariot surgissait – saisissant le casque étincelant, faisant un bond, se blessant au bras – à toute blinde du nuage de poussière, et descendait en titubant de sa meule, que l’équipe d’entretien s’empressait d’emplir d’essence et de relancer sur la piste, avec un motard tout frais dessus. De sa blessure fraîche, à son bras le sang coule. D’immenses cris s’élèvent.

Before ten o'clock, around the body, they were already dispersed all along the track, on both sides, packed shoulder to shoulder. The only visible actions occurred at the finish line, from which from time to time a carriage emerged – seizing the shining helmet, leaping up, injuring his arm – blasting out of the cloud of dust, and staggering down from his bike, which the maintenance team rushed to refuel and launch back onto the track, with a brand new rider on it. From the fresh wound on his arm the blood flows. Immense cries arise.

However, in my opinion, to simply say that this piece is the recounting of a race does not really do the piece justice. The title of the piece is literally translated as “the body to body,” but perhaps it would be deciphered less elegantly as “the struggle of two elements,” or “the battle.” My interpretation of the piece is that Aperghis’ text is not actually *about a race*, but rather *about the psychological state of someone involved in a race*.

As can be observed in the text, there is no coherent narrative, but rather, a series of poetic images linked to the intensity of physical competition at the highest level. I find the text to evoke a nonsensical dream from which one would wake up sweating, out of breath, with his heart pounding. As Aperghis himself notes, the piece reflects the battle between the instrument and the musician, as well as the musician and his own breath.

Iskra (2006): Lewis NIELSON (b. 1950, United States)

The story behind this piece is very special for me. In 2006, during my junior year at Oberlin Conservatory, my girlfriend, Alice Teyssier and I decided to start a small chamber ensemble that would be devoted to the performance of the works of composers who we felt deserved more attention in the United States. After the group had gained some attention from the new music community in Oberlin, the cellist in our ensemble,

Gabrielle Athayde requested a piece from Lewis Nielson, the chair of composition in the conservatory. Ironically, I only found out about this piece several months later Gabrielle's request, when Lewis had completed this piece, which was called *Iskra* and was scored for cello, flute and double bass. One day, Alice told me that parts for Lewis' new trio would be arriving shortly, and I told her to email Lewis and jokingly ask him why he had written the part for double bass when he had a percussionist that was so eager to play his music. To my astonishment, this idea actually gained traction with Lewis, and within a couple weeks, he had rescored a second version of *Iskra* for cello, flute and percussion.

The percussion part is an extraordinarily imaginative reworking of the double bass part, in which glissandi are mapped onto a single muted timpano, Bartòk pizzicati become woodblock, cowbell or bongo strikes, harmonics are produced using a triangle, and various pressures of bowing are reconceived as scraped sounds on cymbal or Chinese opera gong. Additionally, since the instruments were overbalanced with respect to the flute and cello parts when standard sticks were used, Nielson and I collaborated in creating very light dowel sticks wrapped in leather.

Although using this instrumentation was certainly not Nielson's original intent in writing this piece, I believe that *Iskra* contains amongst the most interesting and beautiful percussion writing I know of. I find the blend of these sounds with the flute and cello is truly remarkable. However, it is not really the sonorities of this piece that make it so special for me. It is the friendship that this helped me to cultivate with Lewis Nielson that is the best memory that I take with me.

When we began rehearsals for this piece, I had no idea that this was a particularly important piece for Nielson. Until this point, I knew Lewis as a rather prolific composer of demanding works for chamber orchestra. At least from what I could tell, these pieces explored various aspects of modernist compositional language, and had a great deal of energy and craft, but did not really provide much insight into the person behind the compositions. I admired these compositions very much, and so I prepared my part for *Iskra* with the same type of meticulousness that his other pieces demanded.

However, in working with Nielson, it soon became clear that this piece was making him extraordinarily uncomfortable. I soon realized why: for Nielson, this composition marked a new chapter of his compositional output and his life. After dedicating his career to the craft of composition, he realized that he had had enough of masking his *raison d'écrire* in this modernist language that, though masterful, was perpetually *indirect*. For that reason, he decided to write *Iskra* as a sort of experiment in being utterly *direct* with what it was he was writing. The piece contained several sections that ranged from what I would call standard modernist concert music, to structured improvisation, to a sort of ballad with accompaniment.

The piece starts with dense collisions between the instruments and gradually devolves into less and less explicit notation until finally, out of an aimlessly wandering texture, comes an old Irish folk song, in this case, sung by the cellist (in the score, any member of the ensemble may sing this). The moment of this entry is shocking, since it comes after eight minutes (or nearly four decades, depending how one looks at it) of thorny modernist language, devoid of melody in the traditional sense. Nielson inserts this folk song on top of the texture he has established and subtly converts the instrumental

parts, (which had previously presented themselves as sounds from the modernist lexicon) into a form of almost romantic text painting. The vibraphone and flute provide harmonic support for the folk song, as well as providing quasi-literal commentary on the words being sung. For instance, “we will rise” is coupled with an upwards vibraphone glissando, “birds were silent when our brother died” is paired with a warbling figure in the flute and “hand to hand with sword and rifle” occurs concurrently with a gunshot-like blast from the bass drum.

After having performed the piece several times and hearing different reactions from different audience members (both positive and negative), I now realize why Nielson was so uncomfortable with this piece. For a composer, one is what one writes, and in the world of contemporary composition, using such politically loaded material in such an unabashed way is a huge risk. It renders him vulnerable to being written off by his colleagues as someone who has no business in the subtle world of modern composition. However, for me, this piece marked the birth of a truly masterful and substantial composer, who was willing to suffer being ostracized by his community in order to say what he truly meant.

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