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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Contemporary Percussion Performance: an overview of aesthetics and performance practices

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Matthew B. Jenkins

Committee in charge:

Steve Schick, Chair

Philippe Manoury

Miller Puckette

2008

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008

DEDICATION

This document is lovingly dedicated to my family.

EPIGRAPH

For living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing to do is to open ones ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before ones thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical. - John Cage (1952)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page	iii
Dedication	iv
Epigraph	v
Table of Contents	vi
Abstract	vii
Chapter 1 The Axe Manual	1
Chapter 2 Rosas and For Morty	3
Appendix A Recital Program	5
References	7

Recordings on file at Mandeville Special Collections Library.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

**Contemporary Percussion Performance: an overview of aesthetics and performance
practices**

by

Matthew B. Jenkins

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Steven Schick, Chair

This thesis contains program notes for a recital presented in January 2008. It discusses Harrison Birtwistle's "The Axe Manual," Christian Wolff's "Rosas," and Christian Wolff's "For Morty." These three pieces are scored for piano and percussion duet. A discussion of the history of each work is followed by a brief analysis.

Chapter 1

The Axe Manual

Harrison Birtwistle (Accrington, England; 1934-) composed “The Axe Manual” at the request of Emmanuel Axe in 2000 (Venn, 2005) (Adlington, 2000) (Cross, 2000). It was given its premiere in March 2001 in Chicago with Evelyn Glennie playing percussion (Birtwistle, 2004). Its compositional structure revolves around two devices that Birtwistle creates. The first is a “meta-manual,” a virtual instrument that consists of the piano, vibraphone, and the marimba. The second are the multi-dimensional rhythmic layers that drive the bulk of the material. It is within this landscape that Birtwistle creates a kaleidoscopic array of beautiful textures, motifs, and melodies.

The percussion part is scored for marimba, vibraphone, woodblocks, temple blocks, congas, bongos, tom toms, wood drum, hi-hat, and cowbell (Birtwistle, 2000). Birtwistle begins the piece on marimba, takes a pit stop on the drums, and ends this section with a rhythmic caprice on all of the wooden instruments. There is a brief transition building on the relationships between the noisy attacks of the high wooden instruments to the metallic noises of the hi-hat and cowbell. This eventually leads the

listener to the middle of the piece in which a long chorale unfolds between the hawketing lines of the vibraphone and the piano. The third and final long section cascades toward the end through the entire array of percussion instruments which starts with the upper register of the vibraphone and ends with the drums.

The trajectory the instrumental writing takes forms the basis for each section. Each section utilizes these unique timbral configurations of the percussion and builds off of the rhythmic mechanisms between them and the piano writing. These interweaving rhythmic lines of the two performers is what creates the meta-manual, a constantly unfolding world of richly orchestrated percussive writing.

Chapter 2

Rosas and For Morty

American composer Christian Wolff (Nice, France; 1934-) has been a seminal figure in the American contemporary music scene since the 1970's. He is primarily known as a figure of "The New York School" due to his associations with the composers John Cage, Earl Brown, and Morton Feldman (Wolff and Patterson, 1994). In the past he has also closely worked with the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. The two pieces here, "For Morty" and "Rosas," represent a more conservative trend for Wolff and depart from the indeterministic writing he had been associated with earlier (Wolff, 1990) (Wolff, 1989).

"Rosas", was written at the request of Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion, and Marianne Schroeder, pianist, in 1987. Rosa Parks and Rosa Luxemburg were the two women Christian Wolff's "Rosas" were written as a tribute to. Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 for disobeying the segregation laws on a bus. A European philosopher and theorist, Rosa Luxemburg, was closely associated with socialist and communist thought in the 20th century (Duo, 2001).

Christian Wolff's decision to write a piece associate with more traditional musical practices and politics was indicative of his work in the 1980's and 1990's (Chase and Gresser, 2004). "It was Vietnam which engaged me , and then I got to thinking

about what I was doing as a composer and those concerns. Everything came together, both internally, with my music looking for something else to do, and externally, with political circumstances,” stated Wolff in 2001 (Carl, 2001).

Wolff dedicated the second piece in this suite to the American composer Morton Feldman at the time of his death (Smith, 2001). “For Morty” is a four minute song for vibraphone, orchestral bells, and piano. It can be played with two or three players. This piece is less programmatic than some of the other pieces from this era, however, like many compositions from this time, a conservative approach is taken to the composition. The pitch material and rhythms are quite traditionally based on the familiar meter of 3/4 and the tertiary approach to the pitch material.

Appendix A

Recital Program

MATTHEW JENKINS & MINJI NOH

Tuesday, January 29, 2008 - 20:00

Mandeville Recital Hall

For Morty

Christian Wolff

Rosas

Christian Wolff

The Axe Manual

Harrison Birtwistle

Matthew Jenkins, percussion

Minji Noh, piano

UCSD Department of Music

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