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Tap Routes: The Changing Role of the Contemporary Artist-Percussionist

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

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

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2010
The Dissertation of Justin W DeHart is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

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University of California, San Diego

2010
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VITA

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This dissertation is a history of classical contemporary multi-percussionists in the 20th and 21st centuries. My research is aimed to counterbalance the existing literature on percussion history that fails to include the personal accounts of percussionists who have contributed immensely to modern music. I have conducted interviews with some senior percussionists in
order to view the changes in the field. I argue that a historical view of contemporary percussion that highlights the personal, and the subjective, can give present and future percussionists larger vantage points to understand the salient capabilities of our art.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1… Or All His Stories Will Be Lost

After a concert featuring America’s premier young percussion quartet (who will remain anonymous) at UC San Diego in La Jolla, CA, February 2009, the members of the quartet went to a nearby restaurant along with local percussionists to relax and celebrate the evening. Before the outing was over, I shared my regret that the former experimental solo percussionist and sound artist, Max Neuhaus (1939-2009), had recently passed away. I was startled to see their blank faces as the percussionists admitted they did not know who he was. I found it odd that it was possible for a group of American percussionists to earn graduate degrees in music without hearing of Neuhaus’s work, at least in the domain of sound art, to which he spent to latter portion of his life after serving as one of the earliest examples of a contemporary solo percussionist in the 1960s.

Why wasn’t Neuhaus mentioned at Yale University, where these young percussionists attended graduate school? Was the professor unaware of him, or were Neuhaus’s achievements purposely omitted from discussion for some odd reason? When I began searching for answers to these questions, I arrived at a further question: Why are there only scarce publications that document the experiences of important 20th century percussionists? How did we manage to arrive at a point in time were we are ignorant of people doing very similar
things less than fifty years ago in our same country? I could find no
satisfactory answers to these questions, other than the (false) assumption that
the knowledge of such information would not have broad implications beyond
a few individuals. Since my experience with this research has shown me
otherwise, I became eager to collect, document, interpret, celebrate, and share
the wealth of knowledge and experience that these early percussionists had in
our evolving field of contemporary music.

The second incident that convinced me to undertake this project
occurred while reading percussionist Geary Larrick’s *Biographical Essays on
Twentieth-Century Percussionists* (1992). Of the eighty percussionists that he
documents, I was dumbfounded to discover that he failed to mention 20\textsuperscript{th}
century percussion stalwarts such as Neuhaus, Paul Price, Ray DesRoches,
Steven Schick, Jan Williams, Allen Otte, Christoph Caskel, or Sylvio Gualda.
In my music education, these were the specific personalities that were on the
fore of my awareness as models to aspire to, contrary to the overwhelming
number of adept orchestral percussionists Larrick chooses to include. To be
fair, he admits in the preface that “many deserving percussion artists are not
included in the book” and that he hopes to include them in a future edition (p.
ix). But, for a 1992 publication, it seemed to cut at the very values that I held
about what is meaningful in percussion, and inspired me to start to research a
list of percussionists who I think are important.
The ultimate objective of my research is to investigate and outline the salient changes that occurred in 20th century percussion practice from the view of Western classical percussionists. Specifically, I have concentrated on percussionists who have spent the majority of their lives playing contemporary music. Most of these percussionists have not specialized on a single tonal instrument—such as marimba, or xylophone—but instead play a multitude of percussion instruments in both solo and chamber contexts. I will herein refer to these “multi-percussionists” as “percussionists” and will proceed to define the scope of “multi-percussion” in detail later. I have not directly addressed specific jazz or rock drummers, “world music” percussionists, or orchestral percussion specialists, as these have all received greater attention in other publications (see Barnhart, 2000; Korall, 2002; Larrick, 1989, 1992, 2003; Mowitt, 2002; Spagnardi, 1992).

I have sought to construct my thesis and build my evidence from the percussionist’s perspective for many reasons. Before the 20th century, dedicated repertoire for percussion did not exist in the Western classical music tradition. Percussion in the orchestra assumed supportive roles compared to the other instruments. Today, there have been approximately five generations of percussionists since the advent of dedicated percussion repertoire, making it possible to begin to talk about a history of percussion that has substance. Many of these percussionists have been active in the field long enough to see
the birth of percussion compositions that are now considered standard repertoire in the percussion community. In my opinion, many have made extraordinary contributions to the development of music in the 20th (and in some cases, 21st) century. There is a plethora of information on contemporary music written by (and of/for) composers and musicologists, but comparably very little from the performers themselves, and next to nothing from percussionists. The result from the process of researching the available information on this subject (or lack thereof) led me to attempt to fill in some gaps of information that I think might have an impact on the percussion community beyond my own curiosity.

My research is aimed at serving the present and future young percussionists so that they may become aware of the historical efforts by percussionists to develop the art to its present state. Being a younger part of this community of musicians in which I am researching, I clearly have a personal investment in the information I find. While my aim is to remain critical of the result of the contributions these percussionists have made, I will be arguing the significance of the information as it pertains to the percussion community as a whole, and contemporary percussionists in particular. By situating these topics within a large frame of reference, I contend that younger percussionists will be able to efficiently navigate the (musical) world we now live in.
The musical culture from which the percussive art form developed has undergone many changes that challenge today’s percussionist. Whereas in the mid 20th century, percussionists were most likely to have a sense of musical tradition and an eagerness to explore beyond those boundaries, young percussionists today struggle to identify with any single tradition or sense of single “rootedness” from which to grow. Our musical antecedents are many, and often difficult to comprehend in their richness, or exceed in their complexities and beauty. In his book, The University in Ruins (1996), author Bill Readings articulates this succinctly by suggesting that today’s university students are “born too soon without knowledge, and yet born too late to live that knowledge except as a tradition received from elsewhere” (p. 148). Today, young percussionists are saturated in valuable musical information through the media while they struggle to find a focus, or meaning in the practice. In the community of percussionists in America, challenging and rewarding discourse is rare and seems to represent a threat to the stability and marketability of established music making practices such as orchestral and popular music styles. Looking back, we ask, “What have we gained? What has been lost? What was worth losing? What is worth saving?”

The question can be framed in another way: What are the current needs of the contemporary percussion community and how has this changed over time? One of the featured percussionists in this study, Allen Otte (2010),
suggests, “What the percussion community most needs is exactly what everybody else needs: a society (organization of a social system) in which we are useful and contributive people.” In the absence of a percussive society that successfully addresses the needs of contemporary percussionists who generally trod in experimental territories, how do we create and sustain the work that we do? Later, we will look at the importance of institutions of higher learning for this purpose and discuss the changes of percussionists’ needs over time.

1.2 Methodology

Instead of speaking in generalizations about large groups of percussionists, I have opted to focus on the basic material of those groups, which are individual human beings. To support my thesis, I have interpreted interviews that I conducted with percussionists Steven Schick, Fritz Hauser and Jan Williams during the years of 2009-2010. These experts in percussion were chosen by me based on affinity and opportunity, given the time and location restraints that professionals encounter. In an effort to elucidate the various historical narratives of the field of contemporary percussion, preference was given to percussionists who are well established and have a greater vantage point on which to share their knowledge.
In addition, I have solicited interview responses via email from percussionists Bob Becker and Allen Otte to complete the survey. It should be clear that the nature of these correspondences have allowed answers that have benefitted from the time to carefully craft one’s ideas. I urge the reader not to directly compare responses to questions from this category of interviewees with the others because of this difference.

I have included the full transcriptions of interviews in the appendices to complement my historical perspective of the changes in percussion. However, my primary concern is not to simply assemble facts, but rather elicit meaningful discourse within the larger community of percussionists. In other words, my research is not meant to be comprehensive in scope, but instead insightful in character, while still retaining educational significance. It is my hope that this collection of interviews will help to expand the scope of percussion history and encourage an active participation in its future potentials. The multiple viewpoints might be imagined to function as separate instruments that together comprise a multiple percussion setup. This is not to say that each personal view should be attacked and abused, but rather that we might approach the narratives musically by listening and engaging with the sound. It follows that I strongly urge the reader to read the interviews in full in order to glean the priceless anecdotes and insight they offer.
The process of composing questions involved many steps and practical considerations. I originally planned to have similar questions for each artist in order to produce data that could have statistical comparability. I found this approach ultimately inefficient, as some of the questions I drafted were previously answered in various publications. I proceeded to collect and study the literature on the artists that I secured interviews with in order to discern the gaps in their histories that I might be able to investigate. Finally, I opted to create individual questions for each artist stemming from general areas of curiosity including: historical narratives, personal anecdotes, and present issues/problems that the artists wish to address. My guiding focus has been to pose questions that might suggest how to proceed to create a meaningful future in the field of percussion music.

I hasten to add that I was not able to contact and research all of the percussionists that would be necessary for a comprehensive approach. In some cases, their omission stems from the same lack of available information to which this study is an effort against. In particular, percussionists living in Europe such as Jean-Pierre Drouet, Robyn Schulkowsky, Christoph Caskel, Sylvio Gualda and Jean-Paul Bernard were not included predominantly because of time, distance and language barriers. American percussionists: John Bergamo, Ray DesRoches, William Kraft, Michael Colgrass, William Winant, and Donald Knaack were regrettably neglected here mostly due to
time constraints. It is my hope to meet and interview these percussionists in the near future to append this research.

1.3 Tap Route(s)

Although I do appreciate tactless puns for their own sake, the words routes and role actually appear in the title for important reasons. The presence of a taproot implies a long history and a secure foundation on which to build a future. Whereas I think this might be an interesting or valid lens for a view of percussion history, my experience and interest in percussion has shown otherwise. I have found percussion in particular, and music in general, full of pathways for exploration that extend in multiple directions and dimensions. The theory of a taproot rooting the practice of percussion in some solid ground, although enticing for some reasons, might not explain the changes that came with music in the late 1950s or 60s, or the multitude of uses that we commonly find today amongst percussionist. The word, routes, also helps to reinforce and symbolize my choice to include multiple views in my research—reflecting the common practice of percussionists to produce coherence out of disparate objects and/or forces. What do these different views collectively tell us about the field of percussion? If we were to follow along one of these routes, where would it lead us?
The “changing role” of the percussionist in the title refers to the degree of integration they achieved in modern audiences’ awareness as well as the specific technical changes that took place within their practice. Certainly there are percussionists who still spend countless hours practicing their snare drum roll, but the number of tasks that we encounter in modern music today demands us to pay attention to many more issues (and instruments) that extend beyond yesterday’s expectations.

In summary, I have attempted a wide survey of contemporary percussion that spans from describing its historical and cultural factors to investigating the participants’ personal motivations. First, I outline the general rising trajectory of American percussion in the 20th century culminating in the acceptance of percussion as an accredited field of study in universities. I then discuss some specific contributions from percussionists who were instrumental in this elevation. The second half of the dissertation deals with the relationships between percussionists and their surroundings, as well as their own personal thoughts and assessments on the field. I will now draw attention to these issues using percussionists’ perspectives to track how these changes have affected the boundaries and conception of the art form.
2 POINTS OF ARRIVALS

2.1 Registering the Noise

The advent of percussion music’s popularity in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century has been documented in numerous publications (see Beck, 2007; Blades, 1992; Gagné, 2004; Peters, 1975; Schick, 2006). Therefore, I will only outline a general trajectory including the various elements that helped give rise to contemporary percussion before moving into some particulars. During the last two hundred years, percussion slowly evolved from being supportive and evocative instruments in the rear of the orchestra to establishing its capability as an ensemble and solo art form worthy of its own stage. What factors led to this drastic change in the functioning role of percussion?

The coincidental ubiquity of loud noise produced by industrial machines in the developing cities during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century helped to pave the way to a gradual acceptance and popularity of percussion music. American cities, in particular, were producing a wealth of noise due to the affluence of its economy and the technological advancements that were being implemented. Noise became a reality for many urbanites, even if they resisted it at first (see Thompson, 2002). But some artists embraced the noise, and found ways to incorporate the new sounds into their music.
Both jazz and classical composers began to experiment with these noises, which were often best realized by percussion instruments. From Duke Ellington’s evocation of the sounds in a Harlem apartment airshaft, to Luigi Russolo’s 1913 manifesto of noise’s supremacy, these innovative artists pushed to awaken audiences to the relevancy of noise in music to their cultural surroundings. The general public was slow to approve, but noise continued its progress unabatedly until it scaled the final and highest peak: Western classical music. In an effort to expand the scope of classical music, romantic composers increasingly borrowed sounds and techniques from other musical cultures. The perceived impurity of the foreign sounds quickly became their exotic charm. These appropriations gradually proved vital at a time when the vocabulary of functional harmonic tonality began to crumble.

Modern composers continued to explore the tenuous connection between noise and tonality until a bridge was erected and contact became possible. Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Kontakte (1960) for percussion, piano, and electronics, emblematized and punned this victory over the hierarchical divisions between tonality and noise. In Kontakte, unpitched noise is connected along a spectrum with pitched sound, creating an integration of sounds that we know and recognize with sounds that we do not. Percussion sounds were now free to evolve and participate on equal level (at least theoretically) with other instrumental sounds. Or, as Schick (2006) suggests,
“...the noises and sounds of percussion ceased needing a reason to exist” (p. 16).

Many percussionists worked diligently to make music with these noises, utilizing the same integrity of an orchestral musician. During their formative years, contemporary percussion ensembles strived to achieve the same respect and commitment as a string quartet. Williams (2007) explains, “The ability [for percussionists] to play chamber music was not always the case. We didn’t know how to listen to each other the way members of a string quartet do. We needed to have a conductor all the time.” Most of the percussionists I interviewed echoed this inferiority complex and envy of the string quartet model. Otte (2010) illustrated his frustration at the lack of opportunities for percussionists in the universities: “When I was an undergrad at Oberlin there was no percussion ensemble, and I was already then envious of the string players who worked in (and got credit for) small chamber music groups.”

In the quest to equal the playing field between string players and percussionists, some percussionists developed opposing ideas about what specific elements they wanted to equal. Whereas on the one hand there were ensembles that aimed to obtain the same level of musicianship required of concert chamber music, some groups confounded their envy of musicianship and social respect with the sheen of tonality. In The Drummer: Man (1975), percussionist Gordon Peters writes about primitive men in ancient history
experimenting with implements to make noise and various tones. But it is not until man “succeeded in fashioning instruments yielding a series of tones similar in quality but varying in pitch” did they find themselves in the domain of art (p. 6). Later, he affirms this dogma by equating the delight in sheer noise with infants and “savages” (ibid. p. 68). His argument satisfies the traditional trope in Western classical music that equates purity of tone with high-art, and noisy sounds with “other” subordinate folk music. The implication of the argument often reveals a deeper fear of the unknown, to which Eurocentric values are placed above all in defense. I argue that percussionists who embrace the noise have a great opportunity to demonstrate the fallaciousness of the above trope and work towards building a future that is rich in cultural diversity.

2.2 Multi-Percussion Setup

The role jazz played in the formation of the concept of a single musician making music with a multitude of percussion instruments is considerable. The majority of percussionists I researched for this project conceded that jazz drummers were the most visible and influential model of a definition of what a percussionist is, or could be, during their introductory years of musical training. Swiss composer and improvising percussionist, Fritz Hauser (2009) reflected on his first musical experience, in terms of drumming, when as a young
teenager he saw Max Roach play on a black and white TV: “That was just a miracle. It was a miracle I heard music. I didn’t hear drumming; I heard music.”

The various percussion instruments used by jazz drummers, known collectively as a “drum set,” became popular in the 1920s. This set of drums typically included a pedal bass drum, snare drum, tom-toms, woodblocks and cymbals. Foreshadowing later trends for dedicated multi-percussion compositions twenty years later, Duke Ellington’s drummer, Sonny Greer (1895-1982), added tubular chimes, vibraphone, gongs, tam-tams, and timpani to his basic setup in the 1930s. A quick look at the percussion instrumentation of Igor Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat* (1918) or Milhaud's *Creation du Monde* (1923) provides further evidence for the influence jazz drums were starting to have on classical composers of the era.

In Western classical music, this collection of percussion instruments was termed, “multi-percussion setup.” The objects are usually activated to produce sound by striking, or scraping, but are not limited to such means. The advent of multiple percussion as an efficient instrument for one percussionist has been well documented by Schick in the *Encyclopedia of Percussion* (Beck, e. 2007, p. 289) and in his own book, *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams* (2006). In addition to the jazz drum set, Schick points to the simultaneous decline of the dominance of tonality and the influence of
American avant-garde composers John Cage and Lou Harrison as an important catalyst for the rise of the instrument.

Schick (2006) is also quick to remind us that to play multi-percussion is really to play a non-instrument in the sense that the collections of instruments rarely remain constant when moving from one composition to the next. In spite of this inconsistency, he maintains that: “The basic action of performance, at the root of which is the stroke with its lift, quick descent, and contact, remains largely consistent” (p. 5). In other words, Schick indentifies percussion more with the way in which human beings make use of the sounds, than the sounds themselves. He places more value on “the relevance of a sound or sounds to a moment in music” (ibid. p. 6). Because the instruments themselves are often interchangeable (bongo vs. small tom-tom; or small triangle vs. large triangle), he argues that they function more like tools, perhaps implying that the real instrument is actually the individual performer.

The rising use of multi-percussion can be further explained historically in practical cost-efficient terms. Percussionist Al Payson (1973) suggests that in addition to jazz, “Multiple-percussion had its origins in economic problems…” (p. 16). As the trends for composing for huge orchestras diminished in the early to mid 20th century, composers became interested in composing for fewer musicians, which also lowered operating costs. The percussionists were increasingly asked to “cover” more parts than were
originally indicated for one player. Eventually, one percussionist was efficiently able to combine and play what an entire section of percussionists had played.

Percussionists needed to rethink how to perform in these demanding music situations by using simple tools imaginatively. Various advancements in technology helped facilitate this need by ergonomically streamlining the mechanical components of the multi-percussion setup. Namely, a foot pedal for the bass drum was invented in 1909, as well as a pedal mechanism that could play two mounted opposing cymbals in 1926. In addition, there were hardware changes that allowed the precise mounting of drums and percussion to angles that would facilitate close mounting and smooth playing execution.

The pressure to perform well on a large number of instruments is an inherent aspect of multi-percussion practice. Although many instrumentalists learn multiple instruments, it is not a required or expected to the degree it is today in the field of percussion. In her autobiography, Good Vibrations (1990) percussionist Evelyn Glennie writes about being frustrated at not having the time necessary “to learn how to exploit to the full the many different percussion instruments” in her college training: “One of the problems was the sheer variety of instruments” (p. 78). Becker (1992) echoed this source of anxiety in his “Paradoxes of Percussion” article when he wrote about the mental pressures involved having to learn to perform on a set of foreign instruments in front of large discriminating audiences in a short period of time. But Schick
(2010) reminds us that the wide variety of instruments is the very thing that many people really enjoy about percussion: “So, it seems to me that everything I once thought was an obstacle – people don’t respect percussion, there are too many instruments, it’s heavy, you got to set it up – every single thing that I thought was a problem has turned out to be an advantage. Those are the things people are interested in.” Additionally, I believe that when a musician gains skills on a multitude of instruments, he or she is developing mental and physical skills that create broader value outside the practice of music.

One of the notable side effects of playing multi-percussion instruments is the degree in which one becomes familiar with the experience of being out-of-control. This is opposed to a single instrumentalist who normally operates and maintains a sense of control within his or her relationship to their instrument. There is a degree of madness in the practice of a contemporary percussionist when one pauses to really analyze the situation. At the moment a percussionist receives a new piece of music, he or she begins to assemble a set of instruments that may be completely unlike anything they have played before. A level of chaos ensues until a level of mastery is achieved. “But it’s painful! Why do we do it?” Zen master Shunryu Suzuki’s (1970) words might help to explain why percussionists choose to relinquish this sense of control: "In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there
are few" (p. 21). With each new setup and piece of music we encounter, our thresholds for the possibilities of beauty expand, and we are rewarded.

I argue that multi-percussion is synonymous with a willingness to make beauty out of disparate materials and/or by foreign means. For those of us who inhabit postmodern cultures where the “center” no longer prevails, playing a multi-percussion instrument directly relates to our daily experience of plurality. The multi-percussion instrument is well suited to bring together various musical styles and context, thereby enabling us to engage with different modes and paradigms of thought. The trained multi-percussionist will often seek to learn various traditional techniques and rhythms of the instruments that he or she uses. Percussionists and composers choose to experiment with these combinations of (often foreign) instruments and sound making implements in efforts to achieve new sounds and tools for signification.

We can further speculate on the influence that multi-percussion instruments had in turn on the composers who wrote for the medium. The inexhaustible possibilities of these new hybrid instruments may have helped to serve as a model for other ways of conceiving composition. Was Cage influenced by these disposable instruments to experiment with indeterminate composition? Did the natural theatrical aspect of percussion performance inspire Argentinean born composer Mauricio Kagel to explore the boundaries between theatre and music performance? We do know that mid 20th century
composers were utilizing an increasing amount of disparate instrumentation in order to achieve a sort of unity through diversity in chamber music, much like a multi-percussion setup. For example, French composer Pierre Boulez combined flute, viola, guitar, voice, vibraphone, xylorimba, and unpitched percussion in *Le marteau sans maître* (1954), alluding to and cohering various musical practices, such as gamelan, African music, jazz, and Japanese music into one whole.

### 2.3 Burgeoning Substantiations

Percussion eventually became accepted as a pedagogical tool in American universities in the mid 20th century. Percussionist Paul Price (1921-1986) was the first to start an accredited percussion ensemble at University of Illinois, in Urbana, in 1950. The ensemble performed the neglected American repertoire from the 1930s and 40s from composers John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison. In 1956, Price moved to New York City to teach at the Manhattan School of Music. In a 1959 article entitled, “The Emancipation of Percussion,” Price decidedly thrust the proverbial percussion flag (most likely a homeless cymbal boom stand arm) into the earth’s crust and declared, “Percussion has come into its own. Percussion players are equally recognized musicians” (p. 26). He further defended the pronouncement by pointing to the fact that composers are writing for percussion more often and music schools
are finally setting up proper accreditation for the serious student. According to Price, percussion’s rising value can be explained as a combination of being the last frontier in music to master; it reflecting the turbulent atmosphere of the time and; a turning back to primitive sources as an eternal fact of the cyclical nature of art (ibid.).

Price was one of the earliest examples of percussionist who demanded philosophical changes to the fundamental training of percussionists. He attacked the dominant traditional rudimental training in percussion education, retorting, “The commercially imposed shackles of rudimental domination are slowly being discarded. While rudimental training is needed for proper snare drum performance, it is basic, and represents only a small portion of correct musical education” (ibid.). Price was also adamantly against performing transcriptions; they were fine as a pedagogical tool, but not to perform in concert. His theory was that there were enough valid compositions for percussion already – and composers who could write new pieces for percussion – so that we did not need transcriptions. Compare this approach to Eastman School of Music in 1960, where Williams (2007) notes that the Marimba Masters ensemble (who mainly performed transcribed pop tunes) was the only percussion ensemble you had the option of joining. Williams (2009) explains his aversion: “As far as I was concerned, the repertoire wasn’t that interesting, mainly because they played lots of transcriptions.”
Many students were attracted to Price’s studio to benefit from his determination and enthusiasm in the art. After all, it was the 1960s in New York, and the time was ripe for young students to venture into new domains in art, and receive university credit. Some of the graduates who later became influential in the field of percussion include DesRoches, Neuhaus, Williams, Colgrass, Bergamo, and jazz drummer Max Roach. Many of them formed strong identities around Price’s approach to music making. Williams (2009) acknowledges:

My identity was absolutely formed by Paul Price, that experience, and that school. In a sense I was ready for that because I was not that happy at the Eastman School of Music studying with Bill Street. I mean, Bill was great, he was a terrific player, a real old-school player who came up through the ranks and I respected the guy tremendously. But somehow it wasn’t enough for me. It was too staid and I wasn’t thinking that I would like to play in a symphony orchestra.

Strikingly similar, is Neuhaus’s (2004) explanation of his decision to attend Manhattan school against his parent’s wishes: “Juilliard was their first choice, but it was obvious to me that Manhattan was the only place for a percussionist to go because Paul Price was there directing a percussion ensemble. Juilliard was only producing orchestra musicians.”

Price commissioned and inspired hundreds of new compositions for percussion. Williams (2009) explains Price’s rationale: “He wanted to upgrade the whole perception of the percussionist; it had to be upgraded and how better to do that than by upgrading the repertoire. We did new music because
there was no old music for the instrument." Price created a publishing company, Music for Percussion, to have a commercial outlet for these new compositions. The timely advent of high fidelity LP recording technology in the 1950s also crystallized the aural impact of Price’s ensembles. Listeners could now repeatedly consume more complex and subtle music. Time Record’s *Concert Percussion for Orchestra* LP (1961) recorded in stereo provides an example of The Manhattan Percussion Ensemble’s potential, featuring John Cage conducting and performing on some of his compositions.

Born in Beaumont, Texas, Neuhaus became one the first American champions of multi-percussion performance outside of jazz. He started playing music after hearing the great jazz drummer, Gene Krupa, who he later studied with. Neuhaus earned a Bachelor and Masters degree at Manhattan School with Price during the years 1957-61. When I asked my interviewees when they first became aware of the possibility of performing solo multi-percussion repertoire, Otte (2010) replied, “…it wasn’t until the Max Neuhaus LP [Electronics & Percussion - *Five Realizations by Max Neuhaus*, 1968] appeared that such an activity registered.” Williams (2009) concurs, “It was Max who had the vision that there could be such a thing…we all benefited from his intense interest in finding pieces, designing concerts, collecting instruments, building set-ups and solving set-up problems…” Neuhaus (2004) pointed to his formative experience at Manhattan School with Price: “In this
process I discovered that works for one percussionist also existed and decided to learn to play them. After five years, I came out of Manhattan School a solo percussionist, an almost unknown profession at the time. I had grown out of my fascination with jazz and only building time.”

After graduating from Manhattan School, Neuhaus made many contributions to modern music. In 1962-63 Neuhaus toured Europe with Boulez’s Contemporary Chamber Ensemble playing the bongo part in Boulez’s *Le marteau sans maître*. In 1963, when German percussionist Christoph Caskel left Karlheinz Stockhausen’s ensemble, Neuhaus was asked to take his place. Stockhausen’s repertoire included his seminal solo percussion work, *Zyklus No. 9* (1959), which established Neuhaus as a world-class percussion virtuoso. Neuhaus performed a solo recital in Carnegie Hall, New York, to kick off a two-year tour around the United States and Canada as percussion soloist with Stockhausen. In a 1982 interview with composer William Duckworth, Neuhaus talks about his memorable first concert of the tour: “At the concert just before I played, [Stockhausen] went out and made an announcement disavowing responsibility, with the implication that a young American couldn’t do justice to his music. It backfired. I was ready to play that piece, and I played it like nobody had ever heard it before. It was a beautiful moment.”

One of Neuhaus’s notable contributions occurred while working with the pioneering American composer, Morton Feldman. Feldman composed his
seminal graphic percussion score, *The King of Denmark*, for Neuhaus to premier at the New York Avant-Garde festival in 1964. Neuhaus (2004) relays an important moment in their collaboration: “In the second or third session, [Feldman] was still insisting, 'no, it's too loud, too loud'. I suddenly remembered how, as percussion students, we used to practice our parts on stage just before a concert started. In order that the audience not hear us, we used our fingers instead of sticks. I put down my sticks and started to play with just my fingers. Morty was dumbstruck, ‘that's it, that's it!' he yelled.” Neuhaus’s willingness to let go of the very things that provide coherence with a multi-percussion setup peeled off a whole new layer of sound in contemporary music that many listeners had not been privy to.

Neuhaus’s interest in percussion led him along Cage’s prophecy to explore a career in live electronics and environmental sound art, eventually coining the term “sound installations.” In 1964, Neuhaus presented a solo percussion recital in Carnegie Hall that included live electronics. Columbia Records later recorded and released this same repertoire in 1968, entitling it: *Electronics and Percussion: Five Realizations by Max Neuhaus*. The album cover features Neuhaus, bare-chested, in the center of a plethora of wires and percussion instruments. It was after the release of this album that he decided to cease performing as a musician. Neuhaus (1982) admits that his fame as a percussionist set the foundation for him to attempt and realize his experiments
with sound installations later. However, Williams (2009) reminds us that his interest in electronics and environmental art “was certainly coming out of his experiences playing percussion.” Sadly, when he died on February 3, 2009, America’s premier organization for percussive arts devoted less than a half page memoriam in their newsletter describing his contribution—of which less than four sentences described his percussive contributions (Siwe, 2009).

In France, a professional contemporary percussion sextet was formed in 1962 that set the model for future groups to follow. Still active today, Les Percussions de Strasbourg actively commission and premiere high quality percussion repertoire that continues to be challenging and relevant. There is a great need for more research on the group to be conducted and translated to English, as their span of accomplishments and contributions to the field is immeasurable.

In Buffalo, New York, Williams formed The New Percussion Quartet (1966-1971) with Ed Burnham, John Rowland, and Lynn Harbold. They held a composition contest in 1967 and received seventy new pieces to build their repertoire. The group eventually disbanded when members became too busy with their respective musical engagements to devote the time required to the quartet. However, the stack of compositions they commissioned eventually made it into the hands of percussionist Garry Kvistad, who was gifted the
compositions to jumpstart his own quartet founded with Otte, the Blackearth Percussion Group (1972-1979) in Illinois.

Otte recalls that the Blackearth Percussion Group was conceived as a full-time democratic high quality chamber music counterpoint to Les Percussions de Strasbourg (Reiss, 1987, p. 41). We can also see how Blackearth is linked (via The New Percussion Quartet’s commissions) to Price’s legacy. However, Blackearth specifically refers to the orchestral percussionist’s sensibility, rather than string quartet, as a model to aspire to in contemporary music: "The aim of the Blackearth Percussion Group is to bring to the field of contemporary percussion the highly refined skill and musicianship now existing in the percussion sections of the finest orchestras” (Kvistad, 1992, p. 15). Still, Otte (1974) heeded the need for “systems in which new views and uses of existing resources will lead to the discovery of new resources.”

In Toronto, Canada, the contemporary percussion group, NEXUS, was formed in 1971. One founding member, Becker, spoke to me in 2009 in Banff about a breakthrough for NEXUS when they first discovered Cage’s Third Construction (1942) in the mid 1970s on a Blackearth tape recording. Becker was surprised that no one at Eastman performed or even mentioned it while he was studying there (He also recalled that Edgard Varèse’s Ionisation—probably the first and most important composition for percussion—was
simply neglected at Eastman). After a bit of convincing, Becker succeeded in getting the other members of NEXUS to play the piece. This experience of playing high quality percussion repertoire opened up programming possibilities within the group and inspired them to seek more new music. In addition to the virtuosity and wealth of musical experiences each current member in the group possess, NEXUS continues to operate today as an important ensemble for contemporary music partly because of their willingness for eclectic programming that caters to a diverse audience.

Percussion ensembles slowly encroached upon the contemporary music spotlight in the 1950s, creating a slipstream for solo multi-percussionists to conserve their energy before advancing. However, in 1960, none of my interviewees could name a single solo percussionist besides Neuhaus who did not perform tonal keyboard music. Williams (2009) explains, “It was basically Vida Chenoweth playing solo marimba concerts at Town Hall. That was about it!” The awareness of published solo repertoire for percussion also remained low. In 1968, percussionist John Baldwin notes, “William Kraft’s French Suite, Robert Stern’s Adventures for One, and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Zyklus are the only published unaccompanied multi-percussion solos that the author is aware of at the present time” (p. 289).

The idea of a solo percussionist finally gained currency in the 1970s. French percussionist, Sylvio Gualda (b. 1939), is claimed to have played “the
first recital of percussion in the history of music” at the Great Auditorium of Radio France in 1973 (2010). Gualda is most revered for his work with Iannis Xenakis’ groundbreaking solo, Psappha (1975), which was written for Gualda and premiered in London, 1976 (ibid.). American percussionist Donald Knaack performed one of America’s first performances of Psappha in New York the following year, which was attended by Schick. Schick (2010) remembers his own first concert outside of a degree recital in November of 1978: “It was at the University of Illinois. I played Janissary Music, Psappha, and Zyklus; these were basically all the pieces that existed at the time.”

Schick has continued to give solo multi-percussion concerts since 1978 and remains an unmatched and tireless exponent of the genre today. In the Encyclopedia of Percussion article entitled “Multiple Percussion,” Schick ends with: “The most fruitful form of speculation in the area of multiple percussion performance practice remains the active commissioning and performance of new works” (Beck, e. 2007, p. 293). Many of these hundreds of new works he has performed have subsequently entered the canon of important percussion repertoire due to his relentless dedication and skilled interpretations. There is no repertoire for percussion that is too complex for Schick (including the impossible) and there are few multi-percussion pieces worth playing that he has not been responsible for popularizing to some degree. For example, the repertoire he memorized and performed during his legendary "Three Nights of
Percussion" concert given in New York in 1998, included the vast majority of demanding and sophisticated solo percussion music to date. His published writings and recordings also contribute a depth of intellectual vigor and discourse that greatly counteracts the otherwise athletic and commercial field.

The following anecdotes from Hauser (2009) are quoted at length below to retain the character of his experiences with solo multi-percussion. First, he describes his debut solo program in 1983 including his drum set piece entitled, *The Commuter*:

There were many impressive people in the audience including one of the Basel drum makers and also classical percussionists and jazz drummers who were well known around the world at the time, and... it worked! That encouraged me to go ahead. Then for the next three or four years I did around two hundred and fifty concerts. I played every possible small theatre. I played and played and played. I was just so happy I could do it! Those were the days where this infrastructure still existed: every little town had a small theatre. But I had to bring everything: the carpet, the instruments, the lamps, the backdrop, the soap to wash my hands in the dressing room, the towel, the food, the drinks; I brought everything, they didn’t have anything.

Hauser (1996) explains why he chose to perform solo with a drumset, rather than play in an ensemble:

I always had this feeling the drum set could be more than just a rhythm machine. Playing with other musicians I couldn't hear what the drums sounded like. I really love the solitary sound of a cymbal, the solitary sound of a drum resonating; pure drums. Together with other instruments it always changed. It was difficult to start to sell an idea like this; nobody believed it was possible. They kept asking, “Are you sure you want to come with just a drum set?”
Finally, when asked if he had any models for creating a career as a solo percussionist, Hauser (2009) replied:

I had seen the Swiss-French drummer Pierre Favre…although he wasn’t much of a musical influence on me; he was one of the pioneers of solo percussion in the jazz field. He would tell me stories of taking solos in jazz clubs where people would throw ashtrays and really hated what he was doing. Even to “trade fours” was testing the limits on what people would allow…so he was really the groundbreaking force that made it possible to go into new forms of music and listen in a different way. I remember going to the Jazz at the Philharmonic and seeing drummers like Louie Bellson, Art Blakey, Joe Morello, and people really showed up. The promoter presented it in a way that showed that this music could be concert music and not just background or dance music. And that is what I wanted; I thought people should listen, because I want to play with sound and silence. I don’t just want to just go along with tunes and be in the background.

In the late 1980s, the Scottish percussionist, Evelyn Glennie (b. 1965), claimed to be the first full-time solo percussionist at a time when there was not a tradition in Great Britain for solo percussion recitals in serious music halls “—not, that is, until I embarked on my one-woman crusade to create a wider audience for percussion music” (1990, p. 1). Glennie illustrates the basic attitude towards multi-percussion soloists in the early 1980s: “Nicholas Cole’s view, quoted in an article in the magazine Classical Music in June 1982 just before I joined the Academy, was: ‘You couldn’t make your living as a solo player any more than you could on the tuba.’ There was no precedent for it, partly because the repertoire for pieces for solo percussion was so small” (ibid. p. 82). In her autobiography, she writes about her manager’s difficulties with
developing a satisfying solo career for a (female) percussionist (p. 142-143).

The cost of transporting instruments was a huge deterrent by itself. Nevertheless, through her talent and determination, her achievements in the field are impressive. For example, she was the first percussionist to give a solo recital at the Royal Albert Hall in London. She also won a Grammy award in 1988 for Bartok’s *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* and has been designated a member of the Order of the British Empire (Glennie, 2010).
3 CONTEMPORARY PERCUSSION CULTURE

3.1 Relevant Relationships

My interests lay in the general social dynamics amongst percussionists and our perceived relevance of our art to the world at large. All of the percussionists I interviewed shared these same concerns. “I insist that my profession be relevant to the world in which I function; and I believe it is as simple as that” (Otte, 1974). But, is our profession (which is often comprised of repertoire dating as old as 50, 80, or 100+ years) relevant to the public anymore? Hauser (2009) reminds us that, “We have to cope with the fact that no one gives a shit about contemporary percussion anymore. If you have a hall of fifty people, everyone is happy already. So where is our right of existence in this world?”

Traditions exist in as much as they serve the interest in the society in which they function. In the 1960s, young musicians and audiences were attracted to percussion because of its freshness and potentials for new experiences. The exotic sights and sounds of percussion lured people to attend concerts and purchase records. However, this originality harbored its potential to breed new forms of social dependence, which is constantly being negotiated. Because creative artists depend on patrons to survive in our field, we need to reassess the degree of our successes and reevaluate our
definitions of that success. If audiences still want something new, how do we create that? If we no longer need to be new, than what should we strive for?

When I posed the question to Schick (2010) about how to escape reification of a collection of percussion pieces as standard “new” repertoire when they aren’t new anymore, he pointed to the young musicians’ responsibility to contribute:

Well, you don’t escape it; you can’t escape that. That’s of course why one relies on young musicians and future generations of people who have not yet been born. Of course in 1938 putting a bunch of tin cans together was this astonishing and shocking thing. It’s not anymore. This doesn’t mean Cage Constructions are not fascinating music and are not worth playing, but we certainly can’t just do that over and over again. He wouldn’t have expected us to do it over and over again. The instant that music was born it started a process of being understood by the culture in such a way that it was no longer new. It also started the clock running for someone to come along and revise the model. We can take whatever your wildest dream may be right now, something that would really change the world of percussion, and make something new. The instant that is made, it starts to become – especially if it is any good – part of the vocabulary and somebody forty years younger than you will say, “We’ve got to break that down.” I think that is just the cycle of life and I don’t think there is anything wrong with it. I see that attitude now, and have seen it for some time, about the kinds of music that I commission. These are concert pieces of twelve to fifteen minutes in length. How relevant is that anymore? We have a lot of them, and how many more do we need? That’s one way of looking at it. So when people come along and basically disdain that and want to do something else I wouldn’t take that as a personal criticism and I would think that it is true. It’s part of the life cycle and to some extant it is what I’ve decided to do in my recent years also.
Becker (2009) also chimes with this notion: “Now, and more and more in the future, the responsibility will be to alter radically, or even recreate the envelope itself. And I’ll go further than that – if a generation doesn’t agree to undertake, or can’t accept the responsibility to make and embrace the new paradigms, the transformations will, nevertheless, still occur, and those who don’t commit to them will be left behind in a kind of evolutionary limbo.”

3.2 Intellectual Curiosities

Contemporary percussionists need to keep an open mind to survive in the field. We strive to enrich our minds by developing mental receptivity in order to cope with the plasticity of our instrument(s). This mental receptivity becomes a springboard for nurturing curiosity and intellectual creativity that can become useful in our musical lives. Curiosity is often cited amongst percussionists as the initial attraction to the field and yet it is also the very same thing that we depend on to sustain our interest over time. Schick (2008) explains the connection succinctly: “How do you put in equilibrium the situation that the curiosity and the intellectual apparatus as it develops then produces a musical counterpart, which can be a repertoire?” Furthermore, when I asked Schick to explain a musical “problem” he has recently been concerned with, he answered that he has been most interested with the “one in which is basically in its essence a sort of eternal one, and that is the relationship of a world of
ideas to the pieces of music that are sponsored by those, or floated by those” (ibid.).

Contemporary percussionists broadened their intellectual curiosity in tandem with the explosion of the field in the mid 20th century. Neuhaus (1982) recalled how Stockhausen used to tell him that he was “too intelligent to be a musician.” It is difficult to say whether this broadening happened as a result, or a cause of the expansion of complex repertoire. Otte (2010) suspects:

I have the impression that members of my generation were among the first to take quite seriously many seemingly extra-musical things as potentially crucial elements in a life devoted to our art form (mostly I’m wrong – artists have always been aware of these things, but in my generation there begins anyway the ‘counter-culture’ consciousness (and publicity!) of such things, and we are talking here specifically about percussion, and then maybe I’m right). Yoga, Tai-chi, even diet, and surely in the field of creative music, everything that had to do with philosophy and (especially in and from the late 60’s/early 70’s) social-consciousness and the role of creative and experimental music – indeed, just the role of ‘high art’ as a contributing element to the society in which we found ourselves.

Many percussionists took an active approach to creating a holistic lifestyle to augment their dedication to percussion performance. Hauser (2009) admits, “I think I was more inspired by various films, books, theatre plays, and dance pieces than by music. I am not just into the music; I am into the arts.” Williams (2009) recalls the diverse percussion program requirements at Manhattan School in the 1960s:

I remember Paul Price required all of his students to read a small book published by Museum of Modern Art called “What is
Modern Art?” or “What is Contemporary Art?” It had nothing to
do with music, but was about contemporary painting and
painters. We were all encouraged to read about living artists
working in different disciplines just to try to get us to think about
how we, as percussionists, fit into the larger picture. The
diversity of thought and the way artists work was meant to
inspire us.

Contemporary music education was (and remains) different in this
regard from the orchestral musician’s training. Whereas at Eastman, Street
would have taught you the difference between staccato and legato, Price
urged a larger view of possibilities. A successful contemporary percussion
education needs to involve more than just technique implied Williams: “Those
students who are really serious will do all of that: get the technique and also
be… interested in music and all kinds of philosophy and art” (ibid.) Schick’s
(2008) concern implies the same: “I play just about as well as I have to, in
order to play the music I want to play, and probably not better than that. It
turns out that the music that I want to play is very, very difficult to play so you
have to play well in order to play it. But, if at the end of my life somebody says,
‘You know, he [Schick] was a really good player’, I’d feel disappointed; [in
response:] ‘Really, that’s what you took away?’”

Percussionist and composer Payton MacDonald speculates that the
difference between orchestral and contemporary percussionists might be one
of temperament: “Percussionists who play in contemporary classical
ensembles are generally more willing to take risks, both musically and
financially. They generally possess a high degree of intellectual curiosity and a desire to understand music in its totality—the entire spectrum of emotional discourse, as well as the intellectual and sociological foundations upon which a work of art rests” (Beck, e., 2007, p. 312). While I agree with the “risk-taking” generalization, surely there are also orchestral percussionists who strive to understand the music they play—in its totality. In some ways, it is easier now, as we can interact with the composers and share the same zeitgeist. Of course, one might encounter additional stress when working with living composers because of the required honesty and accountability involved in presenting your work.

3.3 Role of the Institution

In the United States, institutions of higher learning have continued to provide some important assets to the diverse community of percussionists. The economic demands of the market place decrease significantly once one is affiliated with a learning institution. In some cases, there is complete freedom from the public economy. Musicians are often let alone to experiment as they wish. Williams (2009) remembers this freedom during his student years, “We could concentrate on playing and not have to prepare for orchestral competitions. That was a really fortunate time for me” (also, see Packer, 2010). In addition, institutions are often the only place where a large number of
percussion instruments and facilities exist to practice and perform. Finally, ensemble experience and social networking are probably the two most valuable reasons why institutions remain desirable.

Contemporary percussion education seems to engender (or maybe demand) a kind of pedagogy that encourages students to learn to become their own teachers. Students learn how to observe their actions and evaluate, much like a craftsman would evaluate the making of an object and give judgment as to what needs improvement. This pedagogic method allows students to experience percussion as a work in progress, in that there is always something to learn. Students do learn important certain sound concepts from their teachers, but instead of replication; empowerment and integrity of choices remain the goal.

In the 1960s, the contemporary arts grew considerably when the Rockefeller Foundation funded contemporary music and art programs in a number of American universities. Williams and Schick both benefitted directly from these bolstered programs at SUNY Buffalo and University of Iowa respectively. Schick (2010) spoke about hearing Stockhausen’s Kontakte while attending his first concert at the University of Iowa as an undergraduate and how the positive attitude and support for contemporary music was the norm: “It wasn’t a revolutionary act to play contemporary music for me, not at all. It was the thing that was the most interesting thing going on in Iowa City
that time.” In Buffalo, an international group of musician/composers were funded to live, rehearse, and perform new music under the Rockefeller support. We can only regret that targeted funding for the modern arts has declined in the United States of America since the 1960s.
4 INTERPRETATIONS

4.1 Free will

Contemporary percussionists possess a considerable amount of freedom in their art. These freedoms include: the freedom to propose repertoire to their ensembles and to help shape the future of each ensemble; freedom to give and receive feedback with living composers; freedom from tradition—leaving each percussionist “free to make history” (Beck, e. 2007, p. 314). Also in The Encyclopedia of Percussion, all interviewees by MacDonald answered that “freedom” was the most important consideration in spending a life playing contemporary music (ibid.). The results of my interviews were similar.

Many percussionists chose to play contemporary music to escape the tacit suffering inherent in classical orchestral music. “I have no voice!” This move out of the orchestra encouraged self-reliance, as performers learned to play music without conductors and read scores instead of parts. A certain pride in individuality accompanied the transition and continues to be an important aspect of contemporary music culture in general. Hauser remembered his transition out of the music conservatoire where his teacher urged him to become a timpanist. Hauser (1996) dropped out because he “was too much of an individual” at that point and couldn’t imagine spending the rest of his life that way. Hauser (2009) later clarified, “I was never really part of
a group. I always felt a little bit that it never really worked: it never worked with the boy scouts, it didn’t work with the army, it didn’t work with the orchestra, it didn’t work with these drum lines, it didn’t work with anything. I’m just too much of an individual.” However, this individuality need not be conflated with indifference to others as Schick (2010) confirmed, “Maybe this is just naïveté, but I tend to think that a piece that I am really excited about, other people will be excited about it also. I don’t think there is another standard for the public.”

One of the most attractive aspects of playing multi-percussion is the degree of freedom performers often get assembling instruments. Some compositions only give guidelines as to what broad instrument categories performers should choose, and leave the rest to the performers’ will. For example, in Cage’s seminal work for solo percussion, 27’10.554” for a Percussionist (1956), he simply designates four instrumental categories to choose an unlimited amount of instruments to perform the composition successfully. These categories include instruments made from wood, metal, skin, and “all other sounds”—that could range from electronically produced sounds to vocalizations. Likewise, in Xenakis’ Psappha, and Brian Ferneyhough’s Bone Alphabet, the performer is allowed to choose his or her instruments within broad outlines given by the composer. This ability to choose instruments allows the percussionist to assert a personal voice amongst the plethora of other percussionists who might choose to play the same piece.
One only needs to compare this degree of freedom to a solo violin player to appreciate the different range of sound control percussionists have. 

A natural option for percussionists who possess an appetite for expressing individuality is to perform music that involves improvisation. In the 1950s and 60s, composers opted to incorporate elements of improvisation into their work as a way forward in a time when other resources have been drained. Some of these compositions include graphic notation, or mobile forms where the performer can choose amongst certain possible musical pathways. Many multi-percussionists today have done at least some improvisation during their career, even if they hesitate to be identified as such. 

Whether we like it or not, there are times when a percussionist is called to improvise precisely because of the many inherent variables that can change or collapse during a multi-percussion performance. In 2009, at the newly constructed Conrad Prebys Music Center at UC San Diego, Schick was forced to improvise after a bass drum pedal failure encroached on an otherwise smooth performance of Xenakis’ *Psappha* (of which he has performed on hundreds of occasions). Halfway through the performance, the bass drum beater came unattached and fell to the ground—leaving Schick pedal-less, and the attentive percussionists in the audience frozen in alarm. It is safe to say, that it remains highly unlikely that anyone besides the few percussionists in the hall took notice of this mishap, during, or after the performance due to
Schick’s ingenious recovery. He unabatedly continued performing while reaching down with his right hand to play the bass drum, sacrificing very few and unnoticeable notes on the other instruments. At the climax of the piece—when the bass drum should quickly throb incessantly underneath the very fast, loud, and noisy sounds in the hands—Schick slowed the tempo dramatically and played the bass drum with one hand and the melodic line with the other, successfully bringing the proverbial aircraft safely to the ground and finishing with a decided “Bwoomp!”

Other percussionists turned to improvisation as a primary vehicle for their artistic expression. Hauser (2009) chooses to label his composition and improvisation style “ethnic contemporary”:

Of course I like to be innovative in that I am looking for new ways, but always with respect with what has happened in the past. I often find myself using very traditional playing techniques. In *Drum with Man*, I think of it as going down to shamanic drumming in a way, and it’s not about inventing new techniques. It’s more in the essence of what you are doing, which is very, very personal. I really strongly believe that this kind of musical expression can only be found within your own improvisational skills, when you really fool around on the drums. It is not just realizing you have done something that no one has done before, but it really has to do with you.

We can further speculate that the label, “ethnic contemporary,” also suggests the importance of the diverse cultural origins of his instruments.

Assuming we have the freedom to make choices, we ask: What we will do with this freedom? In Otte’s 1973 essay, “Preferences in Percussion,” he
gives voice to his ideas of what the percussion field needs while alluding to our preferences as being the things that imbue our activities with meaning, longevity, and credibility. The forward-looking percussionist is urged to spend their time on worthwhile activities that they can stand behind with integrity.

Schick also stresses the importance of the significance produced by our actions: “I am normally much less interested in a sound than I am in the significance of a sound – in a way that a sound generates impact as the sonic extension of meaningful thoughts and actions” (2006, p. 8). And, in case the message did not register the first time, he rephrases, “Percussion playing, for all of its potential for momentary vigor, is destined to be rootless…unless those sounds can be embodied with action and thought, and harnessed with purpose and significance” (ibid.).

4.2 Meaning?

After spending countless hours developing a set of skills that are useful in the field of percussion, many questions arise. The question of purpose and intention: How is music acting as an articulation of my passion and desires? The question of skillful action: How do I best use my skills? Eventually, the need arises not only get things right, but to have it inform us about ourselves somehow. When we investigate our intention and ambition in action, we can gain more understanding into the formation of the results. What have we
created? How has it served us? Looking at the various ways people create meaning in their art, I find the way in which we believe *with*, and not *in*, our notions of meaning is fascinating. It is our self-perceived intentional actions that produce meaning, while language often stumbles to find the satisfying combination of words to articulate what it *means* in the end.

To solicit specific examples of this “meaning” in action, I posed the difficult question to Otte: “What has your practice of percussion taught you about life? Or, alternatively, what has life has taught you about percussion?” Otte’s (2010) response best conveys the implied consensus amongst the other interviewees when he answered, “maybe this here (?)” Perhaps at the root of the percussionist’s symbolic search for “beat one,” lay this question mark instead, changing Cage’s famous dictum into: “I have many questions to ask, and I am asking them.” I argue that the contemporary percussionist’s quest for meaning is uniquely poignant because we commonly interact with multitudes of new instruments and music we do not understand. Psychologist Carl Jung explains: “When you come to think about it, nothing has any meaning, for when there was nobody to think, there was nobody to interpret what happened. Interpretations are only for those who don’t understand; it is only the things we don’t understand that have any meaning. Man woke up in a world he did not understand, and that is why he tries to interpret it” (1969, p. 31).
But because Jung’s observation does point to the fact that many of us do create meanings for ourselves (and sometimes others), we might further extrapolate a forewarning to avoid intellectual dogmatism. Author Dennis Ford, in *A Search for Meaning: A Short History* (2007), adds, “The acceptance of complexity and the possibility of many possible meanings – whether we are speaking about a text, a society, a personality, a re-emergent polytheism, or a history – is an antidote to totalitarianism and fundamentalism, and the blindness of a single vision, of whatever variety” (p. 126). I argue that the domain of multi-percussion provides an intrinsic value to society in part due to its requirement for its stewards to adhere to Ford’s observation. We can learn from Price’s encouragement to his students not to quickly dismiss composer’s requests, but instead reply, “Well, I don’t know, but let’s give it a shot and see if we can make it happen” (Williams, 2007).

### 4.3 Shifting Domains

*Wonder*, as the beginning of all philosophy might also be designated as the root of contemporary percussion. Percussionists have always had to find ways to arouse the creative use of simple tools to solve complex problems. In his intriguing book, *The Craftsman* (2008), sociologist Richard Sennett defines this ability as a domain shift, which is “how a tool initially used for one purpose can be applied to another task, or how the principle guiding one practice can
be applied to quite another activity” (p. 127). He further illustrates how these intuitive leaps are often preceded by surprise and a sense of wonder, which then leads to a metamorphosis (ibid. p. 211-12).

Schick (2010) postulates the same while using the process of learning percussion as a key to understanding other endeavors: “That way of dealing with objects and collation of dissimilar objects and the coping strategies that attend any percussion project then provides a map for the acquisition of knowledge in all these other kinds of areas.” In his preface to The Percussionist’s Art (2006), Schick elaborates, “…music has often been the sharpest tool at my disposal to puncture the shallow habits of life and thereby to try to reach levels of greater intellectual and spiritual awareness” (p. xvi). Otte (2010) approached the shift from the opposite direction when he described a particular life experience that has helped him to be a better percussionist:

To ‘keep central’ – a literal translation from the Chinese that you might hear from a good tai-chi teacher – has increasingly meant for me to trust in the honesty of a rather traditional role of the artist. I’m not trying to sell anything – not the piece, and not myself. I trust that my private work in the practice room, honestly transferred to some public forum, will in and of itself ‘communicate’ to any observers/listeners.

A premise of music making that often gets neglected in academic discourse is how it enables insight into the procedure of experience that can shape our social dealings with others. The same difficulties one encounters in
producing something well can be applied to fostering human relationships. For example, working with ambiguities and resistance can help to understand why people treat each other as they do and why certain boundaries are built and maintained. When music making is approached with this in mind, we can learn to remain open to possibilities, to improvise, and to play with each other.

Starting in the mid 20th century, we have seen how percussionists were increasingly asked/allowed to exert a greater amount of choice in music—whether in regards to instruments, musical passages and/or interpretation. The issue of morality often surfaces in conjunction with these innovative ideas and the results of the choices made amongst them. Jung (1969) explains this danger of the “new”: “The progressive ideal is always more abstract, more unnatural, and less ‘moral’ in that it demands disloyalty to tradition. Progress enforced by will is always convulsive” (p. 163). We are often reminded that necessary ruptures or cataclysms are caused under dissonant circumstances and that percussionists are uniquely poised to create such cacophonies. However, I argue that contemporary percussionists are also situated to modulate and signify moral values to a degree that orchestral percussionists cannot, for example.

Schick (2010) has referred to the moral responsibilities of the creative artist in various instances: “I am not going to work with someone who I find has a negative personal influence on my life just because that person is a
good composer. That just can’t happen.” And, on the moral implications of memorization, to which Schick is especially noted for: “Memorizing demands that we take our responsibility to the score and a composer’s wishes very seriously” which will eventually bring “intense and meaningful contact with the music” (2006, p. 139). Later he emphasizes, “We not only have to have the right answer; we have to show our work” (ibid.).
5 ASSESSMENTS

5.1 Inside Paradoxes

Today, most of the (once-) new or shocking aspects of percussion music have been assimilated into the larger musical vocabulary. Namely, with the advent of digital sampling, listeners of popular music are inundated with a smorgasbord of sounds and noises that might have been previously made by a multi-percussionist. What changes in the field have accompanied this assimilation? Where does that leave the contemporary percussionist? In other words: What is there left to do?

After multi-percussion led the affront against traditional (tonal) modes of music making in the mid 20th century, the germs of future defeat were sowed when some of the percussive voices split and ruptured, producing more specialists and subgenres (marimba solo, minimalism, experimental, popular, electronic, improvisational, drumset, world music, etc.) Some of the reasons for this splintering are economic, as Williams (2009) is quick to point out: “Let’s face it; if you are ‘only’ a new music player, there aren’t so many opportunities out there in terms of University or Conservatory positions. You are almost forced into having other chops, like steel drum, marching band, theory, or musicology.” Along with the pressures to master many (or focus on few) instruments, the dominating power of percussion matured quickly before dissipating. Larrick (2003) laments, “The ‘golden age of percussion’, as the
international Percussive Arts Society has termed the middle part of the 20th century, has perhaps passed” (p. xii).

When multi-percussion repertoire became increasingly complex, a new breed of a virtuosic percussionist was born. While it is true that composers and performers always tried to transcend limits, multi-percussion instruments naturally provided a rich source for virtuosic display, as their overt physical requirements are easy to read (and hear) by audiences. Early solo compositions, such as Stockhausen’s Zyklus, bookend this trajectory along with later “new-complexity” pieces such as Ferneyhough’s Bone Alphabet.

Cage (2004) explains his particular fascination with virtuosity: “I had become interested in writing difficult music…because of the world system which often seems to many of us hopeless. I thought that were a musician to give the example in public of doing the impossible that it would inspire someone who was struck by that performance to change the world.”

One of the evident changes in the field of percussion in the last hundred years has been the increasing technical ability of young percussionists to demonstrate this virtuosity. We no longer have to cancel premiers of new music because of technical insecurities. However, after these “impossibilities” have been demonstrated numerous times by numerous performers, they tend to lose their powerful allure. There is a limit to the speed and agility of human bodies to execute these difficult musical passages. This limit, arguably, has
already been achieved. If virtuosity for Cage’s sake remains the goal, than new “impossibilities” need to be discovered.

I suspect that we are currently entering into a new period of percussion performance where virtuosity for its own sake is losing currency because of the above-mentioned stipulations. Musicians who prefer to play difficult pieces massage their tenacity of will, but risk neglecting their intellectual prowess. Even if we retain the vital need for heroism in our art, perhaps we can begin to acknowledge what visual artists have known for centuries: “…other things being equal, a heroic figure at rest has a greater transporting power than one which is shown in action” (Huxley, p. 121). Alternatively, maybe what we really need is the “personal”, as Hauser (2009) suggests: “I am more interested in people’s personal voice. I don’t give a shit if anyone can play Rebonds faster than anyone else. When I can tell that this is a very personal thing, then it starts to interest me.”

5.2 To Change or Sustain?

From our present vantage point, we can finally begin to observe the overarching changes that occurred in the field of percussion over the last one hundred years. I solicited opinions from all my interviewees on their views of the history of percussion to illuminate any issues that may need revisiting. I
received some stark assessments of the field as well as intriguing propositions for the welfare of percussion in the future.

After lamenting about the increasing lack of discourse in the percussion field evidenced by the ubiquitous appearance of idiomtic tonal marimba “vomiting in D-flat major,” Otte (2010) admits, “I must say that I sometimes experience this as yet another component of the-joke-being-on-me after all of these years: my devotion to the idea of bringing the ‘high art’ of European Chamber Music to the field of percussion sometimes seems to have been comically anachronistic before I even got started.” Otte continues on an equally critical note: “We’re in quite good shape with technical facility—hands and brain; less sure when it comes to good ears and touch, and quite adrift as to what constitutes ‘contributive’ in a larger cultural/societal moment where the ideals of high art for its own sake are appropriately in question” (ibid.).

Schick (2010) laments the attention drawn from the scheming opportunists who were awoken by the noise: “There is an aristocracy of classical music which is now a part of contemporary percussion and wasn’t when I was younger. I mean we are so fortunate; we’re so lucky, that they didn’t care about us because it meant that there was this liberty and necessity to create these new ways of thinking. Then all of the sudden people start looking over and say, ‘Hey, they are actually doing something interesting, let’s go take it.’” In economics, social theorist David Harvey (1991) reminds us,
“Innovation exacerbates instability, insecurity, and in the end, become the prime force pushing capitalism into periodic paroxysms of crisis” (p. 106).

Schick distinguishes the domains of the “crisis” that we may find ourselves in today: “If you spent any amount of time looking at what the Percussive Arts Society stands for, endorses, and produces, than I think it is not hard to say that we are in a crisis. But then, of course, all you need to do is get a little distance on that and realize that there are many other things to do and percussionists who have nothing to do with that kind of way of thinking and then all of the sudden, it doesn’t seem like as much of a crisis to me anymore” (ibid.).

Schick remains critical of the economic and artistic entanglements of commercial interests in the field of percussion: “When composer ‘X’ writes a marimba piece I have to stop and wonder, ‘Is that something that is the natural growth of the creative process for that person or is that because of the set of inter-entangling commercial alliances?’” (ibid.) Schick is alluding to the vital interest of percussion instrument manufactures to fuel the insatiable need for repertoire that would require use (purchase) of their instruments: “It’s making a kind of emblem for the furtherance of something that started as a commercial impulse. Nothing against people making money, of course, but I think it is too close to the DNA of the creative act of percussion for me to be happy” (ibid.).
William’s (2009) concern also seems to remain focused on the integrity of the music when he explains:

That was the other thing about Price; you didn’t worry about whether a piece was going to ‘make it’ or even be remembered in fifty years. Your responsibility as a player is to play it the way the composer wanted it to be played. For me personally, I’m not too concerned about fostering and sustaining traditions. I have the percussion tradition, but as far as being a musician, I am more interested in what the young composers are coming up with. But, is there now a percussion ensemble ‘tradition’? I don’t give that question a lot of thought.

Hauser (2009) offers a personal and philosophical assessment of the issues surrounding the field of percussion today:

I’ve always understood contemporary percussion as a kind of research: like in science where you need people to research ridiculous stuff to find new aspirin and if we are not going through all of these possibilities than nothing will come out of it. But on the other hand, someone has to pay for it. How can I cope with it? How can I cope with getting older? How will my body react? How will my brain react? How will my mental condition react? Can I just be relaxed about it? When I am turning sixty or sixty-five do I want to be around here? These are philosophical questions about life that I realize are predominating for me now.

Before suggesting that technology remains the most radical change in music’s continuing evolution, Becker (2009) considers the effects of globalization: “Now that we can effortlessly look and listen around the world, we can see how our ways compare to their ways. Music that was considered primitive by westerners two centuries ago is understood today to be complex in the extreme. Some of our ‘advanced’ techniques are found to have been
developed five hundred years ago in music cultures half way around the globe.”

Otte (2010) admits that the various splintered factions of contemporary percussion reflect our present culture much better than the antiquated “high art” of European chamber music. However, he immediately follows the confession with a caveat and a big sigh: “I’m not at all second guessing my choices or judging very different ones that were right for others, but here is the one perspective from which I think I could say the music does indeed speak for itself” (ibid.). Otte then argues for the continuation of the practice of playing and performing acoustic percussion: “I worry that percussion is an exquisitely tactile art form – it is about sound and touch and vibration, it is traditionally/historically associated with spirituality more so than, I think, any other sound producing artifact, and thus, most benefits from vibrating in real time and space, with real human bodies at hand” (ibid.). Finally, Otte explicates his number one problem to revisit:

… the goal to preserve, from my perspective now, looking at the percussion landscape: ‘In my mind and ear and heart, the standard for sound and touch, on all (western) percussion instruments, was set by the previous generation of iconic orchestral players – timpanists, bass drummers, cymbal players; I cheat myself and listeners and music by not living up to that standard in everything I do as a percussionist, no matter how experimental the proposition.’
5.3 Stepping Outside

A percussionist who is concerned with exploring the boundaries of sound and performance art flirts with the possibility of leaving behind the field of percussion all together. We have noted this trajectory already in Neuhaus, but there have also been others who have followed this exodus to some degree either into composition, conducting, theatre, electronics, or visual art. On her personal website, Glennie (2010) describes herself as: “Musician, Motivational Speaker, Composer, Educationalist and Jewelry Designer.” This movement may not present a problem in itself, but I argue its importance as a by-product of the porous boundaries of contemporary percussion.

Perhaps with too much freedom, we lose the foundations of the boundaries that define our field? Where do we draw the line? How many liberties can we grant people without sacrificing the integrity of the music? If a percussionist records isolated percussive sounds to create a composition for playback, do he or she remain a percussionist? Hauser (2009) illustrates this conundrum with an anecdote about the liberties taken with flexible and graphic scores: “John Cage wrote one4 for me and I played it and he was happy and I heard a few versions of what other people did and I just thought, ‘How can they even come up with this version? It is impossible.’”

Many percussionists were drawn into composing music for their own instruments because of a lack of repertoire. Percussionist-turned-composers
Mervin Britton, Jack McKenzie, William Kraft, Michael Colgrass, and John Bergamo all contributed greatly to the early field of percussion literature. In Otte’s (1974) “Preferences for Percussion” he suggests, “One underlying reason that percussionists began to write their own music was simply to sustain the field which was full of life in the 40's. Rather than finding the need for utilizing percussion instruments as dictated by the wants of a composer through his musical system, (to the mutual advancement of new music and the field of percussion) a literature was created in order to sustain the percussion ensemble” (p. 93). Williams (2009) recently assessed percussionists’ efforts with composition: “…I think we’re getting to the point now where we don’t need to worry so much about building repertoire and writing music for ourselves.”

Other percussionists composed because of the natural fascination with sound and choices that were nurtured in their experiences with percussion. Neuhaus (1982) describes his transition into composition: “I don't know whether I ever sat down and said: 'Now I'm going to be a composer'…The work that I was doing as a percussionist demanded that I make a lot of the decisions about the music itself; that was the beginning of it. I've never sat down to make a composition. I have ideas and I realize them.” In a more recent New York Times article entitled “Percussionists Go From Background to Podium” (2009), writer Allan Kozinn mentions Steve Reich and John Cage as forerunners to percussion-turned-composers such as Lukas Ligeti, Glenn
Kotche, Ms. Glennie, Keiko Abe, and So Percussion. Other ensembles, such as NEXUS, always composed, arranged, and improvised some of their music.

In Kozinn’s article mentioned above, he also notes the recent trend for percussionists to perform as conductors. Although it may be tempting to insert common bad jokes about this transition here, there are many obvious reasons why this transition proves rational, especially in the domain of contemporary music. Schick (2009), now Music Director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus, explains his recent interest in conducting and theatre as an outgrowth of the struggle “to continue to do new things that are as intriguing now as that was then. So, I think it means a little bit more diverse set of activities, at the moment, including outside of percussion.” Because there are many more compositions for percussion today, his efforts towards developing new pieces have shifted towards “pursuing more pathways that I think are personally satisfying than more generally applicable or important” (Schick, 2010).
5.4 Conclusion

During our brief historic analysis, we have tracked the development of percussion as an art form from the performer’s perspective. I have shown how percussionists have expanded their job description beyond performing technical jobs well for their own sake. The dynamic nature of multi-percussions’ origin remains visible in the profusion of forms and paradoxes that the field nurtures. I hope my research has shown that the art of contemporary percussion has been constructed as a world of possibilities and potentialities to live in rather than a fixed set of skills and information to assimilate and understand. In order to experience these possibilities, the contemporary percussionist is beckoned to develop the patience of craftsmen, with their ability to suspend the desire for closure.

It should be evident from the accounts above that the personal and the individual aspects of music making are valued greatly amongst the percussionists I included here. Depth of feeling and imagination take precedence over technique alone or cold virtuosity. Considering the weight of this value, I contend that my prefatory argument for a historical view of contemporary percussion that highlights this subjectivity is well justified. With more attentive research on the personal, the specifics of these and other percussionists’ experiences will serve to foster a richer future. In other words, I
argue the true value for us lies in the discipline they champion as exemplified in the lives that they live.

When you have done everything that could possibly be done, the only thing that remains is what you could still do if you knew it. (Jung, p. 21)

Innovation doesn’t destroy anything—people forget things. (Becker, 2009)

We were given the freedom to do what we knew we could do best. (Williams, 2009)

The atmosphere within the field of percussion is pretty good: it is constructive and they help each other. It is not like people fighting to be the first violin. The question is usually ‘how can we go forward?’ That is very nice. (Hauser, 2009)

If the spirit of the endeavor is right, if there is sound at its source, if there is curiosity, and all these kinds of things that we really care about, if that is really active, then the repertoire that grows out of that, and the practice that grows out of that, to me—it’s a little irrelevant what actually grows out of that—as long as it’s growing out of that. (Schick, 2008)

So here we are: this is your time and place. Now what? (Otte, 2010)
Dear Bob,

It was great to talk to you the other day, and have the opportunity to hang out with you while here in Banff. Thanks again for your willingness to answer some questions for my doctoral dissertation and larger project to collect anecdotes and interviews from various important senior/accomplished percussionists in our field. Your contribution will surely enhance my understanding of the field as well as the many others who will get to read them. Below are the questions. They are arranged with “sub-questions” beneath each question to further clarify and expound the area of inquiry. Feel free to ignore or elaborate further on any of the following topics.

Justin DeHart

1) What are some of your recent goals in the field of percussion? Directions you would like to explore, develop etc.

Bob Becker: Not to be glib about this question, but for any performer my age (I’m 62) a primary goal is to not get too much worse every year. It’s probably difficult for any mature artist to set grand, long-range kinds of goals. The management of time and energy within a performance career is difficult enough from day to day, let alone over more extended periods, and so the luxury of exploring and developing new concepts and ideas becomes increasingly rare. The great percussionist Alan Abel once told me about the “career triangle” — the three elements necessary for a financially successful life in music: the symphony job, the college teaching position, and the instrument/mallet manufacturing or music publication association. For most musicians of Mr. Abel’s generation, that equation also included a home and family. In my own life, I have tried to maintain a commitment to time for personal reflection, experimentation and composition. In a practical sense, this requires limiting activities that are creatively draining such as teaching, managing a business or administrating. The result is available time, but then also constraints on financial security, capital and personal relationships.
As a recent example, I wanted to understand the mathematical principles underlying the organization of patterns that are used for stickings, rhythmic groupings and polyrhythms. I invested quite a lot of time in study and research over two years. Certain things required technical practice, and I also focused on composing eight etudes incorporating what were, for me, some new concepts. The whole endeavor took on a life of its own, and the outcome was a 200 page book, *Rudimental Arithmetic*. No one asked me to write a book like that and no one paid me for my time. Nevertheless, the result was both conceptual and technical growth for me, and perhaps a useful, possibly inspiring, source of information for others. It’s unlikely I could have completed a project like that while balancing a performing career, teaching position, manufacturing connection and a traditional family life.

2) Explain your relationship to the idea of “competition” in music and how it has helped to serve or hinder your development as a musician and human being. This is in reaction to: Peak Performance: “Then I go out and try to kick butt.” LHS interview: “Make dust or eat dust!”

BB: That first statement is simply an expression for adopting a “performance attitude”, or “finding the zone”. Any good performer – be they musician, actor, dancer – knows about the importance, and the beauty, of being “there” while on stage. To me, this is not about competition, except perhaps with oneself. It’s about exploration of a kind that only really happens with the cooperation of an audience. When I play any music, and particularly pieces that I am playing repeatedly, I want to go deeper, or at least someplace new, every time. To the extent I can do this, I feel rewarded and satisfied. In fact, I believe that discovering and illuminating new aspects of the music is my principal job as a performer. Whether I succeed in doing this is far more critical than how accurately I play every note. Of course, there’s an obvious balance between those two things that must be maintained when playing composed music. If you’re not playing the notes, then you’re not equipped to be exploring the piece in the first place.

The second comment I made kind of spontaneously in answer to Leigh Steven’s question about what advice I would give to young percussionists, and his limiting my answer to no more than eleven words. I wasn’t being entirely facetious – it has been every generation’s role to push the envelope that has been defined previously for any discipline. At the present time in history there is, additionally, a technological imperative that has rather changed the generational mandate. Now, and more and more in the future, the responsibility will be to alter radically, or even recreate the envelope itself. And I’ll go further than that – if a generation doesn’t agree to undertake, or can’t accept the responsibility to make and embrace the new paradigms, the
transformations will, nevertheless, still occur, and those who don’t commit to them will be left behind in a kind of evolutionary limbo.

3) How has the fundamental meaning of what you wish to share/represent in music changed over your career? What do you strive most to represent in your art?

BB: “Represent” is an interesting word to use in relation to musical expression. In games like poker, people speak of “representing a hand” – in the sense of betting as if one holds much better cards than were actually dealt. In music performance, of course, you can’t get very far on a bluff – in a concert you have to deliver the goods, and then any sophisticated audience will know immediately what kind of hand you’re playing. When I was a student I usually presented myself, and the music I played, in ways I was shown by my teachers or by performers I was trying to emulate. That approach to performance is very much in keeping with representation, in the sense of acting or standing for something or someone else. It’s a very common attitude, even among professionals, and many musicians can’t get away from it.

Somewhat later in my career, after exploring a number of music cultures outside of the western classical and jazz traditions, and after being involved with the creation of an improvisation ensemble like NEXUS, I came to understand that, for me, exploration and adventure – as real-time performance activities – were what I wanted to share with colleagues as well as with audiences. I also realized that this kind of attitude was not only applicable in “free” improvisation, but in every style of music, including the most structured classical forms. It’s a risky approach, and you have to be willing to accept the grotesque and the pathetic along with the brilliant, but, for better or worse, it’s the way I’ve lived most of my musical life.

4, 5) Describe a major discovery or breakthrough you have had in your musical career that changed or greatly enhanced your understanding of the field. Was there any particular moment/circumstance where you had a confirmation of the musical direction you were taking? Can you give an example of a musical experience during your career that greatly illuminated your understanding of daily life, or the universe at large? What has your practice of percussion taught you about life? Or, alternatively, what has life taught you about percussion?

BB: These are really wonderful questions. Unfortunately, I can’t think of an answer for any one of them. I can say that percussion instruments, percussion music, percussion technique, and performing together with other percussionists constitute my career, but they are not my life. To understand
anything about the universe at large, I would have to know, with certainty, something about it. Belief is not interesting to me. You either know something, or you don’t, and I don’t know anything with certainty. Nevertheless, to function in the world, I have to accept – on faith – two principles: cause and effect (i.e., this reliably results in that); and continuity (e.g., if I wake up again tomorrow, I will still recognize myself as being me). And I’m not sure I really buy them either.

6) Relationship with past, present, and future: how do you see your practice of percussion functioning between these various musical directions as a performer and/or teacher? What is your attitude in general about the movement or need towards innovation in percussion where it conflicts or leaves behind tradition? Is there a point in which the traditional methods of percussion hinder the growth of the field? Or innovative methods destroying important tradition? If so, where is that point for you?

BB: Innovation doesn’t destroy anything – people forget things. All “traditional” methods were innovations at some time in the past, and there is great truth in the cliché “there is nothing new under the sun”. Musicians in general, and especially percussionists, should understand that. Now that we can effortlessly look and listen around the world, we can see how our ways compare to their ways. Music that was considered primitive by westerners two centuries ago is understood today to be complex in the extreme. Some of our “advanced” techniques are found to have been developed five hundred years ago in music cultures half way around the globe.

There is, however, a new order of innovation that has recently become significant in the music world, as well as in the world at large, and that is digital technology in all of its present and future manifestations. In my opinion, this phenomenon is transformative and unprecedented – revolutionary in its explosive growth. Several years ago Lindsay Haughton asked me in an interview: “Where do you think music is heading?” I’ll just quote my answer to her.

“Prophecy is the surest way to appear foolish in the future. However, I see the human species, and therefore all of its endeavors including the arts, to be approaching a transformative leap in this century. There is a logical and inevitable evolutionary step to take when technology reaches a certain critical level of development, and it is non-Darwinian in the sense that it is not based on mutation and selection, but rather on conscious choices made by the species itself. I can’t predict exactly what choices will be made, but I’m certain that human
beings will ultimately internalize, or be internalized by, digital technologies, which are currently represented by things like the world wide web and personal computers. All of the ways technology is used by people at present involve interfaces (headphones, keyboards, monitors, musical instruments, etc.), and the use of interfaces, no matter how sophisticated, is part of the continuum of ancient history. In the not too distant future, music will probably be created and experienced purely in an electronic domain, and will be communicated directly from mind to mind, whether these minds are contained in human brains or in intelligent, and possibly conscious, “machines”.
Appendix II


Dear Mr. Otte,

Hello. Attached is a pdf. and Word.doc with eight questions. Each question has a few sub/complementary questions or explanations to help clarify the subject of inquiry. Please let me know if there is any confusion with any of the questions. Also, please feel free to expand on any of these, or ignore them as you desire.

Thanks in advance for your time, I look forward to your responses.

Yours,
Justin

1) Where do you trace your craft back to? Locate the origins of your roots: identity. i.e. drumset, orchestral, American experimental, European chamber, etc?

Allen Otte: As a percussionist, orchestral -- my first drum teacher in Sheboygan was Art Schildbach (just now retired from the Indianapolis Symphony), who connected me with my next teacher, Michael Rosen (then in the Milwaukee Symphony); Mike became a life-long friend and supporter. In the actual ‘career’, European chamber; when I was an undergrad at Oberlin there was no percussion ensemble, and I was already then envious of the string players who worked in (and got credit for) small chamber music groups.

2) When was the first time you became aware of the possibility of performing solo multi-percussion repertoire? Was there a particular model in the form of a performer or teacher for this? Jazz drummer? Composition? How feasible did it seem at the time that one could create a career doing so?

AO: In the mid 60’s I played ‘The Worried Drummer’ with my junior high school band, but it hardly occurred to me to think of it as a multiple percussion concerto – I think I was as embarrassed by it as I was happy for the special attention...it wasn’t until the Max Neuhaus LP appeared (I was an undergraduate at Oberlin when I saw it) that such an activity registered, and then I was mostly crabby about what seemed his poor sound and technique
compared to the then current standards in the orchestral world and in the
greatest jazz drummers.

3) What is your reaction to the ongoing effort of composers and performers to
produce new tonal pieces of music (usually for marimba) that are to be
modeled after the great classical repertoire written for other instrumental
groups (strings, piano, etc)?

AO: Well yes, my reaction is just what you think; I hear/see drummers
standing at the marimba and improvising idiomatic licks into mediocre movie
sound tracks (vomiting all over the keyboard in D-flat major) which are then
supposed to pass for degree recital and even ‘professional’ (really? is there
actually such a thing other than p a s state chapter days of percussion?)
material... indeed, the level of discourse in our field is very low. I must say that
I sometimes experience this as yet another component of the-joke-being-on-
me after all of these years: my devotion to the idea of bringing the ‘high art’ of
European Chamber Music to the field of percussion sometimes seems to have
been comically anachronistic before I even got started.

Or, if I’m just a bit more kind to myself, there is the idea of ‘responding,
in one’s own time and place, just as Chopin [or, fill in the blank] did in his time
and place’ -- it (the ever-so-high craft and ideals of European Chamber Music)
was something that did indeed want/need a ‘response’ from our community,
and there I was – it was the time and place I found myself in. But from my
perspective at this moment, the sustainability of such a career threatens to be
shorter-lived (nearly 40 years isn’t enough?!) than I might have imagined at
the outset. What I allude to here is the nearly concurrent and then subsequent
waves (tsunamis) of ethno/world beat; marimba-as-virtuoso-solo-instrument [I
cant type that without laughing – at least smiling]; the ever-so-easy-for-
percussion ‘cross-over’ of all pop influences, historical and contemporary; the
new old tonality; and then any and all of this swirled into the cyberspace of a
late-20th/early-21stC culture of celebrity and commoditization; this whole list,
today, seems so much more of our time and place than does ‘the high art of
European chamber music”; I’m not at all second guessing my choices or
judging very different ones that were right for others, but here is the one
perspective from which I think I could say the music does indeed speak for
itself.

(big sigh here)

3.1) How is this helping or damaging the current needs of the percussion
community?

AO: [I’m laughing again having arrived at your next question]
3.2) “Needs” is in reference to your Preferences in Percussion- 1973 article, which I assume you still stand behind 26 years later: “What is needed now is an advancement in the art of composing for percussion, rather than the sustenance of the percussive arts.”

AO: You know what I actually think, more than a quarter of a century later, is that what the percussion community most needs is exactly what everybody else needs: a society (organization of a social system) in which we are useful and contributive people.

So here we are: this is your time and place. Now what?

Higher quality sound on youtube so that the next young percussionist’s posting can be better distinguished from the millions of pieces of shit already there…? ok ok -- you see I worry that percussion is an exquisitely tactile art form – it is about sound and touch and vibration, it is traditionally/historically associated with spirituality more so than, I think, any other sound producing artifact, and thus, most benefits from vibrating in real time and space, with real human bodies at hand. A love affair in cyberspace, is, don’t you think, probably pretty frustrating at best, without actual touch. So a culture of the computer and video strikes me as less accommodating to the salient features of this particular art form (though I must hasten to say that the extension of all things percussively vibrating by fantastical electronic/computer creativities is obvious and wonderful).

So our proper business is then what? Revolution?

I’m afraid Cage was quintessentially a ‘modernist’, quaintly/antiquatedly so…perussion music is revolution…by changing music we change ourselves, and by changing ourselves we change society.

But here we stand, staring down the tsunamis, both percussive ones and those of the values of the society in which we must function, with the rent and health care premiums due.

No – seriously – in this unfolding of (what becomes) human history one can note that, (turn turn turn to reference the 60’s once again) there is indeed a time and place for everything, and even somewhat immediately past models can be quite unuseful or simply inappropriate at a current juncture.

A basically mid19C – mid20C European model of the musician w/ mortgage-paying-family-supporting-health-care-providing concert career is, if not gone forever, certainly no longer of this time and place – at least no longer a useful model for the vast majority of persons who would have been capable of such a life. (and please: not “I want to be a university teacher”, producing how many hundreds more such human beings w/o prospect) -- just so many inner city kids playing basketball way better than it needs to be played but only one in
every how many 10s of thousands will be promoted to multi-millionaire for those abilities.

Which is surely not to say that the life process, the years chosen to be involved in this sort of activity within the ivory-towered communities where such things still lurch and stumble and sometimes soar forward, isn’t a beautiful and very smart choice to make for that moment – that time and place, in any individual’s journey. Indeed, these are the very societies/communities I’m wishing for, the ones we create for ourselves.

(not actually a digression, but will I really be able to find my way back from this tangent?)

Well look, its perfectly obvious – the partners of artists must be doctors and bankers and lawyers; we’re good for their souls and they’re good for our bills. Don’t marry other artists! [you’ll have to have very serious (and fun) relationships with other artists because that will be for your soul -- and your art, of course]

so what was the question? – ah yes, advancement vs. sustenance, helping vs. damaging.

It is a moment, don’t you think, where ‘technique’, over a period of a generation or so, has indeed raced ahead, and here we have so much capability, whether its 1000’s of notes in some fantastical construct of mathematical new complexities, or piano music by Tchaikovsky or Debussy or Ellington or new age-ish imitations there of -- more 1000’s of (right) notes, flying by on a marimba kbd – to what end? In either case!

[well in truth, the ‘technique’ of beautiful instruments and beautiful touch is not at all much assured, and I worry that youtubeness only continues to denigrate that ever-so-fragile part of our art]

Our art is sustained by virtuosos ‘composing’ for themselves and next generations of students, and in a few cases getting composers to make such things based on “look at the amazing things we can now do”.

So where can this be put to useful advancement – or rather, given the current state, what now constitutes advancement?

(ah, finally! we come to the possibility of addressing the point)

We’re in quite good shape with technical facility – hands and brain; less sure when it comes to good ears and touch, and quite adrift as to what constitutes ‘contributive’ in a larger cultural/societal moment where the ideals of high art for its own sake are appropriately in question.

Well, one is reminded of Cage’s remark that he wished for the rest of the orchestra to become as noisy, unemployed and poverty stricken as the percussion.

4) Describe a major discovery or breakthrough you have had in your musical career that changed or greatly enhanced your understanding of the field. Any
particular moment/circumstance where you had a confirmation of the musical direction you were taking? Could be technical, theoretical, or non-musical.

AO: I played Zyklus on my senior recital – imagine: it was still a relatively new piece then, only a little bit more than a decade old. I became interested in the piece not through my percussion teacher in the Cleveland Orchestra Richard Weiner, but through the young composer-theory teachers on the Oberlin faculty at that time – I was clear about everything and well prepared with my version of the score to begin playing it in my percussion lesson. A little way in: “wait, wait…did you just hit the triangle with a snare drum stick? Where’s your Stoessel triangle beater?”

(of course: its hilarious to type that even now, how many decades later)
The point was not that he or we don’t know that Bartok composed for that very sound, and Cage had long since ‘granted permission’ for all sounds. Thinking ahead to the next passages of the score, I knew immediately: there are beautiful sections for snare drum coming up, full of rolls and filigree…it needs my best orchestral snare drum technique, but what? while I also hold a triangle beater and a gong beater?...the tom-toms are sitting right there, I need the snares on but they can’t rattle with the snare drum…etc. etc.

So there it was – at least part of what was a career defining idea: to play the percussion music of Stockhausen, and Cage and my friends, with the same level of skill and care that had been (even then somewhat recently) brought by a few symphonic players to the playing of the percussion parts of the great composers who had preceded the composers of my time.

5) Can you give an example of a musical experience during your career that greatly illuminated your understanding of daily life, or the universe at large? What has your practice of percussion taught you about life? Or, alternatively, an example of what life has taught you about percussion?

AO: maybe this here (?)

I have the impression that members of my generation were among the first to take quite seriously many seemingly extra-musical things as potentially crucial elements in a life devoted to our art form (mostly I’m wrong – artists have always been aware of these things, but in my generation there begins anyway the ‘counter-culture’ consciousness (and publicity!) of such things, and we are talking here specifically about percussion, and then maybe I’m right). Yoga, Tai-chi, even diet, and surely in the field of creative music, everything that had to do with philosophy and (especially in and from the late 60’s/early 70’s) social-consciousness and the role of creative and experimental music – indeed, just the role of ‘high art’ as a contributing element to the society in which we found ourselves. Compared to such concerns as all these, product
endorsement and corporate sponsorship were simply not part of the landscape; quaintly old fashioned as it may now seem, typing many hundreds of letters on a manual typewriter only felt like trying to string together a little tour of avant garde music concerts; building a cool personal website for career advancing networking is to have to compete in a very new environment.

So how to retain/protect the spiritual (yes, with a small s)? [and still pay the rent and health insurance]. I think already years ago there was a book: “do what you love, the money will follow” – I’m sorry, but its just not true [for everybody who wants and deserves it] in the arts in 21st C America.

To ‘keep central’ – a literal translation from the Chinese that you might hear from a good tai-chi teacher – has increasingly meant for me to trust in the honesty of a rather traditional role of the artist. I’m not trying to sell anything – not the piece, and not myself. I trust that my private work in the practice room, honestly transferred to some public forum, will in and of itself ‘communicate’ to any observers/listeners, in very much the same way an actual spiritual officiant will function as intermediary in any ritual of religious life; the monk, priestess, shaman, makes his/her connection to ‘god’ – the congregants are connected through him/her. Nothing to be nervous about, nothing to actively communicate to the assemblage, nothing to sell.

It’s a struggle for all of us, and if we’re actually paying attention, it is ongoing; the lessons keep coming, we each recalibrate in the responses. Here I could reference a wonderful statement of Herbert Brun, the opening of his original version of the essay called “Against Plausibility”. But where he was talking about the composition of timbre and sound, of things a composer might wish to hear, I can substitute words which transfer the concepts from the building of a piece to the building of a life in music:

It is one thing to aim for a particular musical career and then to search for the means of making such a life in music a reality. It is another thing to provide for a series of events to happen and then to discover the career, the life in music, so generated. In the first case one prefers those events to happen that correspond to the original image, in the second case one prefers to live those events one wishes would happen. These are not only two different approaches to the composition of a life in music, but also two different political attitudes. As my life in Blackearth and Percussion Group Cincinnati were produced according to this latter preference, I should like to see this understood as a musical career choice that has some social significance to its musical idea and its process of composition.

6) How has the fundamental meaning of what you wish to share/represent in music evolved over your career? What do you strive most to represent in your art? Relationship to virtuosity, sound, imagery, space, process, emotion, etc.
AO: I don’t much separate touch and sound — the most important thing to me, living my life, my being, in music, is sound; and the only way I’ve learned to be able to contribute sounds worthy of joining the history of all music and its performance (hear-ability), is through how I touch these instruments — so many of which are religious artifacts from the planet’s entire history — how they are touched — how their voice is elicited — with precisely what implement that voice is elicited... and in searching for how I am useful as the intermediary in that voice speaking in just some way at just some instant, I wish to learn my touch from that sound source — believing not so much that it will tell me, as that, somehow, together, we are extensions of one another — each without a voice (me, and the instrument/sound source/spirit/vibration) unless we are truly together in that moment.

That’s my responsibility — to learn and know all that; to live it. The composer’s responsibility in what then actually becomes a ‘conspiracy’ - a breathing together - is the speculations and ideas and systems and structures for the stipulated piece of lifetime for which this all is proposed.

And so we then choose our co-conspirators, piece by piece — indeed, once in awhile we are even then our own such co-conspirators.

When we understand the roles of each contributor in that partnership — each knows what the other wants and wants the same thing for that time and place, then we feel, indeed, are, needed and wanted and useful human beings in the spiritual world of sound.

I love my relationship with both -- sounds/instruments/spiritual objects, and my very-human-just-people-trying-hard-like-me friends, the composers.

The touch of the world of percussion, its sound, its music: Once it was the shamans and the priestesses; now it’s us. I wish for my touch a consciousness of spirituality in the bringing-to-life of sound in that world of vibrating surfaces that we so love — it can keep one very humble in the attempts.

7) What are some of your recent goals in the field of percussion? Major “problem” that you come back to, or have recently discovered? Directions you would like to explore, develop etc.

AO: how about that... thanks for asking....

It seems that my answer is, in part, exactly what it was nearly 40 years ago at the beginning of this whole process, and rather than finding that sad or disheartening, or dumbfoundingly unimaginative, it feel like it was and is an idea worth having had and worth still preserving:

1. …which is this thing about synthesizing the arts of symphonic percussion technique with the string quartet. Back then (and all along), I
always included the great avant garde jazz groups and their virtuoso drummers (Coltrane/Elvin Jones, for instance) of that 40-years-ago-era as the third element in this landscape, the observed landscape which I felt cried out for these things to be synthesized: chamber music for a few percussionists, newly composed plus the relatively little ‘classic’ stuff that was there, where every element would be attended to and played with the loving care and expertise that my teacher was lavishing on a single triangle note of Brahms in George Szell’s Cleveland Orchestra; and how to do this in chamber music? – well, pay attention to what the LaSalle String Quartet did with Beethoven and Schoenberg and Ligeti; and for a young American percussionist of the late 60’s did my examples have to be only those European classical precedents? – of course not: the truly great American “quartets” of that time were Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane,....

And so the problem to come back to, the goal to preserve, from my perspective now, looking at the percussion landscape: In my mind and ear and heart, the standard for sound and touch, on all (western) percussion instruments, was set by the previous generation of iconic orchestral players – timpanists, bass drummers, cymbal players; I cheat myself and listeners and music by not living up to that standard in everything I do as a percussionist, no matter how experimental the proposition.

I understand Cage – the whole thing: philosophy, notations, the sounds generated over the course of his lifetime as an artist -- I understand the anti-virtuosic contingency music of amplified cactus, the poverty of crumpled paper; I have an understanding of the contribution to our art, over the decades of which I speak, of the music and percussion instruments and their players from other culture -- some of this we have received directly from players, and a lot of it through composers who have paid attention to these instruments and concepts in ways quite different from the ways percussionists have. Djembe and tabla and their rhythmic systems at one extreme, Cage and Kagel at the other: such riches have come to our art form in these decades. I cheat myself and listeners and music by not living up to the standards which we all know have been so exquisitely set for the producing of sound on our instruments, and these standards were communicated to me through the music of Tchaikovsky and Mahler and Debussy and many such others; the texture of Richard Weiner’s snare drum roll in Berlioz, the depth of Fred Hinger’s timpani stroke in Brahms – these are sounds, and the touch that produced them, that I will never forget. To now ‘speak’ the percussion music of Cage and the next piece by a student composer, I know where to begin, and it continues to be a goal
to pass along to next generations of players this approach to our instruments; or, as Herbert Brun would have said, to at least retard its decay.

2. Prior to the era of radio and recording, people knew and enjoyed erudite music through reading scores, playing the music at home, organizing small concerts of reductions and arrangements of larger works – how often or when again could one expect to actually hear the live concert performance of any given piece?

“A recording of Beethoven’s 5th symphony is not Beethoven’s 5th symphony” – seems like something Cage must have said, or was it Adorno, or Walter Benjamin…? The ease with which we can conjure onto our laptops the sound of nearly any music from anywhere on the planet from any time in history is, of course, a double-edged sword.

So: I’m much intrigued and amused by the idea of chamber music arrangements, as they were done in late 19th and early 20th centuries, which would make possible the actual live experience, for both players and listeners, of all kinds of western art music from the era before we contemplated its exhaustion…a Bruckner Symphony for 5 players including a marimbist; the Overture and Venusburg Music of Tannhauser for xylophone, tenor sax, piano, vln, cello, and a percussionist playing timpani, tambourine, castanets, and cowbells…(come on – don’t tell me you wouldn’t love to hear that!) I organized a set of 6 of Mahler’s Wunderhorn Songs for 2 singers and a little klezmer-ish ensemble including two percussionists; I and a few of my composer friends each chose different songs to make arrangements of.

All of this has something to do with what we might call ‘interpretive exhaustion’ – the facile virtuosity with which the most huge and complex Mahler symphony just rolls off the tongues and finger tips of modern orchestras; thus the desire, not only to experience any of this music live as opposed to via itunes/earbuds, but also to hear it with some freshness – with some of the struggle of the newness it once offered/proposed/communicated.

Capturing specifically that is, of course, also a principal reason for composing/playing/hearing a brand new piece of art music; for the courage to go on; the wish – again – to be paying attention to what might be contributive in our time and place, just as those things we so love once were in theirs.

3. I think, don’t you, that percussion is particularly good -- as good, in our time and place, as the piano was in Schubert’s -- in conjunction with texts, poetry or other; whether it’s the speaking percussionist or an
accompanying one, even whether it’s our own creative texts and/or
ccompaniments, or those of others… Coffee house and bookstore
poetry readings (Brooklyn bar bands – though, careful here; see above:
“the level of discourse in our field is very low”) would be so richly
enhanced with our art; and yes, I’m really thinking of/smililing at,
amongst other things, the image of bongo players backing up beat-
generation poets on the front steps of the City Lights Bookstore in San
Francisco. The keyboard and vocal music of another era that is now
part of an unsupportable cultural activity which crumbles of its own
weight did, once upon a time, begin as lightly and inauspiciously as
beatniks and their bongos.

8) Where do you see the future of percussion heading? In or out of the
University? More or less important; relevance/applicability in people’s lives.
Shock value of 20th century “noise” lessened etc.

AO: Back in 1983, my friend the composer Michael Kowalski wrote, “The
presentation of new concert pieces will continue as a minor sideshow within a
much larger, more vital, and exciting curatorial program devoted to preserving
the best of the tonal repertoire (the curatorial program of preserving the 19C
conception of a composer’s function is the one which should be
dropped)…The burden of keeping the ideal of music-for-music’s-sake alive
through cultural thick and thin has proven to be an insuperable albatross for
contemporary American composers…the arts are just as temporal and finite
as the societies which spawn them.” from the section The Future is Bright, in
The Exhaustion of Western Art Music” (Perspectives of New Music)

6- or 3- (or 12-) member percussion groups, or even 1 by her or
himself: for nearly a century these laboratories of composition and
performance (or maybe better — hothouses, for the cultivation of exotic
blooms) produced the most sophisticated -- advanced -- research,
simultaneously sustaining the training and even career-building of, by now,
many 1000’s of beautifully talented and committed and deserving and
potentially contributive young percussionists, the ‘percussion community’ to
which you refer.

We will always, I think, gather together and be involved with one
another, but maybe more recreationally so in the future. Rather, our proper
role in the culture might be as it has previously almost always been — 1 or a
very few of us at a time making our unique contribution to some larger whole
comprised of other kinds of musicians, other art forms — video, movement,
words...and maybe once again, I might wish, more locally, rather than in the
model of a relative (‘important’) few who travel the globe. We return to the
‘conspiracies’ (‘breathings together’) of local composers/local performers – community.

“Therefore, mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation” -- actually a rather positive and encouraging perspective from Karl Marx (Preface to the 1859 Critique).

Frederic Rzewski writes: “Music probably cannot change the world. But it is a good idea to act as if it could. The situation is hopeless, but you try to make the best of it. At the very least, you stand a chance of producing some good music. And music is always better than no music.” (Nonsequitors XXV)

AO
January 1st, 2010
(Preferences In Percussion, 2010)
Appendix III

Fritz Hauser (b. 1953) Interview, La Jolla, CA, September 23, 2009.

Justin DeHart: Where would you trace your roots to as a musician?

Fritz Hauser: It was really a spur of the moment thing. I was kind of surrounded by this music of The Beatles and Rolling Stones and it felt just like, you know there were these friends in school and they said “let’s make a band” and it sounded kind of fun. I had already kind of this energy to move and to beat on things and suddenly it became much more a “form” and we started playing, I think we started playing *Refried Boogie* by The Canned Heat that is like a forty-five minute pattern to start playing and improvise with. I had no formal training I just banged away. I loved the sound of the drums, the cymbals and everything and I just, I think I had this kind of rhythmic feeling that allowed me to do whatever I wanted to do. We were a trio, and we just played. It was a lot of fun and we immediately started doing concerts and stuff. Well, actually before all of that, I wanted to form a band with this guy at school who was learning guitar and so I took a few drum lessons with the basic drumming, how to hold the sticks, paradiddles, etc. I thought it was interesting but I much more admired the instrument the guy had there, my first drum teacher, he afterwards became a painter, he was a painter at the time but he made his money giving lessons. And he had this very small Ludwig set, the mahogany one, which now I have in my house. 30 years later after a collaboration he did not have any money to pay me a fee so he offered me the drumset and I was more than happy.

I wanted to play the drumset; I didn’t want to play the practice pad. I wasn’t a very good worker in the beginning I thought, “I just want to play.” But then we got into this, and I remember, if I were have to quote something that really struck me as a musical experience in terms of drumming was, seeing Max Roach play on our black and white TV. I was like, 15. That was just a miracle. It was a miracle I heard music, I didn’t hear drumming, I heard music. Maybe I am over exaggerating after 40 years but it just struck me as something just beautiful in sound – not specifically in what he played – but the way he played it and the way it sounded just made so much sense: that drumming can be more than just like… you know, this kind of thing. Then I finished college after 19 or 20. I wanted to make music and the band I was playing in at the time, Circus, was playing very complex pop/jazz/rock. It’s pretty complex, somewhere between Genesis and King Crimson. It was very complex compositions that would go on for 50 minutes. You learned everything from heart, - I couldn’t read music at the time – it was just like: we
would play, develop, rehearse and practice all day. Then my father pushed the idea forward to have proper training. There were very little possibilities 40 years ago: you could either have a really classical training - timpani, xylophone, snare drum - or you could go to the newly opened jazz school in Switzerland but that was bebop, and I didn’t want to play bebop. So I went to the conservatorium for 2 years, which was difficult for me because the teacher really liked my playing but he wanted me to become a classical player and I didn’t want to become a classical player. I actually only wanted kind of part of this education to enhance my music making and not the other way around. He thought all of this I was doing apart from Brahms and Beethoven was crap and I should just get rid of it and just focus on that. I didn’t want to do that and we had a constant fight. The good news was that we were doing ensemble work with the class. With six students we could work on Percussion de Strasbourg repertoire.

Actually my first experience at the conservatorium – I couldn’t really read any music – and I was just playing snare drum, he liked my snare drum, then he gave me an etude and I worked on that at home and I figured it out real carefully then I played it and if he was happy he gave me another one. It took him a while to realize I didn’t really read the music. Then he gave me a part for Ionization, part 3, and that was really the first time I had to learn to read music: learn what a quintuplet was and to understand how this was all to come together. That was kind of a crash course, but it was good.

JD: So basically you align yourself more with popular music as your roots?

FH: yeah, I had heard orchestras play at the time and I was impressed with the power and the beauty of one hundred people playing the same thing. On the other hand I thought it was a very, very kind of, serious business. I didn’t like the seriousness of it, and I couldn’t really figure it out the music, I was not a fan of classical music. I mean there were some pieces that kind of attracted me and I remember even paying a lot of money for a ticket to go to see a piano recital with Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli because I heard some of his records and he was just such a beautiful piano player but classical music was not where I really wanted to go.

JD: Did Basel drumming influence your playing much at that time?

FH: I don’t think so. I backed off from this whole Carnival thing not for musical reasons but the whole social aspect. I just wasn’t interested: it goes the whole direction towards drum line. I really never understood the Carnival. I mean I understand people who are doing something all year something that they don’t even want to do in the first place and they just need to release it at some point.
I have the privilege that I spent my life the way I want to spend it so I just don’t need this kind of thing. I don’t need to compensate and act like a fool for three days in a year just to get the steam off.

JD: But the drumming itself [?] 

FH: The drumming is beautiful but it was so directly connected because you could only learn that in one of those bands. So you had to really be into that and I didn’t want to do that. I was never really part of a group. I always felt a little bit that it never really worked: it never worked with the boy scouts, it didn’t work with the army, it didn’t work with the orchestra, it didn’t work with these drumlines, it didn’t work with anything. I’m just too much of an individual. I like to organize things and bring people together and make big percussion events with lots of people and then I am happy once they all leave then I can go back to my individual life. I like the energy of solo, duo, five, thirteen, two hundred fifteen and then go back to one again. I just don’t want to be with the same people everyday.

JD: A love for change?

FH: Yeah. The Basel drumming is something you really have to work on; it’s a very specific technique, and if I wanted to do that, I had to be a part of this thing. I remember some years later after I knew about drumming a little bit a had a few friends who played in a freelance Basel drumming group and we wanted to make a trio where we could actually improvise on the [Basil] drums. We could open up a new field of Basel drumming within the Carnival. We thought this would be a great idea. We got a practice room and they set up their practice pads and proceeded to argue about how to properly play and teach the basic rudiments to me. They were trained from two different groups from across the river and there was no way that they could bring it together and agree. I knew after five minutes that this was not going to work. It is much like the learning the difference in dialect from someone from Zurich or Basel. You have to make up your mind very early which way you want to say “hello” and there is no middle, no compromise between the two. You can’t have it all. So the Basel drummer really doesn’t play any role in my musical career.

JD: Did you work in the circus before or after you played in the band Circus?

FH: Well I was with the band for about eight years, and I quit the band when I was about twenty-seven, realizing that the members of the band did not want to go the same way I wanted to go. They just had other interests, like having a
family or having other professions and I knew that what I wanted to do was play the drums for the rest of my life and they just weren’t ready for this. So I left at a point when the musical development and the human development had reached a point where I just felt that there was no perspective. We didn’t have a fight, but I sensed it was just around the corner when these existential questions would come up. I thought it would be better to leave then since they were good friends and beautiful people I just had to leave then. So I left with no other things to do. Its not like I had a job to fall back on; I had nothing.

I sat on the balcony during early springtime reading the newspaper and going through the ads thinking about what I could do for the rest of my life. Then I saw this ad of this circus orchestra looking for a drummer and I was really fascinated by this. That had been one of the soundest experiences in my childhood hearing the music at the circus. When everyone else was looking up to the tightrope, and I would look over to the drummer because “zzzzzzzz” press rolls: that’s where it all started. I heard my first press roll when I was six and I thought it was just an amazing sound! I still like press rolls, it is just this different thing, this white noise thing that you can shape. So when this offer came up, I thought that I would do it. But I was sure they wouldn’t take me because at the time it was mostly Polish or Eastern European orchestras that were playing in circuses because they were cheaper and they were very well trained and the musicians knew everything. They could read everything and play everything, but I had no idea how to do all of that. But this specific circus orchestra was put together by a jazz saxophone player because the Polish orchestra had not arrived for some reason. There were only five musicians and they knew my name, so when I went to go see the performance they were already excited to have me join, so that was beautiful. I had to learn the show after seeing it only once, and then play it by myself the next night. I played drum set and we played some jazz and show standards depending on what the artist wanted. All the artists depend on the drummer for all the cues and tightrope; you just have to be ready all the time. I was exhausted, and did this for three months. This was physically, the best time of my life. We were playing two shows a day, five hours of playing, plus moving everything. The Moroccan workers and the musicians had to move the tent two or three times a week. So after three months I was tanned, had muscles, and was “ready to go”. After three months they ran out of money and the whole thing just blew up. But three months was intense enough.

JD: Then, when did you get the idea to go solo?

FH: After the circus I did several other things: worked in the theatre, did Medieval music, and I tasted everything a little bit but at the same time, I always had this idea in the back of my mind that I would like to make a solo
program. I started doing solo performances in 1983. I worked on it for a few months and then had a little presentation of my first solo drum set piece entitled, *The Commuter*. There were many impressive people in the audience including one of the Basel drum makers and also classical percussionists and jazz drummers who were well known around the world at the time, and... it worked! That encouraged me to go ahead. Then for the next three or four years I did around two hundred and fifty concerts. I played every possible small theatre. I played and played and played. I was just so happy I could do it! Those were the days where this infrastructure still existed: every little town had a small theatre. But I had to bring everything: the carpet, the instruments, the lamps, the backdrop, the soap to wash my hands in the dressing room, the towel, the food, the drinks; I brought everything, they didn’t have anything.

JD: Did you have any models that inspired you to play solo percussion? Had you seen a solo percussion concert before?

FH: I had seen the Swiss-French drummer Pierre Favre. He has a large drum set and uses gongs, cymbals, and double bass drums. He was very much into African drumming, his roots being from the djembe side. He is a very good drummer who has played with a lot of people from the Jazz world. Although he wasn’t much of a musical influence on me, he was one of the pioneers of solo percussion in the jazz field. He would tell me stories of taking solos in jazz clubs where people would throw ashtrays and really hated what he was doing. Even to “trade fours” was testing the limits on what people would allow. But when the boys would go off and the drummer take a five-minute solo, the audience would throw ashtrays. So he was really the groundbreaking force that made it possible to go into new forms of music and listen in a different way. I remember going to the Jazz at the Philharmonic and seeing drummers like Louie Bellson, Art Blakey, Joe Morello, and people really showed up. The promoter presented it in a way that showed that this music could be concert music and not just background or dance music. And that is what I wanted; I thought people should listen, because I want to play with sound and silence. I don’t just want to just go along with tunes and be in the background.

JD: Did you have any knowledge of the soloists coming from the classical percussion tradition at that time?

FH: I had heard of Percussions de Strasbourg, but I had never heard them play, and I didn’t even know of something such as solo classical percussion. I knew some of Cage’s pieces like *Construction in Metal*, and Varese’s *Ionization*, but it wasn’t something that really was in my field and it didn’t really register with me. If I would have known, or had more time, I probably would
have been more interested. That’s been one of my problems, or maybe one of my advantages is that I have always moved in between fields. I’ve touched many things, and it is possible that I am not an expert in any of them. But I’ve always felt that percussion is something that can give an energy or an atmosphere – whether to theatre, film, readings, and dancing – I find it a beautiful means of communication. With sound and silence, movement and gesture; things can become very abstract. It can be so dynamic and so colorful that it goes really well with everything. I think I was more inspired by various films, books, theatre plays, and dance pieces than by music. I am not just into the music; I am into the arts.

JD: It seems that your career has in many ways mirrored that of the unpredictable nature of multi-percussion and its refusal to be identified autonomously with music alone.

FH: I had a chance to learn many different approaches to making art when I worked with the theatre. I worked with actors, dancers, and also created radio plays. That was a very tremendous experience to work with an actor together. In 1987, we went into a radio studio for a week, and we just improvised, producing all kinds of weird sounds. There was no text and he was walking around making weird vocalizations as I was playing whatever I had to play while they were recording everything. We recorded everything to a two-track machine and did two mixes of thirty minutes each that turned out completely different. I mixed one, and he mixed the other. That was my first experience really editing and mixing in the studio. It was fun to do.

JD: How did the audience receive your early solo concerts?

FH: It was amazing! Besides a few people I knew from my band, there were probably a hundred people at my first concert in Basel. Then, shortly after, four hundred people would come to the theatre to hear me play. They were completely in to it. That is why I immediately recorded a double record, which was quite pretentious too. I made a lo-fi cassette copy of one of my performances and sent it to a few record labels. I received a call two days later and got a deal from Hat-hut records. They paid quite a bit of money for the production and so I went to Berlin and had four nights to record. They only did double albums at the time. There was probably eighty-five minutes of solo percussion and the box cost forty-five francs and I sold about three-thousand copies of that album. Those were the days. Things were happening. I would travel with these huge boxes of records – if you brought twenty-five records it was like half of a drumset.
JD: Was there any resistance from the audience or public to your early efforts at solo percussion concerts?

FH: The only resistance was that I was not accepted to play real concert halls. I wasn’t able to really analyze the situation at the time because I was just so happy that I could do this, and I didn’t consider things like image, marketing, and management. Now I know that this could have been some kind of trademark and I should have insisted on doing this solo drumming for five years or so just to really bring it to everywhere, but I thought it was boring to do the same thing for that long. After two years and recordings I thought that I was ready to go on. The next CD with Hat-hut was to be with duos and I spent more time doing improvisations, whereas my first solo album was based on compositions. In the end, it was difficult to sell the duo-CD because I could not do a tour with all of the various people who played on the album.

JD: Did you ever use management?

FH: There were occasionally people who would make a phone call for something, or me but I never really had a career plan. I never really sat down and said, “OK this side is the music and I think I can manage that, but who is doing all the other crap?” That was a mistake, so to speak, not to look at the commercial business side of things at that time. That was not the only mistake, I made more, but that was one of them. If you want to make music your life’s profession, then you have to think about it. At least you can decide to think about it if you want. But I am from the “happy” generation there was not much reason to think about it. There really wasn’t a problem. Money was there, everybody was happy, healthy, free sex, safe sex, everything was happening, no aids, no environmental things, and everything was just golden. No one gave a shit, everyone thought it would go on like this for the next couple of hundred years: no one gets old, no one gets unhappy, no one gets sick, that’s just how we are. I never lost a friend from an accident or someone dying until I was forty-five. So I was never confronted with the harshness of life. I came from a family that was doing well enough that I didn’t have to worry about failing and I could always return home if I couldn’t find work if I had to. Life was like “flower power”; we felt no one could stop us. But I look back and see Evelyn Glennie and she had decided when she was nineteen exactly what she wanted to do. But it is just about impossible to have this kind of foresight and ability to plan and execute a career like that when you are an artist, you need other people’s help who are just as interested in your career as you are.

JD: Has your government funded your pursuit?
FH: No, that is the second mistake I made. I should have formed and named a company that could have facilitated percussion performances either as solo, trio, etc. After 1987, I wouldn’t have had any problem being subsidized by the government from the city of Basel. I never did that. And now I can only apply for support for one project at a time. It sometimes takes a few years and way too much time to secure the funds for projects. The government now usually answers my request with the same answer: “I am sorry but we cannot support individuals.”

JD: So it has been a disadvantage to be a solo artist in that respect?

FH: Completely. I have friends who are solo artists and are operating by themselves, but they call themselves a company. I am not so good at that, but then no one can tell me what to do either. All the money I spend is the money that I have made. I like the simple life. I don’t have family, I don’t have kids, I don’t need these huge infrastructures, and so I don’t need so much money. If you play higher stakes, you don’t earn more at the end of the month because you have a larger turnover and more responsibilities. I like to take it easy. If I had a wife and two kids, I couldn’t rationalize to them why it would make sense to spend money out of my own pocket to come here to San Diego for instance. Considering the quality that Steve Schick and the percussion group Ensemble XII brings, it makes sense to me as a great opportunity, but for them, they might not see it that way.

JD: At what point in your career did you turn from improvising to composing, if you can even separate the two?

FH: The first compositional approach I took was in 1986 when I had an idea to create a large percussion orchestra. I was never interested in writing complicated stuff, unless it really made musical sense. Keeping it easy is actually a good way of focusing the sound and musicality. I find it virtually impossible to compose for percussion nowadays. You cannot even define the instrument, unless you call for marimbaphone and vibraphone. You don’t even know how it is going to sound. A cymbal, a drum, or even a tambourine can sound so different. You can specify specific techniques but if you are not there you wonder how they came up with the solutions they did. It’s like what Morton Feldman went through with his graphic notation. John Cage wrote one4 for me and I played it and he was happy and I heard a few versions of what other people did and I just thought, “How can they even come up with this version? It is impossible.” And I was as shocked as Steve Schick was when he heard King of Denmark in Geneva because it was just different versions. Nowhere can you find indications in the score that can justify some people’s versions. It
is baffling. They say “Oh it’s graphic notation I can do what I want” NO! You cannot! This is just not true. But it’s kind of tricky. So I thought when I write for percussion I wouldn’t even try to go into that kind of thing. If I mix colors on a piece of paper and call it my piece, then I may as well just give someone fifty bucks and say, “play something” and call it my piece. That’s good too. When I want a specific sound than I try to fix it. I am trying, and still it is difficult. I found out that I write for specific people in groups, and am involved in the first performance, so I can really say how I want it.

JD: How has your composing affected your performing?

FH: It’s mostly from listening and watching how other percussionists produce sound and from their various approaches and interpretations on my music. I can’t do that if I am not there, so I like to be there. I think music is a very social thing. I wouldn’t want to be a composer who lives on a mountain and sends out scores every month and the money comes back. I don’t think that is interesting. The atmosphere within the field of percussion is pretty good: it is constructive and they help each other. It is not like people fighting to be the first violin. The question is usually “how can we go forward?” That is very nice. The atmosphere is better here then in Europe.

JD: Is it more competitive?

FH: It’s not competitive; it’s just a lack of trust. Nobody in Europe would just open up their office to me and let me use it so freely like Steve Schick does here. He just gives me the keys and I don’t think anyone in Europe would just give me their keys to their office and share the space with me.

JD: How do you balance traditional playing methods vs. inventing new techniques?

FH: People often ask me where they can find my CD in the music store and I don’t know what to tell them. If I had to choose, I would have them file it under “Ethnic Contemporary”. It means it is contemporary but has its roots in ethnic music. I am looking for something that comes a long way and not avant-garde, which is just to be original for its own sake. Of course I like to be innovative in that I am looking for new ways, but always with respect with what has happened in the past. I often find myself using very traditional playing techniques. In Drum with Man, I think of it as going down to shamanic drumming in a way, and it’s not about inventing new techniques. It’s more in the essence of what you are doing, which is very, very personal. I really strongly believe that this kind of musical expression can only be found within
your own improvisational skills, when you really fool around on the drums. It is not just realizing you have done something that no one has done before, but it really has to do with you.

One time after being invited to play on a concert full of eight soloists, who would all play for twenty minutes each, I felt I should do something different. I found a gong in my cellar that I had never used. It looked at me, and I said “OK, it’s your turn.” So I took the gong to Italy with my stick bag and I had to cope. I came up with a technique of scratching the gong using a variety of beaters and dampening techniques using my other hand. This developed into an eighteen-minute piece, using the same rhythm, but changing the sound constantly. I will never forget the face on the people when I pulled up in the car and stepped out with the small gong, and they had their gloves on ready to help me unload. I said, “Boys, what are you waiting for? I am all set!” The sound check was only twenty minutes and I was ready.

I am really interested on working with this scratching sound more because it produces heat and is like starting a fire with friction. I have done a version with small percussion ensemble in Switzerland, we will record one here, and play it live, and I did a radio play recently as well for scratching the gong and the walls of the studio on a 24-track recorder. It lasts forty-eight minutes. The next step will be to do it for the Basel Sinfonietta Orchestra with 50-70 people in Lucerne, 2010. In fact, when I first heard an orchestra I thought to myself, “How could the orchestra play music that is not influenced from the composer, but is pure music, and individual at the same time?” But, of course you cannot improvise with an orchestra, it’s much to complex. It’s chaotic. But to have this pulse, and this rubbing that you can do on any instrument practically, it’s going to be different because every musician has their own touch and sound. When everyone researches his or her own sound, it will produce a sound cloud that will be different every time. This could be really the unique energy output of an orchestra. What I like about the scratching thing is that I would not like them to scratch their violin. But I would like them to put their violin on their lap and they could have two sticks. One they place where they want it, then they scratch the stick. Then, the resonance starts and you can move the stick wherever you want to move it. There are so many possibilities and there is a huge dynamic range, it can be beautiful.

I did it with a percussion ensemble in a kind of half circle, and it looked ridiculous. So I suggested for everyone to gather in the center of the room, and instructed everyone to be in a place where they cannot see anybody. Just sit with your back to the others. Just listen. Then, when they started playing, they couldn’t tell what they were doing, because it was difficult to hear where the sound was coming from. You only know that you are a part of this. And suddenly this sound cloud comes up. So that’s the idea. If it works, I would like
to tour and play it with other orchestras because I could play the gong, and they could do the rest.

JD: Did you ever have a moment where you knew exactly that “this is what I want to do, I want to be a creative percussionist”?

FH: I don’t think that I really wanted to be a creative percussionist. I think I wanted to be a creative person. I just felt embarrassed by all these organizations around me and Switzerland is a total over-organized land. It kind of frightened me to say “I don’t want to be a part in all of this” but at the same time I knew I couldn’t. It was more saying “no” to something rather than saying, “yes” to something. And it is not that I had this vision of me playing Stockhausen in Carnegie Hall and becoming famous, or playing with this orchestra or something. I just knew I couldn’t spend my life being in Basel and dealing with these infrastructures. It was more despair that drove me out into the wild to just find a way to do it.

Like with teaching, I just couldn’t do it. I would be honored if someone asked me to be a part of a university but I would have to see. I would be happy to come two weeks a year and do a really foolish project and then take it from there. There are so many people who can come every week and teach repertoire better than I can. I can’t do it. I lack the enthusiastic approach to these pieces. I’ve never played any of these pieces like Rebonds, etc. I needed John Cage to write a piece for me before I could play a piece by John Cage. All the solo pieces I commissioned were written for me so I had a real intimate relation with the pieces. I couldn’t develop this relationship with standard repertoire or etudes because I thought so many people would play these pieces, why should I care? I don’t see the point.

JD: So you were more interested in finding an individual approach to art rather than it being new?

FH: I am more interested in people’s personal voice. I don’t give a shit if anyone can play Rebonds faster than anyone else. When I can tell that this is a very personal thing, then it starts to interest me. And that is usually only happening when people improvise. I mean when Steve [Schick] plays Psappha I can tell there is a story behind it, and it is not just playing ordinarily. He brings his whole life to the table when he plays and lays it out for us. That’s good. He has this strong personality that influences his music and he is not trying to imitate anybody and he also has the self-esteem to say, “I am worth it and I am doing it my way” and that is when I find it starts getting interesting.

There was an interesting discussion I had with Joey Baron after commissioning him for a composition. After he wrote the piece he told me he
had struggled after listening to my CDs because he was trying to compose something for *me*, until he realized that he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t write like me. Then he realized that perhaps I didn’t want him to write like me, but that I wanted him to write a piece that comes from *him*. I said “yeah”! That’s exactly what I wanted. I wanted him to provoke me.

JD: What new problems are you interested in the world of percussion these days?

FH: Well, one of the things we really have to deal with is really the transportation problem. Only a few years back it was possible in Switzerland to have an airline that would invite me to bring 150 kilos of mobile weight to any country in the world for free. No one would even think about doing that anymore. So, I have to cope with living costs. We have to cope with the fact that no one gives a shit about contemporary percussion anymore. If you have a hall of fifty people, everyone is happy already. So where is our right of existence in this world? I’ve always understood contemporary percussion as a kind of research like in science where you need people to research ridiculous stuff to find new aspirin and if we are not going through all of these possibilities than nothing will come out of it. But on the other hand, someone has to pay for it. How can I cope with it? How can I cope with getting older? How will my body react? How will my brain react? How will my mental condition react? Can I just be relaxed about it? When I am turning sixty or sixty-five do I want to be around here? These are philosophical questions about life that I realize are predominating for me now.

There is a joy in doing this and it is a funny moment because I have recently been offered three things this year: Ensemble XII will record all of my written music so far, a state library in the French part of Switzerland has offered a place for me to store my archives, and the National sound archives in the Italian part of Switzerland takes all of my recordings, CD, cassettes, records, etc. They have all the devices to play everything. They will restore what needs to be restored. They will transfer into digital everything and I can be done with all of this. With a little bit of luck in a year or so, all of this will be settled, so I can say “OK, this was life #1, now let’s think about life #2”. Let’s just relax; let’s just see what I really feel like doing.

I have to admit from my education and from the situation that I grew up in “proving” was a main element: “Can he really do it? Can he really pull this off? Can he make a living as a percussionist? What do you do when you stop playing percussion? How do you earn your life? Can this really be considered a lifestyle worth being lived? Where is your social responsibility? Can you just be the clown of a society?” That’s just a few questions I ask myself but occasionally I am being asked these questions and certainly in Switzerland
where everyone has to contribute financially and substantially to the welfare of the state. And we don’t like clowns, really, in Switzerland… not to speak of those who live off of the community. This is what I don’t do, but you get pushed into this and I would love to be able to be a bit more relaxed.

JD: So it seems you have answered most of these questions already?

FH: Yeah, but it took me a while. It took me a while to say no, no I can’t do this but maybe you can help, or I can do this, however, because this is my specialty. Maybe we can do this together. I don’t have to prove anything, because that’s what I am doing.

JD: Certainly the proof can be found in your work up to date.

FH: Yeah, there are a few things that I can really look back and say, “OK, I can pull out forty CDs or these scores or whatever I did. But, no one will believe what you’ve done in the arts if unless you get put on currency bills like they do in Switzerland, or until a street is named after you or put you on a stamp or something. Otherwise you are just … it’s ridiculous. There are really famous composers in Switzerland, who if you asked people in the streets, they would have no idea who he is. If you ask anybody who Heinz Holliger or Klaus Huber they would just look at you like, “who”?

So what will I be doing, I don’t know. I am going to work with the theatre. This lady who did the Drum with Man with me, she’s now the director of the Zurich Theater. This is one of our largest theater institutions in Switzerland. So she pulls the strings there, and I am going to do Drum with Man five times in Zurich in November this year. I am really looking forward to it because it’s a piece that I feel still deserves more attention, and I still love to play it, and it’s an exemplary piece for being in between a concert and a theater-play, but it’s both at the same time. Aside from this, which I will probably carry with me for the rest of my life, I would like to create something new, with Barbara, the director, and maybe involving a choreographer and someone else. Maybe percussion, maybe with body language, maybe with poetry, or with singing, I don’t know. I would like to expand ways of expressing myself and mixing with different media. I am not an electronic guy so much. It’s all handwork. Even here, although there is 24-track Protools and engineer and all, I prefer not doing overdubs, everything is as it is. There is no EQ or moving things around. It could have been done thirty years ago on a two-track machine, apart from the noise level.
JD: Although from the recordings I have heard of yours, you get a sense that recording technology affords a particular view of your compositions that you wouldn’t get live.

FH: Exactly, it comes in the thinking. That’s what I did with Flip with this multi-track way of thinking or recording the cymbals with the low end. That is something that I find can be a solution but I don’t know if it works. Just recording a performance and putting it on the CD… I really don’t see the point. What I find interesting is really well recorded improvisation; because that is really there, and if you want to hear it, you can listen in through the CD, or, create something in which you cannot possibly hear something, even in the studio, but only in my mind. So you are actually coming into my head to hear the music that only exists here and I kind of compose it by creating the space. This is done with recording techniques, for example to capture the low frequencies that microphones can hear but I can’t. Also working with chance factors as well… overdubbing woodblocks than try a few things and then I can finally say, “OK, this is what I want.” It’s like chemistry; we do these experiments and sometimes something blows up, and sometimes it’s just a bad smell. We want the nice colors and the fumes to go off, you know? If it is just sitting there and it smells funny, then you say, “OK, it did not work, let’s try something else”. Although I have mixed before, I don’t use plug-ins or EQ, just use the faders and panning.

One time I did a sound instillation in an architectural museum that wanted to present three new rooms. In the first room, there were four speakers, one in every corner. It would play cymbals, just like the ocean. When you walked in, you could not really locate the room; you saw it, but you could not really define it. In the second room there was four speakers but they were really close to each other. There was only room for one person and you had to stand right in the middle of them. The third room had sizzle cymbals but with the low end cut completely out. In the middle room between the four speakers you had these really dampened cymbals like on Flip. If you stood in the middle you could see both rooms but not really hear anything until “blub blub bla bloom” the dampened cymbals would come out of the speakers and startle you. Your ears would jump up and then the two spaces would open back up again. It would constantly be this kind of electronic shock that would open up again and give you a sense of the three rooms. That worked pretty well, but I think only seven people saw and heard it… maybe seventy-five, I don’t know.

Did I tell you about the stones? This is part of my career here really. Peter Zumthor, the Swiss architect created this spa in the mountains in Switzerland that is the most famous building. It is completely made of stone and is beautiful. There is an inner and outer pool, and around the inner pool
are smaller special pools. They are hot, or cold, flower pool, and sand bath. There is one room where there are two beds and you go in and lie down and you hear my music, which is basically made with sounding stones. It is not tuned, but it sounds beautiful. I am playing with mallets, and I am rubbing the stones too. I recorded four hours of music, which plays on four CD players, between 20-24 tracks on each CD. There are also four pairs of speakers. You have a near field pair when you lie down and one above you and on the other bed you have the same. When it is really quiet in there, you can hear all four pairs. All four CDs run in shuffle repeat so there is no way it will sound the same twice. I wanted to create something that makes you decide to go in and go out, just like a bath. It’s not like “Oh yeah, it’s been a half hour and I’ve heard this part before.” Also, you can’t think “Oh this is really beautiful why don’t I go get my girlfriend” because the moment you go and get her and come back, it is different. It will never be the same. That is totally abstract music with no melody, with no harmonic system, with no repetition, with no recognizable sound, and I sold 4500 CDs with that. Of course we had to make a version for that which mixes the four separate CDs into one. You can only buy it there as a souvenir. That supports my work tremendously.

JD: Do your CD sales in general comprise a large amount income for you?

FH: No, this was a unique production.

JD: Well, I think we are running out of time now, thanks so much for speaking with me today Fritz.

FH: You’re welcome.
Appendix IV

Steve Schick (b. 1954) Interview, La Jolla, CA, March 15, 2010.

Justin DeHart: As I remember in Banff (Roots and Rhizomes, June 2009), when we were talking about where we all trace our craft back to, you replied with, “drumset”, correct?

Steven Schick: Yes I did, and I guess by “drumset”, I kind of mean a broader category of drumming traditions. When I think of someone like Bob [Becker], I am sure he did it all kind of “right”: learning rudimental drumming first, etc. I didn’t really. I drummed in rock bands, school bands, pep bands, and in the basement. So, the basis of my training was really formed in an impure way.

JD: Would you say that drumset formed your earliest conception of what “percussion” is?

SS: Yes.

JD: Can you tell me about some of your recent musical goals or “problems” that you find yourself interested in lately?

SS: The issues of “problems” has changed from a kind of a general community approach, which is how I often felt about things for most of my professional and adult life - in other words: percussion needed a kind of development and percussion needed new pieces. I thought that I was doing that because it was what I wanted to do and it also had some sort of broader application. Now, it seems to me that there are many more people doing things, leaving less of a need for a single person. I was probably deluded in the first place to think that a single person could really curate much of anything besides his own life, but it is certainly clear to me now that I am pursuing more pathways that I think are personally satisfying than more generally applicable or important.

One of the really big issues for me is – I hope this doesn’t sound any cynical overtones at all – to find ways to stay interested in it [percussion]. It’s a little harder than it might seem. For instance, those major pieces that I’ve played for years - thirty years of playing Psappha, or twenty years now exactly playing Rebonds - and its hard to think, “OK, I’m going to get up in the morning and I’m going to practice that thing.” But, it needs practicing. So, you have to find a strategy to continue to find new things in that repertoire, and then to commission things or do things that provide the same sort of thrill that those pieces did when I was learning.
When I got the manuscript for Rebonds I was only one of three people who had ever seen it and I was practicing it in my brother’s garage. I was on vacation and visiting with him in Florida and learning this piece for the first time and it was this electric experience, which you could hardly wait. You woke up early because you thought, “This thing is there, and contact with this amazing piece!” But, it changes obviously over the course of the years and so one of the things is to find a way for me personally to continue to do new things that are as intriguing now as that was then. So, I think it means a little bit more diverse set of activities, at the moment, including outside of percussion.

JD: Conducting?

SS: Conducting, yes, and a growing number of theatrical things. Two circus presentations with Roland Auzet and then the Ur Sonata and Schick Machine with Paul Dresher and then some new thing in France in the spring. So, there is a series of basically non-percussion related music theatre pieces.

JD: So you have moved from the broadening of repertoire to encompass that mode of exploration in other areas?

SS: Yes, I mean percussion is a kind of system of knowledge acquisition as well as an art form. It's the way we understand the world we live and the way we learn anything, whatever that might happen to be. How many thousands of hours have we practiced? That way of dealing with objects and collation of dissimilar objects and the coping strategies that attend any percussion project then provides a map for the acquisition of knowledge in all these other kinds of areas. So, if you learn Spanish or learn to drive a motorcycle or whatever it might happen to be I think it is really an outgrowth of percussion because of the learning aspect of things that is so strongly ingrained in the way we learn percussion. If when I learn a piece to conduct with the orchestra, or for the theatrical things, I don't think it's actually that far from percussion because it really still adopts that map of strategies for learning.

JD: Right, so there is just a different “something” on the other side of what you are going up against.

SS: Yes, obviously there are different goals, different materials, but the learning strategy and intellectual architecture behind it is really very informed by learning Psappha.
JD: In Banff you alluded to the “crisis” in the world of percussion akin to the growing pains in adolescence. How would you react to the idea that the world of percussion is in a “hangover” instead?

SS: The word “crisis” prompts me to backtrack because I did say it and I remember the first time when it came up at Roots and Rhizomes meeting here in 2007. It seemed like a crisis to me then because it preceded many things that have now given me a lot of rewards. It was before the conducting started, it was before I got married, and there are lots of ways in which life is now richer than it was then. Maybe I lean now less heavily on percussion music with a capitol “P” then I did then. It’s not that I deal with it any less, but there are a lot of other things in life now, so maybe that’s one of the reasons I don’t use the word anymore that often. But, also there is that possibility that we are really just separating ourselves from the percussion mainstream. If you spent anytime looking at – we’ll just use the PAS as an example as an academic percussion establishment – if you spent any amount of time looking at what the Percussive Arts Society stands for, endorses, and produces, than I think it is not hard to say that we are in a crisis. But then, of course, all you need to do is get a little distance on that and realize that there are many other things to do and percussionists who have nothing to do with that kind of way of thinking and then all of the sudden, it doesn’t seem like as much of a crisis to me anymore. If I’ve spent a lot of time in that world then I start feeling more bored than I do normally.

JD: Even if we ignore that influence though, the kind of “shock value” of the early and mid-twentieth century percussion has definitely lessened.

SS: Yes, there is no doubt about it. I think there is something – maybe we need a little more detail on the relationship to the Percussion Arts Society and the mainstream percussion - because on the one hand: I don’t care, and I doubt you do, whether anybody else does. If somebody wants to play repertoire that I think is kind of silly, that’s fine with me, I don’t care. I don’t even think less of them; that’s totally fine with me. Where it becomes not fine with me, where I do care, is the way in which broad commercial brushstrokes have really changed the formation of art. The example that comes to mind is the endorsement practice in which a percussionist endorses a certain percussion company. That in itself is not a problem, and we certainly know a lot of people who have done that. I really don’t care about that either. But the companies’ goal is to sell instruments so they provide the percussionist with instruments and then he or she says, “You know, I need some new pieces for these instruments”. And then it goes out to composer ”X”, maybe with a little bit more money from Yamaha Corporation or whatever it might be, and then a
set of etudes or concert pieces for their instruments are made and we are under the impression that somehow this is a kind of benign or transparent process and we’re just making music, but we’re not. It’s making a kind of emblem for the furtherance of something that started as a commercial impulse. Nothing against people making money, of course, but I think it is too close to the DNA of the creative act of percussion for me to be happy.

You alluded just now to the explosion in the middle of the twentieth century, which was devoid of the commercial impulse because nobody cared and nobody thought you could make money from it; it was just a bunch of weirdos doing it. And now all the sudden people think, “Wait a minute, we can make a lot of money selling drums, or afuches or whatever it happens to be”. And so now all of the sudden it is full of that kind of motivation. When composer “X” writes a marimba piece I have to stop and wonder, “Is that something that is the natural growth of the creative process for that person or is that because of the set of inter-entangling commercial alliances?” So that’s where I take issues, otherwise, when I read a program that’s been played at Percussive Arts Society and if I think the music is really not that interesting, that doesn’t bother me, that is just the way it is. But it’s that particular thing that I find pretty bad.

JD: Looking at the beginning of your career as a percussionist, what followed your solo recital in the university? Was it the tour in New Zealand?

SS: That was an early one, but it was not the earliest one. The first concert that I played outside of a degree recital was in early November of 1978. It was at the University of Illinois. I played Janissary Music, Psappha, and Zyklus; these were basically all the pieces that existed at the time. It is a meaningless story, but I tell you what happened to me that night. Because I didn’t want to switch instruments, but instead move from one piece to the next, I brought a big GMC van. There were two marimbas and two vibes. Tom Siwe met me there and said, “You know we’ve got instruments”. I replied, “That’s OK” and set it all up. There was a freezing rain that night and everybody went out to the dinner or party afterwards and I was still finishing up the packing. The van was really full except for about six or eight inches on top. I am soaked to the skin, it is raining and all that. It was probably thirty-five degrees or something ridiculously uncomfortable like that. I get the whole thing full, and I realize as the van is still running that the front doors are locked and there is no way to get to the keys. I said to myself, “I can’t unload this thing”. So I decided I would kind of crawl on the top and I get about half way through and the rain is beating down and I am soaked to the skin and I can just barely find a way and all the instruments shift with my weight and I get my leg caught in these instruments and I am half way and I am calling, “Help!!” but everyone is gone.
I am alone in this loading dock at about eleven o’clock at night and I just remember sitting there and thinking, “It’s not really starting well.” [laughs] I thought that being trapped by instruments really was a kind of model.

That was the first real concert that I did and then I starting teaching at University of Iowa after finishing a Master’s degree there. There were also tour concerts, mostly with Jim Avery then. Afterwards, I went to Freiburg 1981-82 and played a number of things and entered some competitions that year. I moved to Washington later during the 1982-83 academic year because Wendy, my wife then, was in graduate school there. Then I took a job at CSU Fresno in 1983 and it was in the summer of 1986 that I played in New Zealand and Australia. So, New Zealand was not the very first thing, but it was an early enough kind of example.

JD: Was there ever a period where you were not very active before that?

SS: No, I was playing a lot, and I was playing a lot in Europe and there was the Fulbright year in Germany in there. One year where I didn’t play a whole lot and didn’t have many concerts was the year in Washington. That was kind of an amazing year. You talk about these kinds of practice retreats; that’s what I did for about a year. I don’t think I practiced less than eight to ten hours a day that year. I didn’t have a job, and I basically spent less than fifteen dollars a day. [laughs]

JD: Rice and beans?

SS: Rice and beans, and ramen soup. That was about it... and practice.

JD: What was the audience reaction when you played some of the early concerts and how has that changed over the years?

SS: Besides meeting Brenda, if there was a stroke of pure luck in my life, something that was just pure luck, it was being a resident in the State of Iowa. My parents wanted me to be a doctor and I went one year to a small college and it didn’t work out. So, I decided to be a music major at that time, I didn’t even really know what that meant. I was thinking I would be a high school band director or something like that. So, I went to the University of Iowa, which was the state school. If I went to the University of Nebraska, maybe I would be a band director, or maybe I would be a doctor, who knows what I would have been, but certainly not doing what I am doing. But it so happened that Iowa, and Illinois, Buffalo, and a few other places in the country had seed money from the Rockefeller Foundation to make centers of contemporary art. The Center for New Music was there. You know Will Parsons?
JD: Yes.

SS: He was the percussionist there and that’s how I knew him. I walk in there and the very first thing I hear is Will Parsons playing Kontakte with James Avery. That was just what the environment was like. It wasn’t a revolutionary act to play contemporary music for me, not at all. It was the thing that was the most interesting thing going on in Iowa City that time. There was the writer’s workshop and the theatre lab and every art form had its version of the Center for New Music. It was stupendous! I am sure that if today I walked in to Iowa City in 1970-74 – I arrived in 1973 - I think you and I would walk in and think, “This is amazing!” I think on any kind of absolute standard it was an astonishing place to be at that time. I don’t think there are places like those places, Buffalo, Iowa and Illinois, right now. Anyway, it wasn’t particularly a revolutionary thing, it was what people were doing so that meant there was an audience for it and a sort of welcoming audience for it.

I was shocked when I went to New York for the first time; going to what I thought was going to be the world’s greatest city. I went to the New York Philharmonic and saw how provincial the audience’s tastes were. I really couldn’t believe it. I mean I felt like the rogue off of a farm and I went and I saw Boulez conduct Berg Violin Concerto and Messiaen Et exspecto and people left in droves. I thought, “God you know the farmers, from Kalona, who drive in to see the Center for New Music have infinitely more sophisticated taste than you people.” I was shocked! In Iowa you grow up with a built-in inferiority complex thinking we were just behind in everything. When I went to go find out how it is done in New York it was just stunning to find out that they were backwards compared to what we were doing.

JD: In the New Music Box interview you did with Frank Oteri (2004), you compared the role of people playing music from the past versus people playing new stuff, and said, “It does create a pressure to reproduce a model of making music rather than to create one. I think that is an unfortunate thing.” Obviously you’ve spent most of your life dedicated to playing “new” music, but at what point do those pieces become “old”? Some of the pieces we play, and call “new”, are actually fifty or sixty years old now.

SS: I don’t know what I meant, since it was a long time ago, but I’ll just say how I feel right now. I don’t think the quotation is a criticism of traditional music, at all, but it is the recognition that in the world of percussion there is another kind of standard and potentially a higher standard. So, I have nothing against, as I am sure you can imagine, a symphony of Mahler or Beethoven; I love that music, but I don’t think our job as percussionists today is to
reproduce that model of making music over and over and over again. So that we now have sonatas of Beethoven but just now written for marimba or for tom-toms or brake drums for that matter. What is that model of creation? There is an aristocracy of classical music which is now a part of contemporary percussion and wasn’t when I was younger. I mean we are so fortunate; we’re so lucky, that they didn’t care about us because it meant that there was this liberty and necessity to create these new ways of thinking. Then all of the sudden people start looking over and say, “Hey, they are actually doing something interesting, let’s go take it.” That’s what I would mean by that statement now, and I think that is probably pretty close to what I probably meant then.

JD: How do you then escape reifying this new thing that we’ve created in order to keep it fresh?

SS: Well, you don’t escape it; you can’t escape that. That’s of course why one relies on young musicians and future generations of people who have not yet been born. Of course in 1938 putting a bunch of tin cans together was this astonishing and shocking thing. It’s not anymore. This doesn’t mean Cage Constructions are not fascinating music and are not worth playing, but we certainly can’t just do that over and over again. He wouldn’t have expected us to do it over and over again. The instant that music was born it started a process of being understood by the culture in such a way that it was no longer new. It also started the clock running for someone to come along and revise the model. We can take whatever your wildest dream may be right now, something that would really change the world of percussion, and make something new. The instant that is made, is starts to become – especially if it is any good – part of the vocabulary and somebody forty years younger than you will say, “We’ve got to break that down.” I think that is just the cycle of life and I don’t think there is anything wrong with it. I see that attitude now, and have seen it for some time, about the kinds of music that I commission. These are concert pieces of twelve to fifteen minutes in length. How relevant is that anymore? We have a lot of them, and how many more do we need? That’s one way of looking at it. So when people come along and basically disdain that and want to do something else I wouldn’t take that as a personal criticism and I would think that it is true. It’s part of the life cycle and to some extent it is what I’ve decided to do in my recent years also.

JD: This is a more personal question about your motivations to persist with a life of percussion. What are some of the things that you have fed on or which fuel you to sustain this career? For example, like ideas of becoming famous, or something as banal as money, or creating new pieces, etc.
SS: Actually money has been an issue for me because I was never really good at a freelancing hand-to-mouth sort of thing. I always knew that I wanted a teaching position because I don’t function that well outside a structure of stability. It’s not that I wanted to be rich because of course if we wanted to be rich we would have done something else. But, having a stable financial platform was part of what fueled me; there is no doubt about that. Fame, never because I never really believed it was possible… [Laughing] it’s still not really, you know? Apropos fame, I remember seeing Cage in Darmstadt. I was riding on the tram and he was walking in the city and I just happened to catch him out of the corner of my eye and he was walking there completely unrecognized. In 1990 he was probably the most well known important composer in the world and he was walking completely unrecognized through a town whose reputation is built on contemporary music, right? And yet the worst soccer player of the third rate local team would have been recognized and sought out. That gives you some sort of perspective about what kind of fame is really possible in our world.

The joke I always tell about the great motivation is the fear of public humiliation. It’s true to some extant; no one wants to fail and the odds of failure go up radically when you are doing something untested like new music. I think to some extant you have a higher bar. It’s true that maybe people don’t know the pieces and there could be a greater tolerance for inaccuracy, but the overall experience of what people take away creates a higher bar for contemporary music compared with traditional music. You really have to “deliver” if you want a mainstream audience to understand what you are doing. Basically, you make a decision to do something with your life and then it sets up a set of rules that ask for refinement, perfection, investigation and re-investigation. You keep going on a way and it becomes a language that you speak and strive to speak well. It’s almost self-perpetuating. In terms of getting new pieces, I like to work with people that I like. It is a way of knowing people.

JD: Yes, you’ve mentioned before that you primarily associate yourself with composers and that has been a fruitful thing.

SS: It has been. A lot of people write interesting and worthwhile music, but it’s not only the quality of the music. In a way, the quality of music feeds that relationship that you have with that person. I think about John Luther Adams who is certainly probably my best friend in the world and it’s funny because we got to know each other through music. Of course we have a relationship that is outside of music, but it is so rooted in the way we talk to each other. It’s a musical friendship and so those are the kinds of people I end up working with more and more. I am not going to work with someone who I find has a
negative personal influence on my life just because that person is a good composer. That just can't happen.

JD: I think one of your biggest contributions to the percussion world is your use of memory while learning and performing music. You have spoken before about the corporeal role in the process of memorizing, but can you talk a bit about the role of emotion? In other words, how do the thoughts, and emotions you experience while learning a piece factor into the process of memorization?

SS: Well, that's a really good question and interesting question. I think I have a good memory, but it is not a fast memory; I think I memorize more slowly than I used to and probably more slowly than other people. But if I allow myself to memorize in the way that I know I can, than it gets really rooted. When you talk about the corporeal impulse, or the corporeal role in memory, I think that you cannot separate it from emotion. The body is the storehouse of emotion and so I guess I should give a bit more detail when I talk about corporeality but to me it means this kind of global, organic, rich aspect of being human. It's not just how you move; it's not just the body but it's one's psyche it's one's intellect and emotion and everything like that. By "corporeal" I mean certainly that it extends beyond the rational in all these areas including emotion. I think memorizing is deeply tied to emotion. I remember in the Medieval and Classical view of memory it's a branch of ethics. As a result, personal investment and right and wrong, and organization of one's life and the organization of the culture are tied to the way we remember. All you need to do to see how true that is is look at how the diminishment of memory has caused cultural rifts recently. In any event, I probably just should have stopped with a short answer; I include emotion when I think about corporeality.

JD: It hasn't been a conscious tool by itself, but something that you have fused with corporeality?

SS: How would you use it as a conscious tool?

JD: Remembering something as an emotion rather than the body actions needed to produce sound. I am thinking about the use of imagery or something.

SS: Well, let me give you an example. I memorize, but sometimes I don't always finish and sometimes I can't conduct these pieces from memory, but the goal in every major piece I conduct is to memorize it. I am memorizing Deserts right now and there are these wedge-like like shapes which I am sure you can imagine in Varese's music: pyramid or diamond structures. I've
started giving them names that are personal to me and perhaps even embarrassing. There is one that seems like a giant floating wedge. In other words: a line that goes up, and a slighter louder volume than a line that is mirrored but goes down. So it seems like something is floating but anchored softly. To me that has a real emotional quality. Something that is heavy above, or something that is ominous. Also, it could be something that is heavy but floats, like a cloud or something like that. The firmer the characterization like that that I can come up with - I mean that is something that I can really see now – I really remember what that thing looks like and I know what the material inside that wedge is. It seems to me that maybe that is an emotional tool.

JD: The reason I was thinking about this was in reference to an early conversation about memory between us when you talked about specific memories becoming embedded in the process of learning a piece and those memories coming back when you visit the piece again years later. I was just wondering if after you realized this you ever decided to make use of the fact.

SS: I am a little bit afraid to… but it happens. I notice even in new memories that I am making now with Dressur. It's hard to know whether that will really be indelible now because I am memorizing so much and also I'm a lot older so I'm maintaining a lot of things in memory. It feels like the computer is slowing down a little bit you know? But in the early days when it was really sponge-like it would just grab all these things, not just the music, but also whatever else was happening in that day. I probably cited this happening when I play Psappha and I think of my brother every time I come to this bar in the piece. I learned Psappha when I was twenty-two and my brother would have been twenty. That's how he comes to my mind, not as a middle-aged man now, but as a young man. I can't use it though, because if I think about it than I will probably forget about what I am supposed to do. But it is just a snapshot of him that comes before my eyes each and every time I play the piece… however many hundreds of times that is.

JD: Other than satisfying a desire for new musical experiences, how has your recent conducting experiences affected your practice as a percussionist?

SS: It's affected it in a couple of ways. For one, it forces a revaluation of the basic mechanics of percussion because our ability to make a stroke – we can make a stroke in an extraordinarily short time and make a sound with such a short and fast stroke, and then the instruments respond. It is a sound without a ramp on it. No other instrument really does that, not even a brass instrument; there is still more stuff. And a string sound is of course full of all this stuff that
happens even before a sound is even registered. When you are working with an orchestra of seventy-five people or so, nothing happens really immediately and sound materializes and develops to create an internal life of a sound that isn’t just something that starts, but has a dynamic shape which you can sculpt or that you can think about at least. This has slowed me down a bit as a percussionist. When I realize in common practice what is allowed in terms of interpretive process of breathing and openness, it also increasingly frees me from the kind of enslavement of the score; when it says this is a sixteenth note, so the next note has to come precisely one sixteenth note after and if it doesn’t than it is wrong. Of course you don’t ever play nineteenth century music that way. So I think it has made the “rules” a little bit richer.

The particular conducting with the orchestra here has been great because it is a community orchestra that belongs to a particular place. I think of a world of professional musicians who often presume that we are all in a fluid kind of pipeline where everybody is moving through a place that is not really a place. I don’t think this has broad impact, but I just got really tired of that. Being a part of an orchestra that is in residence here and consists of community members like doctors and lawyers and professional musicians from the area has been a very valuable antidote to the “being-on-a-plane-all-the-time” which was really what my life was like ten years ago.

JD: How do you feel about conducting or playing pieces that you are not fond of? In other words, how far would you go to please the public, or how much responsibility to the public do you feel when you program concerts?

SS: I feel an enormous responsibility when I program. Maybe this is just naïveté, but I tend to think that a piece that I am really excited about, other people will be excited about it also. I don’t think there is another standard for the public. I think we saw that at the Xenakis concert last week. There were some raised eyebrows at some of the music, like, “What is that?” But I think people liked it in about the same way I liked it so I keep getting this validation that my gyroscope is OK in respect to that. You are right that I very rarely play music that I haven’t chosen to play. You were there for one of them recently in Taiwan and it was a pretty hideous experience you know? It’s like, “OK, I know how to get through this” but it didn’t feel like music to me. So, I don’t know if that is an answer?

JD: Sure. And my last question to you is: What have been your major obstacles in...

SS: Lack of coordination!? [Laughs] You mean besides that?
JD: …well in terms of any stories you would care to share about obstacles in your life as a musician.

SS: I've been really lucky. I think that is really true: I’ve been really lucky. I’ve worked hard, but I’ve been extremely lucky. This was lucky, this job just happened to open up at the right time. The obstacle that has been there is probably the general suspicion that percussion has not a lot to offer. I think you still get that a little bit. It has cause a lot of people to engage in a rehabilitation project and try to make percussion a respectable art. There was an article in UT that came out this weekend from a Drummer’s Summit concert that I recently played at Dizzy’s and the article was about “getting respect “. So there is that whole thing which I think is a little bit sad. But, it has been true of course. The obstacle that a friend of mine who is a cellist can go to a presenter and everybody will understand what she does and the road has already been walked upon and you can get a concert quite a bit easier. Looked at in another way, everything we did was fresh, and a pianist or a cellist has this enormous weight around their neck of the way it had been done and we’ve had lots of them and it’s hard to make a mark.

So, it seems to me that everything I once thought was an obstacle – people don’t respect percussion, there are too many instruments, it’s heavy, you got to set it up – every single thing that I thought was a problem has turned out to be an advantage. Those are the things people are interested in. Was there anything that was seemingly an advantage that became a problem? I suppose. Like the ease of with we can make rhythms, how fast you can play and how you can fill the space. That seemed to be so great, you know? At the Drummer’s Summit, which was fun to be a part of, but, that “thing” that everybody does, which is to make a wall of sound; it doesn’t last, and it isn’t very attractive, actually. After drummer number four goes “brrrrrook brrrookk bop!” I think, “OK, let’s stop now and have a little quiet.”
Appendix V

Jan Williams (b. 1939) Interview, La Jolla, CA, December 6, 2009.
(Diane Williams was also present.)

Justin DeHart: My first question has to do with your identity as a percussionist. Where would you locate your roots of identity as a musician? For example, “classical percussionist,” “experimental percussionist,” or “drum set” etc.

Jan Williams: I guess you could say I had more rudimental drumming and classical timpani training when I was very young. Although I played drum set and popular music, I never considered myself a drum set player. I listened to jazz and I respected these guys but I never really concentrated a lot of time on that area. In high school, I didn’t even think I would be a musician. I think I talked about the way it worked out in Jon’s Hepfer interview. After high school, I went to engineering school and it became clear to me there that music was extremely important in my life. So then I went to Eastman for a year and then the Manhattan School.

My identity was absolutely formed by Paul Price, that experience, and that school. In a sense I was ready for that because I was not that happy at the Eastman School of Music studying with Bill Street. I mean, Bill was great, he was a terrific player, a real old-school player who came up through the ranks and I respected the guy tremendously. But somehow it wasn’t enough for me. It was too staid and I wasn’t thinking that I would like to play in a symphony orchestra. But on the other hand I didn’t know what... So it was a fortuitous timing of information coming my way. I learned about things totally serendipitously, like the article in Time magazine when I was still at Eastman, or maybe it was Life magazine, anyway, it was about Paul Price and what he was doing in New York, and it sounded like pretty wild stuff, you know? And it sounded like a lot of fun. That, combined with that fact that I always wanted to go to New York anyway.

But, it was that experience at Manhattan with Paul and his way of working, his way of approaching percussion music so seriously, so driven to change the image of the percussionist, that most affected my identity as a percussionist. He wanted to upgrade the whole perception of the percussionist; it had to be upgraded and how better to do that than by upgrading the repertoire. We did new music because there was no old music for the instrument. It was a very serious approach; from the classical area, in other words, not from jazz. That wasn’t his thing, or rags, or rudimental drumming, it was always very much in the Western European classical music tradition. Percussion had to be taken seriously and presented seriously. He
thought through every aspect, even how we looked on stage. We wore tuxes and tails because that’s what the string players wore. I don’t know how many players back then, like Max [Neuhaus], went to the Manhattan School because of Paul. I think maybe Max did, I certainly did. Paul only started teaching there in 1957 or 1958, coming from Illinois. It wasn’t as if he had already built a big reputation at the Manhattan School by 1959, when I arrived. It was really in a sense a little bit of an accident for this group to form.

JD: He started a new program there, correct?

JW: Well, he was the first to get the percussion ensemble accredited as a college approved course at Illinois. When he came to Manhattan, there wasn’t any percussion program like that there, so, in a sense, yes he did and I think he had carte blanche to do what he wanted to do. Many of us had scholarships to play in the symphony or opera orchestra, so we were integrated into the whole scene there. Degree programs? There was both a Bachelors and Masters degree. But it was the percussion ensemble where he was going to make his mark. Not so much solo repertoire, but the ensemble; that was his area.

JD: Unconducted?

JW: …or conducted. He would conduct if it was bigger than a quartet. We did mixed ensemble music too. We did the Boulez Improvisations sur Mallarmé with harp and soprano, for example. He would ask people to write pieces all the time. Of course he had all this music from Cage, Cowell, and Harrison, which he sought out when he was at Cincinnati Conservatory and was fortunate to get his hands on. Most had never been played again since the forties, you know? So, he had already the foundation for this repertoire. And then he started the publishing company, Music for Percussion, because he thought that this music should get out there, be published. His source was either stuff from Cage that wasn’t under contract, or Harrison’s Labyrinth for eleven players, which originally he planned on publishing but never did. But mostly he relied on his students at the time to write pieces for the ensemble, such as Mervin Britton, Jack McKenzie and Michael Colgrass at Illinois. He thought, “We need music, so write!” That’s when Mike wrote Three Brothers. Then there was that early stuff that was published in Henry Cowell’s magazine New Music Quarterly. It had Cowell’s Ostinato Pianissimo and Harrison’s early pieces that never got played, and a lot of Cage. So my identity was formed there.

I was very fortunate that at the time I graduated from Manhattan in 1964, various foundations became interested in supporting new chamber
music and in the forming of new music groups around the country. At the request of Lukas Foss, the Rockefeller Foundation funded a group at SUNY Buffalo, but also groups in Iowa, the University of Washington, Rutgers, and other places around the country. They all had a little different focus or way of working, but I was fortunate that it all happened just then. There was the Fromm players group at Tanglewood—John [Bergamo] was a member—all of a sudden there were opportunities. We could concentrate on playing and not have to prepare for orchestral competitions. That was a really fortunate time for me.

JD: You mentioned you played drum set with your father?

JW: Yes.

JD: A lot of people I have been interviewing started with the drum set. In the 60s, how many people like you were really listening and being influenced from the jazz scene?

JW: There was definitely a lot of interest. We would go to the Village Vanguard and see Max Roach.

JD: Wasn’t he at Manhattan School also?

JW: Max was at Manhattan but I don’t know if I actually ever met him. At that time, there were a lot of part-time students, right Diane? You were working there then.

Diane Williams: Yes, I was working in the office then and there were all these people who thought at a certain point, “Yeah maybe I should get a Bachelor’s degree”. It was a loose enough school that they could take a few classes each semester, come and go, and run down to Radio City Music Hall to make it to the [orchestra] pit after classes.

JW: Yeah, people would schedule their lessons in between shows. There were a lot of great drummers in town playing all the time, but myself personally, no. Bergamo was a fabulous drum set drummer, and there were other guys in the program, like Eddie Cornelius and several others who made their living playing drum set. We talked a lot about it and played jazz, but as I said, Paul Price was not focused on that area, so you couldn’t really talk to him a lot about that. But it was New York, what better campus could you have? You could hear any kind of music you wanted to hear.
Max [Neuhaus] was touring with Stockhausen and Boulez and playing their pieces for the first time in America. I remember hearing Boulez at the New School with a percussionist, either [Jean-Pierre] Drouet or [Boris de] Vinogradov, I think. It was “oomph!!!” you could hear the real guys coming over from Europe playing this extraordinary music.

But drum set, yeah, you know, if someone was playing in town you would go to hear them. I was more interested in big band jazz; I liked Count Basie, Erroll Garner, Sonny Stitt and those guys. We used to go to Birdland all the time and hear big bands. I started studying snare drum as a kid in Utica, NY, but my teacher, George Claesgens, was not a big drum set guy. He was a rudimental guy like: [starts demonstrating slow double strokes alternating hands] “bomp…bomp…bomp…bomp”. It would take five minutes or more to play the long roll. You worked on that with this big drum tied around your neck. Man, he had chops. He was also a very good timpani player and had a great ear. He studied with Saul Goodman in New York. I played alongside him in the Utica Civic Symphony. So, my drum set experience was not through my teacher, but because of my father and because of the times. I never considered myself very good; when it came time to take a solo, I wasn’t that comfortable doing that. I used to love hearing John [Bergamo] and Buell Neidlinger; do you know the name “Buell Neidlinger”?

JD: No.

JW: Oohhh!! He is a bass player who used to play with John and Andrew White who is an oboe and alto sax player from Washington D.C. Andrew N. White the Third... He had the most phenomenal ears. He was one of those guys who transcribed Trane’s [John Coltrane] solos and could play classical oboe too. Andy, Buell, and John used to play jazz in coffee houses in Buffalo and, awwww man... these guys were really good. Hearing that, I didn’t go near the drum set when John was around. I drifted more towards multiple-percussion. In fact, when Buell left Buffalo he did a lot of studio work in LA, but now he lives in Seattle. He taught at Cal Arts too. In 1964 we did a piece called Sonant by Mauricio Kagel. The concert was recorded and somehow Buell got hold of the copy. He checked with all of the players and said, “Can I put this out on this record?” It was recently released by a new record company called Vivace Records. The CD features Buell and includes our recording of Sonant. I hadn’t heard it in years. It brought back so many memories of rehearsing with Kagel. I had never worked with a composer whose music was so far out and who was so meticulous about details.

But I don’t remember Eastman as a big drum set place. They had a wind ensemble with Frederick Fennell and a bunch of very skilled mallet players who would play in a group called the Marimba Masters. As far as I was
concerned the repertoire wasn’t that interesting, mainly because they played lots of transcriptions. They had a drum set player and bass player and they did a lot of very good arrangements of pop tunes. I am sure some people wrote for them, but I don’t remember. That was just the beginning of the whole marimba explosion. After that, things really took off when the Japanese composers started writing for it, thanks to Keiko Abe. The drum set was always on the back burner for me. I played William Albright pieces, Take That, and another of his pieces called Tic, for two drummers and film and tape. But drum set wasn’t a big part of my identity as a musician.

JD: So, besides Paul Price’s ensemble, the choices for playing percussion were either marimba band, orchestral or jazz? Were there any other percussion ensemble opportunities?

JW: You mean other than New York?

JD: Yes.

JW: Well, of course there was the Strasbourg group, which was in existence at the time. They were doing their thing.

JD: Were you aware of them at the time?

JW: Yes. As soon as we started finding these pieces by Ramati, Stockhausen, or Boulez, you started hearing about this group who was playing the ensemble pieces. Even Ionisation, we knew that they had a done a version with six players and there were some recordings.

In New York, there were many opportunities to play contemporary chamber music. The Group for Contemporary Music at Columbia was started by Charles Wuorinen and Harvey Sollberger around 1961. They did a series of several concerts a year. Ray DesRoches was their percussionist and sometimes I would play as an extra along with John [Bergamo] or Max [Neuhaus]. Gunther Schuller had a fabulous series of concerts called 20th Century Innovations at Carnegie Recital Hall, which is now called Weill Hall. Gunther would conduct a lot of the pieces. When I saw Gunther recently, he said “Oh, man, I gave you your first new music gig!” He’s right. There was also a concert series called Music of Our Time run by a violinist named Max Pollikoff at the 92nd street YMHA. As a freelance musician, I had opportunities to play chamber music with these groups.

Outside of New York there seemed to be fewer opportunities. Mostly you had to be on one coast or the other, or Chicago. Groups like the one at the University of Washington spurred activity, where a trombone player named
Stuart Dempster started a group. John [Bergamo] went there after he left the Buffalo group. He left there to go to Cal Arts. There was a new music group in Iowa too around the same time. We went the grant route; these grants were similar to a post-doc grant that funded you for a year or two to do exactly what you wanted to do. It didn’t happen to be in New York, but in my and John’s case, Buffalo, which I was initially skeptical about. Or maybe you went to Europe on a Fulbright Fellowship. There are players like Robyn Schulkowsky from South Dakota who got a Fulbright to Germany and basically never came back. So there were a few players like that who went to Europe because there was a higher degree of activity there at the time. Stockhausen, for example, had a studio at the WDR (West German Radio) in Cologne and his music was performed, recorded and broadcast regularly. There were studios and radio stations all over Europe performing and recording new music back then. You could go over there and play a lot of new music. Man, it was tremendous!

When the group from Buffalo toured over there, radio recordings were the core of our tours instead of concerts. These tours were usually stimulated by the work of specific composers. I toured Europe many times with Lukas [Foss] and Morty [Feldman].

JD: So, your model for contemporary percussion was Strasbourg Percussion, Paul Price, and the urban local of New York itself.

JW: Yes. Our horizons were expanding every day like this [holds out extended arms], but it started with a tight little group at Manhattan, doing our thing, rehearsing all day on Saturday, a couple of times a week, taking lessons, etc. Then, you encounter someone like Max [Neuhaus], who is already part of the group and a year or so ahead of me, and is a real soloist. We all benefited from his intense interest in finding pieces, designing concerts, collecting instruments, building set-ups and solving set-up problems for Zyklus, for example. We all benefitted from that even though I never played Zyklus. And John [Bergamo], he had his thing that he was doing, which was a little different from Max’s. John wasn’t so driven towards the solo thing; he was more about playing chamber music like Ray [DesRoches]. They were doing a lot of gigs in New York and it was always mixed chamber music and occasionally percussion music written by non-percussionist composers. I was more interested in that area too; I didn’t have any illusions about being a soloist. It was Max who had the vision that there could be such a thing.

JD: What was the model for being a solo percussionist at that point? Or was there one?
JW: Very, very few. It was basically Vida Chenoweth playing solo marimba concerts at Town Hall. That was about it!

JD: There were jazz drummers playing solos…

JW: Yeah, but in the context of a jazz ensemble. I am trying to come up with names… and really, there were no soloists. Max, in a sense didn't really do all that many solo concerts—he did have solo concerts—but often he played Zyklus on a tour with Stockhausen, and with Boulez he played the bongo part in Marteau (sans Maitre). Then he got heavily involved in making his own pieces, first through doing realizations of Cage’s Water Music and then his own compositions. This took him in a totally different direction from playing percussion music. He became very involved with building his own electronics. Eventually his percussion instruments ended up in storage and he quit playing percussion. OK, that’s the way it developed. It was certainly coming out of his experiences playing percussion. But there were really no models besides the Strasbourg group at that time.

Then in the mid-60s in Buffalo I formed the New Percussion Quartet. We thought, “Oh wow, maybe we could have a career doing this!,” but managers didn’t know what to do with us and two of our members were in the Buffalo Philharmonic with inflexible schedules, so that didn’t work out. Then Garry Kvistad comes to Buffalo as a Creative Associate and spends a year there. He gets the [same] idea and I give him stacks of [percussion music for ] quartets. Then he and his brother Rick, along with Mike Udow and Alan Otte go off to Minnesota for a year and begin playing and recording all this great percussion music. They [Blackearth Percussion Group] basically had a career for a while. Then you started hearing about a group in The Hague [Netherlands]. But the evolution happened on a very small scale.

I was interested in solo pieces, but I was not interested in creating a career as a soloist. You know, putting together solo concerts, trying to book them, sell them and go out playing as a soloist. But doing solo pieces; yes. People did write solo pieces for me and I played them, but not usually in the context of a solo percussion concert. Of course we all did solo recitals.

JD: Can you remember your first one and what you played on it?

JW: It was my Bachelor’s recital at the Manhattan School, which had a very minimal requirement. You didn’t have to do a whole recital, but just play a few pieces. My Master’s recital was a different story. This was a full-blown recital. Mine took place on May 15th, 1964, again at the Manhattan School. I played John’s [Bergamo] Tanka, [Haubenstock] Ramati’s Liaisons, in a version for vibraphone and three of the original six [Elliott] Carter timpani pieces in their
unrevised versions. I also premièred a new piece for vibes, marimba and glockenspiel, which I have since forgotten. Since Paul [Price] encouraged all his students to write new pieces for their recitals, I composed and premiered my Theme and Variations for Solo Kettledrums. Anyway, that’s my first vivid recollection of a solo recital. When I came to Buffalo, I didn’t really play many solo recitals because we were so busy playing chamber music like [Berio’s] Circles or Kagel’s Sonant or whatever. There were solos like Luis de Pablo’s Le Prie-Dieu sur la Terrasse; do you know this piece?

JD: No.

JW: Awww… it is a great piece; it should be resurrected. He is a very good Spanish composer. By the way, a prie-dieu is the prayer bench on which you kneel before an altar. The piece is scored for large concert bass drum and a small bass drum suspended by a gut bass string like a lion’s roar. I used an 18” or 20” bass drum. You bow the string and actually play tunes on it. You could also move it with your knee to make it swing, giving a vibrato.

JD: Oh yes, a visiting percussionist from Spain, Luis Tabuenca, played it this last year here.

JW: Well there you go. We did that piece first in Buffalo, I am not sure if it was written for the performance in Buffalo or not, but I played it several times, including performances in Spain. I always had to carry around my own 20” [bass drum] head and had to find a kick drum wherever I went that I could put it on. I didn’t want to punch a hole in someone’s [drum] head every time. But then I had to find ways to suspend it. I remember in Spain, near Barcelona, Luis [de Pablo] set up a concert for us in this ancient church that was almost in ruins and all I could find was a big stepladder. I could remember standing under this rickety thing and hoping it didn’t collapse. It was surreal.

I should also mention that David Gibson wrote a piece for vibraphone for me that used a speed control pedal so that I could continuously change the vibrato speed. It’s called Lillian Brook. The constantly reiterated notes, juxtaposed with the speed of the vibrato, created beats that went continually in and out of focus. Lovely! A terrific composer named Harley Gaber, who lived in San Diego for a long time, has a piece called The Silent Zero for two vibraphones. It’s very subliminal, soft, and beautiful.

JD: How much improvisation was fostered at Manhattan with Paul Price? Was there any attitude against that or...
JW: No, there was never an attitude against that, absolutely not, quite the opposite. I mean, whatever the composer came up with, if he asked to you interject your creativity into a piece by choosing instrumentation or interpreting a graphic score, like Ramati, Paul never had any prejudice against doing that at all. We never called it “improvising” when we did that, we were just playing the piece that the composer wrote, which just happened to have some freedom in terms of certain parameters. Well, then the perennial question surfaces, “Shouldn’t your name be on the piece as the co-composer?” As far as Price’s attitude was concerned, the answer was definitely no.

JD: You spent a long career in contemporary percussion and I am wondering if you can speak about your attitudes between the need for innovation and the pull of traditional music making?

JW: From a technical or stylistic standpoint?

JD: Aesthetically speaking. I’m wondering how much the medium of percussion inherently influenced your decision to innovate in the field, since by default, you had to seek new pieces to play since there weren’t any. In other words, if you were a violinist, do you think you would have spent the same amount of time playing new music?

JW: Well, let’s say that back then, around 1960, there were always violinists who were interested in new music and played new music. But compared to the number of percussionists who were doing it, there were definitely many more percussionists. It was certainly because we had no repertoire. It could absolutely have been possible to ask a composer who wrote traditional music and wasn’t necessarily interested in the avant-garde to write you a piece. There were composer colleagues we could have asked who were more interested in writing for marimba and might have been interested in writing in a traditional way. But, in the area of multiple percussion, percussion ensemble and chamber music with percussion, it was the innovative component. The composer would be coming up with something new, new approaches, asking us to do different things, challenging us in terms of technique, and in terms of aesthetics. Like the Kagel piece Sonant that I was talking about: technically it is not difficult, but it asks for certain odd techniques that you have to practice in order to “get it”. Kagel knew what he wanted. In places in the piece you have to speak texts or make nonsense sounds. This was not something that we were prejudiced against. In fact, for some of us, this was very exciting.
JD: Even in the context of today though, how far do we have to go back before a piece isn’t new anymore? At what point is a piece not considered “new music”?

JW: Sometimes it’s just an arbitrary thing, but to me it’s more about how the piece sounds, whether it’s “new” music or not. Some of Stravinsky sounds extremely new to me, and very abstract, like Agon, which I heard the other day on Pandora. Other neo-classic pieces don’t really sound that new to me. Will Pléiades ever sound like anything other than new and innovative? That was the other thing about Price; you didn’t worry about whether a piece was going to “make it” or even be remembered in fifty years. Your responsibility as a player is to play it the way the composer wanted it to be played. For me personally, I’m not too concerned about fostering and sustaining traditions. I have the percussion tradition, but as far as being a musician, I am more interested in what the young composers are coming up with. But, is there now a percussion ensemble “tradition”? I don’t give that question a lot of thought.

JD: Sure, but considering that it has happened, how do we keep with the spirit of innovation and not get stuck in that tradition?

JW: It’s up to the composers to do that for us.

JD: When you were summing up the interview with Hepfer, you mentioned that you hoped percussion would become more mainstream and at the same time innovative. What did you mean by “mainstream”?

JW: “Mainstream” in that people will think of percussion as having a legitimate, serious repertoire, the way the string quartet has a legitimate, serious repertoire. It should no longer be an odd thing to have a concert of music written only for percussion instruments. It’s not the medium, the shock value of seeing Xenakis’ Pléiades; it’s more about the music that stands on its own. One hopes it will become more mainstream and be less of a shock. After the Eighth Blackbird concert the other night, there were a lot of young kids on stage after the concert, trying to beat on the percussion instruments and asking how Matthew [Duvall] got the sounds, wondering what he did here and there. For me, you have to be very careful and work to steer them away from that by not making a big deal about it. The focus should be on the actual music.

When the New Percussion Quartet did concerts years ago for Young Audiences, the big attraction was the instrument demo. But first there was a question and answer period, which is a stupid idea with kids. Don’t even go there! All they want to know is how long is this tube when you straighten it out,
or how heavy is the bass drum. It was an instrument demo, it had nothing to
do with the actual music. Fortunately, we came across some composers and
performers in the Young Audience organization at the time who felt that this
kind of approach was not a good idea and that we weren’t challenging the
kids. You weren’t talking about music. You were just talking about instruments,
and that’s not so important. Maybe you should not be trying to interest them in
leaning to play an instrument. If you are, then you should inspire them through
the music. They called this the “Exploration Concept” or something like that.

We would get together at conferences and work on bits focusing on a
specific piece, like Harrison’s Fugue. We would make a bit about one aspect
of that piece without telling them “This is called fugue. In a fugue, one player
starts, then the next player…” and so forth. But you didn’t tell them that, they
had to understand the concept when they left the room, it had to come through
the music and the way you spoke to them about the music. I remember one bit
that Ed Burnham developed around a piece where he played drum set and the
rest of us played a couple of small, un-pitched instruments. We would play
along, obviously reading music, and then all of a sudden he would take off and
start improvising. The rest of us would stop playing and incredulously ask him,
“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ed, Ed, Ed, what’s going on over here?” because we
wanted to teach them the concept of improvising. We were always playing
very strictly, you know, “Boom, chic, boom, chic!” and looking at each other as
we played. All of the sudden he would go crazy. When we asked him what he
was doing he would answer, “Oh… I don’t know, I just decided that I wanted to
make up some of my own music instead of playing what’s on the page.” And
then we worked that bit and finally agreed that there would be times where he
could do his thing and times where we would all be playing together. That got
us thinking a lot about presenting to young people and how the music should
be the most important thing.

With adult audiences, it’s a similar situation, and you do that through
programming. How to design a good program so that when people leave at the
end of the concert they say, “Whoa, what the hell was that? I mean that was
fantastic, what a trip”. Thinking very consciously about what piece follows what
piece, where are you taking them on this trip?

Stage logistics can be tricky with percussion, as you know, but that’s
what I wanted to do with the all Xenakis percussion concert I designed for a
PAS weekend at NYU with the help of Jonathan Haas last February, 2010.
The four pieces on the first half, Rebonds A, Psappha, Okho, and Rebonds B,
were performed with no breaks between them. I just wanted to hit the
audience with these four pieces and not give them a chance to come up for
air, so to speak; to have them say, “Wait a minute, give me a break!” Then
they would come back after intermission and experience Persephassa. So, I
think that’s important and although I am not playing as much anymore, I’m
thinking about how to design programs along these lines, always being driven by the repertoire. I am talking about those pieces that work really well together and work well in the sense of a big arc. That’s something I am really critical about when I go to concerts by student groups. Everybody’s got to be playing, and “We’ll do this piece or that piece, depending on setup, logistics and other non-musical considerations.” It’s a little like instrument demo; you should be able to design a good program taking into consideration those elements, but not letting them dictate the program design. Is it easier to do this with percussion music because there is such a wide variety of sounds and styles of compositions? Maybe.

JD: What other issues are you concerned with in the world of percussion recently?

JW: Besides programming, I am concerned about percussion ensembles playing lightweight repertoire when training young players in ensemble playing. You hear high school groups do programs at PASIC and sometimes the repertoire is pretty lame, in my estimation. Maybe all the cream rises to the top and there are still many student groups doing really well in terms of playing serious pieces. There are many pieces where it is not about chops and you don’t have to have a lot of ensemble experience to play them well.

Take for instance Cage’s *What about the sound of crumpling paper*... you don’t really need to be a percussion player to do it, although it was conceived as a piece for percussion ensemble. Like any piece, there are right ways to do it and wrong ways to do it. You have to seriously prepare your own part in a certain way and think seriously about the sounds you want to use. It takes chops, but not necessarily traditional chops. There is nothing wrong with that. I think with young players the emphasis is so much on chops, and it has to be to a certain degree, but I think it is very important to expose students to interesting, good music and perhaps not be so concerned with technique. Again I think it goes back to the repertoire, as opposed to the technique. Those students who are really serious will do all of that: get the technique and also be... well like Hepfer. He has always been interested in music and all kinds of philosophy and art.

Actually, I remember Paul Price required all of his students to read a small book published by Museum of Modern Art called “What is Modern Art?” or “What is Contemporary Art?” It had nothing to do with music, but was about contemporary painting and painters. We were all encouraged to read about living artists working in different disciplines just to try to get us to think about how we, as percussionists, fit into the larger picture. The diversity of thought and the way artists work was meant to inspire us. A lot of Price’s percussion students started writing percussion music.
There were excellent percussionist/composers, look at [Michael] Colgrass, or James Wood, or John Bergamo. I think that early training had a lot to do with how they think about composition. There are a lot of percussionists who write music, but I think we’re getting to the point now where we don’t need to worry so much about building repertoire and writing music for ourselves. We [Williams’ generation] had to worry about that back in the day, but now there is a different problem. It is a problem we were anticipating back then, in that we could imagine how great it would be if there was so much music for percussion we could afford to be selective and say, “This piece is really not that great.” Whereas back then, however you felt about the [Darius] Milhaud Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone, you just did it. Or, the Creston Concerto… man, you just did it. It didn’t matter; it was a repertoire piece. The repertoire was so small you had to try and learn every piece in the repertoire. Does anyone play the Creston anymore?

JD: Yes, but not at UCSD, that’s for sure.

JW: Yeah well there are things to be learned in the piece; it’s not easy. And the Milhaud...

JD: They are “period pieces” now.

JW: Yes, and you need to know them. Whether you play them all or not, you need to know them very well, particularly if you want to have a career in academia. Let’s face it; if you are “only” a new music player, there aren’t so many opportunities out there in terms of University or Conservatory positions. You are almost forced into having other chops, like steel drum, marching band, theory, or musicology. This needn’t be a negative, because if you have an aptitude for doing theory and you happen to be a percussionist, then, yeah, it makes sense. My colleagues and I were fortunate, as far as our academic careers were concerned, because we had to do a lot less stuff we were uncomfortable doing. It was such an early time, in terms of the percussion repertoire. John at Cal Arts, Ray at Purchase and I were extremely fortunate to be able to continue the career trajectory we launched at a time when technique, musical experimentation and a repertoire could develop hand in hand. We were given the freedom to do what we knew we could do best.

JD: Great! Thanks for speaking with me today Jan, I really appreciate your time.
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