

PERCUSSION MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

by

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PREFACE

This paper was undertaken with the purpose of using it to further educate the writer in the field of contemporary music. As it has turned out it has done that and much more. The topic, percussion music in contemporary music, was chosen on the basis that the writer had that area of instrumental music as his least knowledgeable.

Though the format of this paper is styled as a panel interview with four prominent composers, in actuality it was four individual interviews which the writer subsequently edited for unification. Since all material is quoted, and there is no paraphrasing, quotation marks after each speaker's name are eliminated. The presentation as a interview was chosen for its uniqueness, first hand information, and as an experiment for this writer. Perhaps the ultimate presentation would be the tapes in their spontaneity and entirety. As it turned out there were close to 70 pages of transcription from which it almost seemed sacrilege to condense all that discourse into fourteen pages.

The composers who generously donated their time and thoughts to this paper were Mr. Robert Erickson, Dr. Kenneth Gaburo, Miss Pauline Olivers, and Dr. David Ward-Steinman. They were interviewed on December 6, 5, 4 and 3, 1968 respectively. The former three are composers-in-residence at the University of California at San Diego, and Dr. Ward-Steinman is the composer-in-residence at San Diego State College. This writer thanks them each again for their co-operation in making this paper and the writer's stated objective a success.

G.L.P.

December, 1968

LIST OF QUESTIONS USED IN INTERVIEWS

1. What is your working definition of "percussion music?"
2. How have you used percussion music?
3. What influence has percussion music had on music written since 1940?
4. What might its role be in future music?
5. What are some of the new instruments of percussion music?
6. What are some of the new ways of using traditional American percussion instruments?
7. What about the use of foreign percussion instruments?
8. Do you think that the re-emergency of folk music has influenced the percussion element in serious contemporary composition?
9. Do you feel confined in your experiments with meter and rhythmic complexities because of the theoretically limited ability of the human percussionist?
10. What about the voice as a percussion element?

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PARKS To begin, and for the sake of clarity, I believe it is necessary to circumscribe the area in which we will be working by defining percussion music. Miss Oliveras, what is your working definition of percussion music?

OLIVERAS It is anything activated in the percussive manner and that can include friction and striking and things that occur in a percussive manner without activation. In other words, environmental sounds.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN Simply sounds that are produced by striking something, and music implies an organization of these sounds.

PARKS Mr. Erickson?

ERICKSON I don't think I have one. I don't think of percussion music, but, instead, of a percussion player and the variety of instruments he can play. So its everything which can be struck, and now in my category it includes bowing because my percussionists have to bow.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO I use percussion in a very, very new kind of way; so I'm not really sure I can answer that question altogether. Part of the use of percussion as far as I'm concerned involves defining new ways in which percussion can be used. Certainly as a general definition, an articulatory kind of thing that somehow underlines meter and so forth, along with other kinds of articulation that support another kind of music above it -- say pitched music.

PARKS Now that we have aligned the basic semantics I would like to explore the area of percussion music in which each of you compose. Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN Well, taking a notion of percussion music in its broadest sense, I've been exploring percussive possibilities inside the piano, that is, experimenting with different kinds of mallets on the strings and the different effects of resonances that are possible. I'm also using things like key clicks

on instruments or sounds that are made by striking parts of the body, always though without damaging the instrument. I've made extensive use of the traditional percussion section in earlier works. In one there's even a fugue for percussion instruments in which the instruments play the contour of the subject before the orchestra takes it up. In "Song of Moses" I've scored for 23 different percussion instruments [see Appendix A] .

PARKS Those first instruments you spoke of, would they be called "prepared" instruments? Would you use that term?

WARD-STEINMAN By traditional instruments I meant, you know, drums, temple blocks, claves, cymbals, gongs, this sort of thing.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO I'm working on a piece now that's a theater piece in which one of the movements happens to be for four voices -- soprano, alto, tenor and bass and four percussionists. The sound, rather the text is not like a poem or anything like that, but it's just one word. The word happens to be "glass". The singers are using the various sounds which are involved in the word glass like the ssss sound, and the aaaa, llll, and so forth and so on. Percussionists are associated with those singers [one percussion player is matched with the soprano, one with the alto, etc.] and are distributed in a very assymetrical manner throughout the concert hall. Our percussionists are playing all kinds of glass instruments; instruments in which the resonating factor is glass and no other -- like no membranes of any kind or no metal of any kind -- just glass.

Another area I am interested in is the synthesizing of music. I have one piece, for example, that is an all electronic piece, but you'd swear that there were real percussionists at work, that there's a real double bass at work playing jazz pizzicato bass and all that. It's all been done synthetically. It's not an attempt to imitate those instruments because it's not really an imitation going on, but the sense of that instrument being there. It sounds like it

could've been a drummer or a double bassist or something like that.

PARKS Miss Oliveras, how have you used percussion music?

OLIVERAS Well, I'll describe a large percussion piece which I did in 1967.

PARKS It was called?

OLIVERAS It was called "Circuitry." It involved five percussion players and all of the resources that they could gather. This included any and all percussion instruments that were available. We gave a performance of it at Illinois' University of Illinois in which we had an ocean of percussion on stage. They have quite a percussion teacher there, Jack McKenzie. He's one of the best in the country. They have a large selection including a nine foot marimba and a six foot bass drum. Now this piece also used electronic amplification and induction. In other words, getting the instrument to sound via an induction coil. The players had a score which was a grid of light bulbs on the back wall. This grid consisted of 12 bulbs; there were four columns of three bulbs each. First column was tempo: first bulb meant fast, second meant speed up and/or slow down, and the third bulb was slow. The fast or slow meant extremely fast or extremely slow. In the second column was dynamics: loud, crescendo/diminuendo, and soft. The next column had what to play: a short, choked sound; a sustained sound or inducted sound; and a glissando. In the last column was: street beat, roll off, and single-stroke roll. Now the elements of the piece are very simple and that's all the indication they had, but each player had a light bulb on his stand and it meant he could play or not play. Even though the score [grid] would be lit up he couldn't play unless his light was on. Now four of the players "read" the score and the fifth player was a trap drummer, and he sat in the middle of the grid of light bulbs. His on and off light meant to play jazz, rock'n'roll, or dixieland. Whenever his light went off he had to stop, but when it came on again he must change his style and/or his tempo. These were the conditions. Now all these light bulbs

were activated by what the players did. We had SCR controllers for the lights . . .

PARKS Pardon me, but what's SCR mean?

OLIVERAS Silicon Control Rectifier. It's an electronic component which can control a large wattage with a small voltage activated by a small voltage. There were several means, several parameters involved. Each player was amplified, and there were four speakers -- two in the front and two in the back. In other words, the space was surrounded. The signal went into the SCR controller as well as to the audience. There were frequency selective filters which would select a frequency that a player might sound, and then would turn a light on, or his intensity or the intensity of what he played might turn a light on or off. The players are actually in the circuit. That's how the thing operates. It's a large piece and it can last for an evening.

PARKS Then you might say that the percussion players are actually the score.

OLIVERAS Sure. It all depends on their resources.

PARKS Mr. Erickson, in what way have you used percussion music?

ERICKSON Well, last year I wrote a piece where I built the instruments. I was very aware of the fact that saying tom-tom and indicating pitches was a pretty meaningless thing to do. I'd already gone through the whole business of not indicating the pitch of the timpani, but indicating what diameter timpani should be played and so forth. I decided in this one to build my own instruments. What I built was several xylophone like instruments with marble keys instead of wood or metal because they're more bell like. I've been interested in bells for a long time. Probably if I've done anything, I've added more bells to the traditional percussion group than were usually there. I also built the effect of tuned drums. I discovered a way to make drums with metal heads which would be hand played where the tuning is in the tube itself [same diameter, but various lengths] so the drums won't go out of tune. Anyway what I did with these instruments was that I actually felt when I wrote the piece that I was composing the instrument. That was a very interesting thing to do because

the big proof with writing for any percussion instrument is not just to give the dynamic level because you then have no control over the timbre; that's invented by the player. But if you build the stocks that the instrument is going to be played by and if you indicate what sticks are to be used on what instrument and where on the instrument, you know just how loud the instrument is going to be and what it's going to sound like. This is what I call "composing the instrument," and I'm recommending it to all composers. It's hard work, but it's very much worth it. Does that answer your question?

PARKS Yes, sir. Miss Oliveras, in your opinion what influence has percussion music had on music written since 1940?

OLIVERAS I have no idea.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN First, I'm curious why 1940? Why not 1950, 1960, or 1900 for that matter. How did you arrive at 1940?

PARKS Well, this was an arbitrary figure Dr. Savage arrived at so as to determine the difference between the experimental period and that which she chooses to call the contemporary period.

WARD-STEINMAN Contemporary, like age, is a matter of spirit I think.

PARKS There are some exception of course, but we'll say that it is music written not for a previous time. In other words, music written now for this time . . .

WARD-STEINMAN Okay. Well, I think the question is badly phrased. I think you have the card before the horse. The question might better be "What influence have composers had on the evolution of percussion music since 1940?" I think what I might say to bring it in line with terms with which I might discuss it is that there's been a great deal of experimentation in music since 1940, to use your date. Some of the fallout of this exploration has been the development and exploitation of percussion music. As composers have explored sound resources, naturally they have come around to the percussion section, and as it

turned out this is one section of the orchestra that had been most neglected and least developed. The percussion section has become of equal importance in many compositions with the wind, brass, or even string sections. If you want to trace a cause and effect relationship, the development of new percussion resources by composers has led to a greater acceptance of the percussion section and percussion music and we now have the phenomenon of the percussion bands, percussion orchestras using only percussion instruments. The more that is done with it the more continues to be done. So in that sense it's like a breeder-reactor in atomics perhaps.

PARKS You spoke of percussion orchestras. Can you name some?

WARD-STEINMAN The ones best known are those of Paul Price and Jack McKenzie. The latter is at the University of Illinois, Paul Price is at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. He [Price] leads what I think is called the New York Percussion Ensemble.

PARKS Mr. Erickson?

ERICKSON I really can't say anything for anyone else.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo, do you have any opinion on "the influence since 1940?"

GABURO First, to an incredible degree, I think I'm right on this. For one thing there was practically no literature at all for percussion as such by itself prior to about 1940. Varese of course used percussion a great deal, very frequently in connection with other instruments, but I mean a percussion ensemble as such was virtually non-existent until around that time. But now there's an incredible body of literature which is just for percussion of various assortments. It ranges from say one person who has got such a vast technique and sensitivity to percussive sounds, to pieces that use 150 percussionists or something like that. So to that extent it's not only had an incredible influence on music in general, but has developed its own thing, its own literature and very, very fascinating.

PARKS Mr. Erickson, what might its role be in future music?

ERICKSON Who knows?

PARKS Miss Oliveras?

OLIVERAS (no comment)

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN Well, I don't think we've exhausted the possibilities. There'll continue to be a period of exploration and discovery of new sounds, new instruments, new sound sources, new combinations and I think this will continue until there is some attempt at synthesis. In other words, right now I'm more or less in the position of the little boy let loose in a candy store and he's going around sampling all the goodies. I think this is happening with percussion music. I think we are sampling all the sonic goodies and not always very critically. I dislike prognosticating. It's very risky business, but I would say its future is very bright. Right now I think we're overusing it. Originally percussionists were considered the salt and pepper of the orchestra. Now we tend to treat them, some of us, as the staples of the orchestra -- to continue the gustatory metaphor. There's a danger that the sounds may quickly exhaust themselves, the ear may tire of them. I think the potential lies in the development of a variety of sounds, a richer range, perhaps as Harry Partch is doing with his own instruments most of which are percussive.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO I would guess it's probably here to stay even if we move as I am moving into the realm of synthetic music. As soon as you do that you begin to generate sounds which are very, very percussive like. So even if you're not using a real bass drummer you are bass drummer you are generating timbral things and articulatory things and so forth. It will probably be there if and when it ever becomes the fact that everything is totally synthesized in some kind of laboratory. So I don't see that it's going to go away.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo, what are some of the new instruments of percussion?

GABURO I'm not prepared to go into detail about that, but I will say this. There are two kinds of exploration. One is in terms of natural physical phenomena that you find anyplace.

PARKS "Found sounds?"

GABURO Yes. Will it resonate? Can I use it as a percussion instrument? Anything from tin cans to brake drums to glass bottles or what. Then of course there's the whole electronic synthesis field, which includes computer generated music, which opens up a whole new domain of sound. That's where I am and what I'm interested in.

PARKS Mr. Erickson?

ERICKSON I'll give you an offprint [Appendix B] because it can explain things better than I.

PARKS Miss Oliveras?

OLIVERAS Actually I think what's happening is a lot of rediscovery of instruments like friction drums for instance. You'll find an incredible variety of percussion instruments in Brazil. For example, in the Brazilian street bands there are all manner of drums, scrapers, so on and so forth. There's the friction drum, called Cvica, which can sound like a lion or a bird.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN Well there are brake drums which are assembled in racks and tuned. John Cage calls for nine woodblocks "not Chinese" in his "Amores for Prepared Piano and Percussion", and when we performed it last year it was done with 2x4 slabs of redwood cut to different lengths placed on felt supporters. The sound was quite different from hollow wood blocks or the Chinese Temple blocks he was referring to. One is doing things with glass, not only water glasses, but glass containers. I think one of the classic innovations was the instruction in a score, at one point, to "break Coke Bottle -- fortissimo," as a sound.

Harry Partch has cut apart large five gallon carboys to make a set of instruments he calls "Cloud Chamber Bowls." It can be very interesting, very delicate. He also made instruments out of light bulbs -- one he calls the "Mazda Marimba." Partch is a real innovator in the development of percussion instruments. But actually anything goes now in percussion music. Anything that can produce a sound is potentially useable.

PARKS What are some of the new ways of using traditional American instruments, Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO Well, take the timpani for example and use the pedal up and down to get a whole bunch of glissandi, rapidly or not rapidly, and use that aspect more than just the timpani sound. A friend of mine has written just an exquisite percussion piece. Its played by three people who just play on various wooden inside parts of the piano. Very polyphonic and rhythmic kinds of things that indirectly get the strings to vibrate sympathetically and so forth, but the main thing, changing of texture and timbre, depends upon where you strike the inside of the piano.

PARKS Miss Oliveras?

OLIVERAS Well, I can talk about some of the ways I've indicated things to happen in some scores of my own. For instance, using rhythm sticks, ordinary rhythm sticks, as bows because they have the serrated side. You can draw it across a cymbal or any of the instruments and have the sound in this bowed manner. Using bass bows or cello bows and so on to bow cymbals, gongs, anything that you can activate or cause to vibrate with a bow. Another thing to do is amplify the instruments and as they're amplified to modify their sounds with electronic modification.

PARKS Mr. Erickson?

ERICKSON To each his own. I guess everyone invents. I use a lot of bowed cymbal and bowed gong things like that, but I certainly didn't invent them.

I'm very high on toy pianos. They have a very bell like sound. I've been working for years on making a toy piano sound like a celesta and I think I'll succeed pretty soon.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN Bartók, in a work like "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion," asks the percussionist to strike a suspended cymbal with a knife blade at one point. Barney Childs calls for a fly swatter in one score. You are to play timpani and then a snare drum with the fly swatter. Another example is the "water gong" which has appeared now in many scores, for instance, one by Lou Harrison. The percussionist is instructed to take a small hand held gong, strike it, and lower it gradually into a bucket of water. The result of this is a very delightful gong glissando. As the water damps the gong the pitch changes and if you strike it hard enough you can pull it out while it's still resonating getting a glissando both ways. The possibilities are endless and fascinating.

PARKS Speaking of gongs that brings up the seventh question. Mr. Erickson, what about the use of foreign percussion instruments?

ERICKSON Well, I collect Balanese gongs and I'm very high on button gongs which are sort of hard to get; all on the principle that I send all the small instruments along with the scores. Another instrument that I'm very high on is stamping tubes. These are all over primitive cultures. I'm building sets of stamping tubes now.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO They [foreign instruments] haven't been incorporated into traditional, say conventional type of music very much. I don't know of a conventional Roy Harris kind of symphony that would utilize them, because somehow the very nature of these more exotic instruments suggest a different kind of music. There's Lou Harrison, who's been here for years, who has gotten into all of that. I

heard, about three weeks ago, a very, very astounding orchestral piece for conventional orchestra used in a non-conventional way. It was kind of a concerto between the orchestra and two "koto" soloists. Instead of a piano or a harpsichord or a clarinet as a solo in a concerto situation this composer used two kotos and very, very beautifully integrated the whole thing with typical traditional orchestra sounds.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN There's a certain fad for Indian music right now -- the sitar, the tabla, the tambura, the latter two are kinds of drums. I have a collection of Indian bells, Greek goat bells, different kinds of wind chimes, some of which I used in a recent work, "Tale of Issoumbochi," the setting of a Japanese fairy tale.

PARKS Miss Oliveras?

OLIVERAS Well, I think probably we've talked about it already.

PARKS Do you think the re-emergence of folk music has influenced the percussion element in serious contemporary composition, Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO I don't think so. We're influencing folk music.

PARKS Miss Oliveras, do you think it has?

OLIVERAS No.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN No, I think folk music has always lagged behind anything else that has happened in contemporary music, and the percussion element in folk music is negligible anyway.

PARKS Mr. Erickson?

ERICKSON I don't think so. Certainly rock percussion is a pretty dead issue.

PARKS Have any of you felt confined in your experiments with meter and rhythmic complexities because of the theoretically limited ability of the human percussionist? Miss Oliveras?

OLIVERAS Whose theory is that?

PARKS Okay. Well, now what I'm getting at is more or less in terms of human versus the electronic percussion.

OLIVERAS Well, any system has limits because it defines itself as a system by its limits. So a human being has its limit and an electronic system has its limits. To know about limits is very useful because then it's possible to extend them. I don't think of human versus anything because it's not true. After all, electronics are merely an extension of the human -- a tool.

PARKS So I take it that most of your music has been scored for the human percussionist?

OLIVERAS Yes.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN There are limitations for every kind of instrument no matter who the player is or how virtuosic he is. A composer, to really function well, ought to be able to write for any level of performance ability or any combination of instruments. I think part of the challenge is working within the limitations. If at any point I would not be satisfied with the possibilities and if I wanted to write something that could not be performed, then I would go to an electronic medium where I could synthesize the rhythm precisely. The great advantage of computer synthesis or electronic synthesis is precisely in the area of rhythm. A much greater degree of precision is possible in rhythmic control.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo, do you feel limited as per my question?

GABURO No, not at all. In fact, I just came from the University of Illinois which has one of the more important percussion laboratories. The people who train there are unbelievably complex in what they can do. I mean seventeen against twenty for example. Very, very unusual sub-divisions at any tempo, and any radical shift of tempo is no problem. There use to be an expression which

you just never hear anymore, "that's impossible to do." The difference between what they can do now and what they were able to do ten years ago is absolutely fantastic.

PARKS Mr. Erickson how do you feel about the "limits."

ERICKSON Ah, that's a lot of boloney. I really got very high on African music after I wrote some teaching material this past summer. These people can go along at such a rate and with such ensemble precision that you never hear from western [occidental] music. Not since Baby Dodds maybe and he was a solo drummer. Here's a bunch of Africans without a college education, probably can't even read notes, whose precision is so elegant you can not tell how many are playing. You'd think they must practice their whole lives. On the other hand, I say to myself these are people who aren't that different from others. What have they got that we haven't got. Well, they haven't got our notation system. So if you want to get this kind of rhythmic elegance, then you have to invent a notation system which makes it possible.

PARKS Miss Oliveras, what about the voice as a percussion element?

OLIVERAS Well, I have a chorus which is recorded on Oddessay [record brand] called "Sound Patterns for Mixed Chorus," and that chorus is full of percussive like sounds. The whole chorus is made up of vocal sounds rather than intelligence. I mean there's no text.

PARKS Dr. Gaburo?

GABURO I happen to be particularly concerned about the voice. I've done most of my work in the vocal field. In fact, I have an ensemble, and we've done the Oliveras piece. You have to look at the score to be absolutely sure there's soprano, alto, tenor and bass there instead of a set of percussionists. They do all kinds of oral percussive things, very, very uncharacteristic vocal things, but when they're put all together they make very very beautiful interesting sounds and arrays of sounds. It's very much like if you had twenty percussionists

and asked them to do these things, You'd get the same kind of sensation.

PARKS Dr. Ward-Steinman?

WARD-STEINMAN The percussive element in speech would be that of the consonants rather than the vowels. There are composers who are writing just consonants and some who are breaking up words among a chorus so that each section or voice will add one letter, a consonant or a vowel as it may be, and hopefully in the synthesis of these you get the full word. Luciano Berio has done it for solo voice in works like "Circles" and "Omaggio." The vocal sounds produced are many of them, I think, percussive. One emphasizes the glottal stops and the different kind of sounds that one can make which are not normally considered part of traditional singing technique. So the voice is not immuned to development and exploration either.

PARKS Mr. Erickson, will you make the final comment on this?

ERICKSON I just finished a piece where untrained people are doing all these percussive things vocally and are going along at a metronome marking of about 250 with beautiful precision. It's just they're not having to do it in the kind of notation system bequeathed to us [see Appendix C]. What they are doing exactly is they're singing the equivalent of drum words. So if you can produce drum words for western singers, you can do any complex piece just beautifully.

PARKS Did the use of the metronome help in learning?

ERICKSON It was actually a hindrance. People are better than metronomes. They're even more accurate than a metronome in a way because they're constantly "stealing." You steal from each side although you're coming out even all the time. It's this stealing that makes it sound rhythmical. The metronome's rigidity, its lack of being able to steal, would make it sound mechanical.

PARKS Thank you.

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