

The Rise of the Percussionist-Composer

By Brian Blume

I think that percussionists are tinkers by nature. We are explorers. We are discovering our world through sound every day. We are often asked to find new sounds, or even create new instruments. As Adam Sliwinski puts it in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, “Rather than specialist-performers, percussionists are more like curators of sound.”¹

Have you ever walked through Target and found a violinist bowing items on the shelf? Probably not. What about a brass player buzzing her lips on an object to see if it makes a good mouthpiece? I doubt it. But I can tell you that I have tapped and scraped and shaken numerous bowls, glasses, toys, and other items on store shelves to hear the pitches and sounds they make. Sometimes I have done this out of my own curiosity, but sometimes it has been out of necessity, as I’ve searched for a set of mixing bowls that sound at specific pitches. Sure, I’ve received a few odd looks, but in the spirit of exploration, I don’t mind.

The art of percussion is many thousands of years old, but within the world of Western Art Music percussion-centric writing is a rather new development. The earliest percussion ensemble works are not even yet 100 years old, with a large number of substantial chamber and solo percussion works having been composed in my lifetime. This short lifespan is striking when compared to solo piano or or-

chestral repertoire, for example, which go back hundreds of years. As percussion has moved from the back of the stage to being the focal point of a performance, as it often is today, there have been many changes in our repertoire and the manner in which it is developed.

Consider the two ideas I have just presented: on the one hand, percussionists are explorers, tinkers, and often improvisers (drum set players especially); on the other, the body of work composed for our instruments is relatively small and young. It seems logical, then, that many percussionists have taken to composing music for our art form, and in recent decades we have seen a rise in what we call “percussionist-composers”—percussion performers and teachers who also compose original music. Based on my experience and some informal research, I estimate that a significant percentage (possibly as high as 25%) of college-level and professional percussionists today also compose music, and if you include those who arrange music for marching bands and drumlines, that percentage is likely much higher. I would like to share a few thoughts about why I believe this is the case, and I will follow with some thoughts on the implications that this carries for our repertoire as well as our art form.

WHY ARE MORE PERCUSSIONISTS COMPOSING MUSIC?

First, in our increasingly globalized cul-

ture we are seeing the melding of music genres, of so-called “high” and “low” music, or art music and pop music. In the eyes of would-be composers, this may remove some of the boundaries around becoming a composer; that is, being a composer carries with it many stigmas. Only a few generations ago, composers created art for the wealthiest members of society, and their music was only performed by people wearing tuxedos and dresses. Today, a classical percussionist might live a good portion of his or her life in the pop music world as a performer and songwriter, so it makes sense that this same musician may be inspired to compose, for example, pop-influenced music for a percussion ensemble.

Second, the recent surge in percussionist-composers may have something to do with our cultural interest in *singer-songwriters*. This class of musician (and genre of music) made its rise in the 1960s and 1970s, as songwriters moved from writing as hired hands to performing their own songs, expressing the sentiments of their songs directly to an audience.² I see a possible parallel here between percussionists and pop music singer-songwriters, as percussionists often have one foot in the classical world and another in the pop world, largely due to the role of the drum set.

Consider the similarities between the two monikers: singer-songwriter and percussionist-composer. They are essentially

the same idea, that of the performer-author. It makes sense that percussionists connect with the idea of expressing their original ideas through their own voice. Steve Reich has even said of playing his own compositions, "It seemed clear that a healthy musical situation would only result when the functions of composer and performer were united."³ Whether percussionists have been directly influenced by pop artists or not, I am certain that personal expression and the sheer enjoyment of performing my own music were major reasons that I started composing myself, and also why I continue to write music I can perform. I expect I am not alone.

Third, I previously mentioned marching bands and drumlines, and I believe the increased popularity of these art forms is another reason many percussionists are also composing music. Think of all the high schools, colleges, and other marching ensembles that perform and compete in marching activities. New music is composed and arranged for these ensembles every season, and in many cases the writing is becoming much more intricate and expressive. Largely due to the competitive nature of the activity, marching percussion arrangers are being challenged to compose and arrange more creatively, which can then naturally extend to other types of composition, including concert percussion repertoire. This is, in fact, exactly how I got my start composing music.

Fourth, who else knows the ins and outs of percussion instruments as well as percussionists? We have spent years immersed in an endless world of sounds, and we have collected a large palette from which to choose colors in composition. We understand what works and what does not on various instruments. This is not to say that non-percussionist composers cannot have a great understanding of the family of percussion, as there are many who certainly do. Nonetheless, I sense that some composers are hesitant when it comes to writing for percussion. I was often asked about writing for percussion by other composition students while

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pursuing my master's degree, and I see it with my composition students now—the huge (and growing) world of percussion can be daunting! So, while the demand for new percussion compositions rises quickly, it stands to reason that those who know the instruments so well feel the confidence to dive in and write for percussion, rather than waiting for composers alone to meet the demand.

The final reason I believe more percussionists are composing for the idiom (for now; I am sure I could come up with more!) is the ease with which we are able to share our music with the world. I can compose and publish my own music from my living room and share it instantly with people around the world. Modern technology has removed many of the barriers of entry into the world of composing and publishing music.

WHY DOES ANY OF THIS MATTER?

You may already be thinking what I am about to say: all of this may not set up the best situation for our art form. Just because it is easy for me to compose music and share it with the world, that does not mean that my music is great, or that it will be a masterpiece in the percussion repertoire. Or, as Bob Becker puts it, "Unfortunately, an abundance of percussive skill does not ensure the ability to approach the rigors of creating a compositional voice of any originality or significance."⁴ Since many of the percussionists who are composing and arranging music today have no formal training in composition, it is understandable that a good portion of new music for percussion is not particularly great. Of course, I recognize that I am writing this as a percussionist-composer, and I am very aware of my shortcomings

as a composer, so I do not exempt myself from this scrutiny.

While other instrumentalists and vocalists are performing masterworks by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and others, our young repertoire has fewer "masterworks." What's more, many percussionists tend to ignore those celebrated staples of the repertoire in favor of the newest works, many of which are composed by percussionist-composers. Percussion ensemble directors often program works composed by friends, colleagues, or even former students. I have no problem with this, as I often benefit from these exact scenarios when people perform my works, but we must be careful not to overlook works composed by men and women who are first and foremost composers, many of whom are quite brilliant at writing for percussion.

When we reflect on some of the most foundational works for percussion solo and ensemble, the names that come to mind may include such composers as Cage, Carter, Creston, Druckman, Reich, Stockhausen, Varèse, Wuorinen, and Xenakis. And we continue to see popular works written by non-percussionists, composers such as *Hatzis, Lang, Lansky, Maric, Mellits, Psathas, Viñao, Snowden*, and others. While it is true that percussionist-composers typically know the instruments very well, I believe non-percussionists have a unique opportunity to come to the table with fewer preconceived notions of a sound or technical capability, thereby offering some of the most creative and unique compositions for percussion. For a percussionist, it is quite tempting to write only what is easy or idiomatic to play, and this often sounds like music composed by other percussionist-composers! Non-percussionist

composers are more likely to avoid these pitfalls, and they can even present distinctive challenges that may not occur to someone more intimately familiar with the instrument.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

It is important for us to recognize this trend in order to choose how to best serve our art. But recognizing the trend is only the first step. What actions can we take to encourage the development of a more creative and compelling percussion repertoire? As performers and concert programmers, we should seek to program and perform works that highlight the best composers and compositions, whether the composers are percussionists or not, and whether the pieces are new or not. As educators, we should encourage our

composing percussion students to seek composition training, enhancing their compositional skills and opportunities. And for those of us who are percussionist-composers, we should strive to learn from other great musicians and work to compose music that expresses an authentic musical voice, always moving toward the end goal of advancing the artistry and repertoire of percussion.

ENDNOTES

1. *Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, edited by Russell Hartenberger, p. 95
2. https://www.bmi.com/genres/entry/history_the_singer_songwriter
3. *Writings on Music, 1965–2000* by Steve Reich, p. 78
4. *Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, edited by Russell Hartenberger, p. 164

Brian Blume spent the last seven years as Assistant Professor of Percussion at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, where he coordinated all aspects of the percussion studio and taught world music and music theory. His compositions for percussion are performed regularly around the country and across the globe. Blume performs frequently as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral percussionist, and he recently won a position in the United States Army Band "Pershing's Own" in Washington, D.C.



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