

# Drumming in the Dark?

## An Interview with Steven Schick

by Ricardo Souza and Christine Conklin

When introducing Steven Schick as a guest performer at a poetry reading, poet Chuck Moulton related percussion to poetry by saying that we are all “drumming in the dark.” Poets and percussionists were fatally linked as wanderers because of the uncertain nature of their craft, he said. This recurring theme of drumming in the dark inspired not only the title of Schick’s latest solo recording, but also the first night of the infamous “Three Nights of Percussion,” a series of concerts performed by Schick in New York City in 1998.

But is Schick really drumming in the dark? As one of the foremost multiple percussion artists of our time, he has a profound grasp on the role of percussion and the art of noise, as is evidenced by his powerful performances, insightful interpretations, recordings, and writings on the subject.

Born and raised on an Iowa farm, Steven Schick’s work as a soloist and chamber musician has been of great significance not only because of the over 100 works he has commissioned and premiered, but also because of his progressive thinking in the area of non-pitched percussion. Many of his realizations result from his experience and dedication to an avant-garde repertoire considered by most people as extremely difficult.

Traveling throughout the world for the past 15 years, he has performed and taught at the most prestigious new music festivals and schools. He is currently on faculty at the University of California–San Diego and the Manhattan School of Music, and has been a regular guest lecturer at the Rotterdam Conservatory in the Netherlands and the Royal College of Music in London. He performed with the

Bang on a Can All-Stars from 1999–2002 and his current ongoing collaborations include work with pianist James Avery, the percussion group red fish blue fish, and the Maya Beiser/Steven Schick project. He is also Artistic Director of the Centre International de Percussion de Genève.

Drumming in the dark? Maybe most of us still are, but this interview with Steven Schick certainly sheds some light on the art form we call percussion.

*Many people think of Steven Schick as a multiple percussionist. Could you explain your predilection for, as you say, the “art of noise”?*

**Schick:** A lot of the rationale for any life choice is retrospective. I don’t really know why I became a percussionist. In fact, I didn’t really choose percussion; my mother did because she thought she wouldn’t have to buy an instrument, just the sticks. But slowly, the “noisiness” of percussion began to appeal. Noise has come to mean



the messiness of a world that has to be cultivated in order to become habitable. Noise has meant being alive to me; if you’re dead, you hear harps, not brake drums! Noise has meant the chaos of uncertainty; percussion models an art of faith where no amount of preparation can determine exactly what will happen in a concert. I am not sure of much, but I do know that if I had accidentally begun a musical life with any other instrument, I would not be a musician today. It was percussion that hooked me and has dragged me more or less willingly through a life as a musician.

*Your involvement with complex music is clearly seen in your repertoire. Is complexity a necessary element of percussion music?*

**Schick:** Brian Ferneyhough, frequently cited as an example of the “New Complexity,” once told me in conversation that he rejected the term “complexity” because there was no such thing as “non-complex” music. He’s right. The shifting set of interpretative, compositional and perceptual parameters means that music is never unqualified. It is by nature complex, and percussion music in particular, because of the lack of standardized setups and notational practices, has been especially complex.

Many percussionists have sought to “decomplexify” percussion music by standardizing setups, techniques, even repertoire. In my opinion, this depletes the reservoir of possibility. The greatest virtue of percussion is that we don’t know exactly what it might sound like. Can you think of another medium where successive performances of a major piece might sound as different from one another as in percussion music? A percussionist could choose brake drums, simantras, or anvils to play voice D in “Psappa.” No such latitude can

be found in a Beethoven string quartet. And we percussionists, through the necessity of renegotiating even the most well-worn pathways, touch and are touched by the central aspects of the creative process.

*After reading your article on learning Brian Ferneyhough's "Bone Alphabet," we are struck by your commitment and precise definitions of learning music, which is a very complex task in itself. How does one learn to learn, getting to the heart of a piece of music?*

**Schick:** I just finished a book on the solo percussion repertoire and the problems related to learning and interpreting it. The question you ask took me 40 pages to deal with in that context, so I am not sure I can give a brief response. In general though, an interpretation is a series of "answers" to questions posed in a score. Learning a piece involves sharpening the questions one asks oneself. In the case of "Bone Alphabet," those questions involved precise renderings of complicated rhythms, the expression of form by means of very limited sonic material—just seven instruments—and the question of how to store—as remembered information and physical impulse—the large amount of information in the score. It took a long time, frankly, for me to answer these questions—around 1,200 hours of practice for a ten-minute piece. I have had students do it much faster since then, which may have something to do with the intensely physical way I learn as described above, but there is unfortunately—or fortunately—no shortcut.

*What attracts you to a piece of music?*

**Schick:** The answer to that has changed in quite radical ways over the years. At first, I often chose pieces because of the difficulties they posed. Playing hard music somehow put me, as a percussionist, in the same domain as pianists and cellists. I remember being fascinated by the difficulties of Charles Wuorinen's "Janissary Music," for example. Difficulty demanded commitment and produced focus.

However, in the past ten years or so I

have learned only one piece of the solo percussion repertoire—that is to say, a piece that I did not commission. That piece was Alvin Lucier's stunning "Silver Street Car for the Orchestra." Otherwise, every solo piece I have learned was a first performance or commission. Those pieces include Brian Ferneyhough's "Bone Alphabet," David Lang's "The Anvil Chorus," and two evening-length solos, James Dillon's "La Coupure" and John Luther Adams' "The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies." I also did the first American performance of Iannis Xenakis' "Rebonds" and Kaija Saariaho's "Six Japanese Gardens." This fundamental change in finding repertoire has

meant that I no longer look for pieces but for people. I am interested in composers whose music I admire and who, as people, are open, lovely, and complex. The music that ensues is inevitably worthy.

*Are there any reasons in particular that you have not recorded some standard pieces from the solo repertoire such as Stockhausen's "Nr. 9 Zyklus," Feldman's "The King of Denmark," and Xenakis' "Psappha"?*

**Schick:** I suppose the reason may be something like a cellist waiting until the time is right to record the Bach cello suites. These three works, which are the only major

## TEN QUICK QUESTIONS FOR STEVEN SCHICK

### 1. A musician that has inspired you:

My duo partner, Maya Beiser. She is a wonderful musician and an extraordinary person.

### 2. A special collaboration with a composer:

Both Roger Reynolds (in "Watershed") and John Luther Adams (in "The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies") have been very important to me.

### 3. The most unusual instrument you have had to play:

I don't really know about unusual, but I love to play the hand-crank siren, both in "Ionisation" and the new Adams piece. Very beautiful and mournful.

### 4. A work by a woman composer:

Well, of course there's Kaija's "Six Japanese Gardens," and a lot of chamber music, but I love the cello and percussion duo that Julia Wolfe wrote for Maya and me, "Close Together."

### 5. The most lyrical piece in the solo percussion repertoire:

This is a trick question since part of our goal is to find lyricism hidden in noise—in every piece, in other words. Lyrical taken as "song-like" I would say David Lang's

"Scraping Song." Lyrical as "beautiful" or "magical," I would say "The King of Denmark."

### 6. A great use of percussion in chamber music:

I love the three Feldman trios ["Why Patterns?," "Crippled Symmetry," and "For Philip Guston"] and Berio's "Linea," but how can you top the Bartók "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion"?

### 7. The most physically demanding solo piece:

A toss-up, but Charles Wuorinen's "Janissary Music" or Michael Gordon's "XY" would have to be close to the top of the list.

### 8. A memorable performance:

I will never forget the concert in São Paulo at the Teatro Cultura Artística.

### 9. A young composer to check out:

I have just spent some time with Lisa Bielawa. She is very interesting.

### 10. The best use of color in the multiple percussion repertoire:

There are so many options that I'll take the odd way out by saying "Corporel."

pieces in my repertoire that I have not recorded, are so imposing and full of complex interpretative possibilities that I feel I must wait for the right time.

Part of the fear is that a recording is regrettably concrete. Once you have fixed an interpretation of a piece as a recording it attains a certain authority—warranted or not—and re-visitation of basic questions is no longer likely or even possible. By extension, my approach to interpretation has privileged a sense of flexibility over the long term. I learned most percussion solos, including these very pieces, in a way that allows them to change over the years of performances. For example, I've played "Psappha" over 600 times. If I had recorded the piece when I first played it in 1978, I would have had the constant presence of a model to contend with. I would like to record these pieces, although I may not wish to release the recordings. Maybe this would be a good compromise.

You have written that "in percussion music, physicality is a powerful force and a central agent of expression." This physicality seems to come naturally to some players, but not to others. Can this physicality be learned, and if so, how can it be developed?

**Schick:** The kind of physicality I mean is not learned at all but rather imposed by percussion. Percussion instruments, played by anyone in any context, prompt inherently physical modes of performance. The objects we use as instruments demand that we use our minds and our bodies. Nothing else is possible. The fascinating thing about percussion playing is that, just as everyone's body is different, everyone's mode of physical expression in performance is different. Percussion playing reveals these differences and celebrates them as interpretation.

Are different listening skills required in the appreciation, understanding, and enjoyment of multiple-percussion music?

**Schick:** No. Music is music.

If this is true, why is it that some musi-

cians, and even percussionists, do not appreciate or understand "noise music"?

**Schick:** I am not sure how far the interchangeability of the terms "multiple per-

cussion" and "noise music" may go. Noise certainly implies some kind of polemic that multiple percussion does not have. But returning to your question, I do not feel a strong need to answer because I feel

## STEVEN SCHICK: A CHRONOLOGICAL DISCOGRAPHY

- American Composers Alliance Recording Award. Composers Recordings Incorporation (CRI SD 459), 1982. Includes Charles Wuorinen's "Percussion Duo."
- Kenneth Gaburo, *Antiphony VIII (Revolution)*. Perspectives of New Music, 1985.
- Béla Bartók, "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion" / Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Kontakte." Music & Arts Programs of America, Inc. (CD 648), 1990.
- James Wood, *Stoicheia*. Wergo (WER 6194-2), 1990.
- William Alden Hibbard, *In Memoriam William Hibbard*. Music and Arts Programs of America, Inc. (CD4675-1), 1993. Includes "Schickstück" for vibraphone solo.
- Kenneth Gaburo, *In Memoriam Kenneth Gaburo*. Music & Arts Programs of America (CD 4832-1), 1994. Includes "Enough! (Not Enough)" for 40 voices and percussion.
- Bang on a Can, *Bang on a Can Live, Vol. 2*. Composers Recordings Incorporation (CRI 646), 1994.
- Steven Schick, *Born to be Wild*. Newport Classic (NPD 85566), 1994.
- Peter Todd Lewis, *Bricolage*. Composers Recordings Inc. (CRI 619), 1994.
- Iannis Xenakis, *Ais*. Neuma (450-86), 1994.
- Sonor Ensemble, *Double Concerto*. Composers Recordings Incorporation (CRI 652), 1994.
- James Dashow / Thomas DeLio, *antipayage*. Neuma (450-90), 1995.
- Roger Reynolds, *Ivanov Suite/Versions-Stages*. New World Records (80431), 1995.
- Roger Reynolds, *The Paris Pieces*. NEUMA (450-91), 1996. Includes "Autumn Island" for solo marimba.
- Bang on a Can, *Cheating, Lying, Stealing*. SONY (62254), 1996.
- Hilda Paredes, *The Seventh Seed*. Mode Records (MODE 60), 1997.
- Igor Korneitchouk, *The Virtual Performer*. Old King Cole (OKCD 001), 1997.
- Mark Osborn, *Interregna*. Old King Cole (OKCD 102), 1998.
- Roger Reymolds, *Watershed IV* (DVD). Mode Records (MODE 70), 1999.
- James Wood, *Two men meet, each presuming the other to be from a distant planet*. NMC Records (DO 44), 2000.
- George Lewis, *Endless Shout*. Tzadik Composer Series (TZ 7054), 2000. Includes "North Star Boogaloo."
- Bang on a Can, *Renegade Heaven*. Canteloupe (CA 21001), 2000.
- Godfrey/Schwartz/Frank, *Music for Strings and Mallet Percussion*. GM Recordings (GM 2041), 2001.
- Steven Schick, *Drumming in the Dark*. NEUMA (450-100), 2001.
- The Maya Beiser/Steven Schick Project, *Caught by the Sky With Wire*. O.O. Records (OO 67), 2001.
- Stuart Smith, *Breath: The Percussion Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*. Sonic Art Editions, 2001. Includes "...And Points North..." for solo percussion.
- Bang on a Can, *Bang on a Can Classics*. Canteloupe (CA 21010), 2002.
- Mark Applebaum, *Catfish*. Tzadik Composer Series (TZ 7094), 2003.
- Mark Applebaum, *Intellectual Property*. Innova Records (Innova CD602), 2003.
- Louis Andriessen, *Gigantic Dancing Human Machine*. Cantaloupe (CA 21012), 2003.
- Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Microphonie* (in preparation).
- Iannis Xenakis, *Complete Works for Percussion* (in preparation).

strongly that the way and extent to which different people respond to different music is personal. By playing the music I play, I am explicitly not leveling criticism at anyone who does not appreciate it. Why, how, and for what reasons we respond to one kind of music over another is the result of a complex nexus of artistic, personal, and subconscious concerns.

*You once mentioned that a spiritual level of performance can only be reached by intensive physical work and preparation. Could you describe this process?*

**Schick:** I can describe the process of physical discipline much more easily than I can describe spirituality in performance. This latter is somehow self-evident: you know it when you see it or experience it. Two recent performances have qualified on this account, I believe. Last week I played John Luther Adams' "The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies," a 75-minute solo for percussion and computer sounds. The next night I played Morton Feldman's four-and-a-half-hour piece for percussion, piano, and

flute, "For Philip Guston." Obviously there is a physical component in these works. For a 50-year-old's body, the intensity of Adams' drumming and the sheer stamina, both physical and mental, required by the Feldman, was revealing. Throughout the preparations of this concert I began to know when the pieces were ready not by what I thought of them, but by how I felt them in the body. The body is really incapable of lying to itself. A passage "feels" rather than sounds ready to me.

On a related topic, over the years of watching student recitals, I can almost always tell when a memory error is coming by a sudden physical awkwardness or change of posture that immediately precedes the memory problem.

I have therefore begun to train the body separately, although in tandem, with my musical practice. I am a regular practitioner of yoga. The strength and focus required by music as well as by yoga seems to derive first from the body, then be made present in space by means of sound or the asanas, the organized series of yoga postures, then evolve into bodily sensibility

once again.

*You have mentioned that you learn/memorize music note by note. Could you describe this method and its advantages?*

**Schick:** I cannot comment on the desirability or lack thereof of my method of memorizing. It is simply my method. I like it because it immediately locates the music in the body. In other words, by transferring the score to the muscles as the first stage of memorizing, I am able to refine my interpretation as a series of mental and physical actions and not as a mental act alone. In those instances when I have first learned a piece from the music and then attempted to transfer it to memory, the physical reinforcements of playing seem too fragile. My memory is very largely kinetic and I learn pieces accordingly. Since there are lots of variations among memory types, I could not, and would not, recommend this method to anyone else. It works for me, but everyone has to find his or her own path.

*What inspired you to perform "Three Nights of Percussion" in New York City? How long was this project in the making? Can you comment on the physical and mental preparation for those performances?*

**Schick:** The initial inspiration for the "Three Nights" concert series was my desire to play a solo recital in New York City after not having done so for several years, and my inability to decide on a program. Finally I decided to play everything, which for me meant around 21 pieces that represented the most important solo percussion music I knew at the time.

The physical and mental preparation for those concerts was intense, as you might imagine. I created an empty space of about five months in order to learn a few new pieces—David Lang's "Scraping Song" and Michael Gordon's "XY"—as well as to polish the repertoire that I had been playing. I ended up playing about five hours of percussion solo music from memory. I felt a little "top heavy" and remember thinking that it would be unthinkable for pianists

## COMMENTARIES

"What I like about Steve's playing is the intensity, coupled with the total command and authority over every aspect of the music, which is so inspiring and uplifting. Partch used to go on about the corporeality of musical performance; for me, I like an instrumentalist to seem as if he or she is singing. Steve has both these qualities—in abundance."

—James Wood, English percussionist, composer, and conductor

"I remember the first time I saw Steve play, in the dilapidated auditorium of a former Catholic school on New York's Lower East Side, at the second Bang on a Can Marathon in 1988. It was that rare moment where I realized instantly that the bar has been raised, that a new standard of performance practice had been

reached in a completely fresh and original way, that everything I knew and understood about performance was now different."

—Michael Gordon, Bang on a Can composer

"A performance by Steve is invariably an inspiring demonstration of artistry, commitment, and dedication. To cite but one memorable example: the PASIC '93 New Music Day "European Percussion Marathon," for which Steve was the curator, gave us twelve solid hours of consistent excellence in both performance and repertoire."

—William Moersch, marimba soloist, percussionist, and educator

or cellists to perform, say, 50 to 75 percent of the serious repertoire for their instruments. Percussion repertoire, even in the small, protected cove of contemporary solo repertoire, will soon have grown too large to allow any single player the perspective of an overview that I had with these concerts in 1998.

*How many hours of music do you have memorized and how do you maintain them?*

**Schick:** It varies with the projects I am engaged in, but with a week's practice I could play, say, three hours' worth of repertoire from memory.

*You have performed and recorded all of Xenakis' works for percussion. How would you summarize his importance to percussion literature?*

**Schick:** There are many possible answers to this question, so let me choose just one. Many of us learned to play percussion by playing the music of Xenakis. We learned to cope with extremely difficult scores. We learned to conceive and sometime build instruments that responded to the needs of his music. We learned to confront failure in his occasional impossible passage. We learned to combine the intellectual and physical in performance rituals that were at once beautiful and terrible. In short we discovered ourselves by looking deeply into his music.

*What upcoming projects are you working on?*

**Schick:** So many things: improvised percussion settings of texts from *Howl* and Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonata" come to mind first. The book I just finished needs editing. I have a four-month concert tour of the U.S. by car planned for Fall of 2005. I am commissioning pieces from Chinari Ung, Gabriela Ortiz, Roger Reynolds, David Lang, and Chaya Czernowin. I am sharing a concert next season with Evelyn Glennie and the group red fish blue fish at the new Disney Hall in Los Angeles—that should be fun. I practice yoga, and I am committed to

watching as much live baseball as possible.

**Ricardo Souza** is a student at the University of Oklahoma, where he is currently finishing his DMA in percussion performance.

He holds a Master of Arts degree and a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Prior to coming to the United States, he earned a Performer's Certificate from the Carlos Gomes Conservatory in Belém, Brazil.

**Christine Conklin** recently completed her DMA in percussion performance at the University of Oklahoma, where she studied with Richard Gipson and Lance Drege. She also holds a Master's degree in percussion performance from OU and a Bachelor's degree in percussion performance from the University of Missouri-Columbia. [PN](#)