

Graduate Recital: Perspective and Analysis

An Overview of Morton Feldman's *The King of Denmark*, Michael Gordon's *XY*, and Jacob Druckman's *Reflections on the Nature of Water*.

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Introduction

The number of works for percussion as a stand alone form of expression increased drastically throughout the twentieth century. During the late nineteenth century, the demands on percussionists in the orchestra began to increase and in turn, so did their ability. As the nineteenth century progressed, the use of percussion evolved from the traditional role of “timekeeper” to a more substantial role in the ensemble. Percussionist Prof. Steven Schick (1954-) claims:

It was in music by composers like Beethoven and Berlioz that percussion music began its shift from evocative to provocative. This new and unfamiliar family of instruments, which had so often borrowed meaning from others, was beginning to earn its own place in a broader musical syntax... The percussionist’s job description was changing. No longer shackled to the basic role of timekeeping, by the later nineteenth century, percussionists had become sound effects artists often spinning out kaleidoscopic collages of unheard-of colors and textures.¹

By the early twentieth century, composers such as Edgard Varèse (1883-1965), John Cage (1912-1992) and Henry Cowell (1897-1965) revolutionized the use of percussion. Their works for percussion helped establish a foundation for which composers to build on with regards to the contemporary percussion literature. The solo percussion literature now houses hundreds of works by established composers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the earliest major works for percussion, and examine three works: Morton Feldman’s (1926-1987) *King of Denmark*, Jacob Druckman's (1928-1996) *Reflections on the Nature of Water* (1987) and Michael Gordon’s (1956-) *XY* (1997), and to discuss the compositional inspiration and content of each one.

¹ Steven Schick, *The Percussionist’s Art, Same Bed Different Dreams* (Rochester, University of Rochester Press 2006) 2.

Overview

The idiom of contemporary solo percussion was born out of chamber percussion music, and much of the inspiration used in early percussion solos is found in these early chamber works. Given that Feldman's *King of Denmark* is only the third major percussion solo written, it is important to understand the preceding works that formed the compositional landscape out of which it grew.

The birth of American percussion music occurred, arguably, when Varèse moved to America. On the eve of American involvement in World War I, he conducted Hector Berlioz's *Requiem* in New York City. The work features a vast array of percussion, and houses a marriage of European compositional discipline and the intense, bombastic American style that Varèse would go on to champion. While in New York, Varèse parted ways with the European artistic ideals, which were seen as prestigious and sophisticated. He adopted an American perspective which was progressive and intense. Varèse's embrace of this new identity was a critical moment in the growth of American contemporary music, especially with regards to percussion.

Varèse's monumental work, *Ionization* (1931), is not credited with being the first piece for percussion alone, however, it had a profound and lasting impact on percussion music. While the work was composed during a brief sojourn to Paris it is a quintessentially American work. The piece is highly representative of immigrant culture, housing the sounds of New York City in the nineteen thirties, a city which has always been known for night life and a popular destination for immigrants. The piece's forty-one instruments comprise an array of musical traditions. The bongos and maracas' repeated gestures are traceable back to the music of Latin America. The gongs, and Chinese cymbals, are timekeepers which denote important moments in the work,

relating the instruments to their role in traditional Asian music. American military band traditions are represented through the use of various snare drums, and the ringing police sirens of New York are represented prominently.

Nicholas Slonimsky (1894-1995) conducted both the premiere of the work and its recording session. At the time of the premiere, Varèse was still in Paris, however he was present at the recording session in New York. For the recording, Slonimsky tried to engage the percussionists of the New York Philharmonic. Only a short time into the recording, it became clear they were not going to be able to master the rhythms; Varèse's rhythmic material was too complex. It was evident that the standard performance practices used by percussionists in orchestras was not going to be sufficient in the cultivation of this exciting new idiom. The solution was to engage what Slonimsky called a "star-studded" cast.

As a result, my ensemble was star-studded. Carlos Salzedo, the great harpist, played the thematically important Chinese blocks. Paul Creston was at the anvils. Wallingford Riegger rubbed the guïro. Henry Cowell pounded tone-clusters on the piano keyboard. William Schuman, then a mere youngster, pulled the cord of the lion's roar. (A third of a century later, Schuman reminisced... Slonimsky launched me on my musical career... when he entrusted to me the part of the lion's roar in *Ionization*. But apparently I did not do very well, for he never engaged me again.) Varèse himself was in charge of the sirens. They had to be of the manually operated type in order to produce the requisite crescendo and diminuendo.²

In Slonimsky's brief analysis (which also serves as the preface to the printed score) of *Ionization*, he claims *Ionization* is in a modified sonata form with an introduction, first iteration of theme, a counter-theme, development, and a slight recapitulation or coda. Slonimsky's take leaves the structure of the work conforming to thematic Classical Era form.³ Others such as Chou Wen-Chung (1923-), a Chinese American composer and Varèse enthusiast, view the

² Peggy Feltmate, "1933 World Premiere of Varèse's *Ionization*", last modified February 21, 2010, <http://nexuspercussion.com/2010/02/1933-world-premiere-of-vareses-ionisation/>.

³ Edgard Varèse, *Ionization* (New York: Colfranc, 1931) 7.

compositional material drawing from this interaction of instrumental groups with similarities of timbre that function in similar ways to one another throughout the context of the composition.

The grandeur of *Ionization* eclipsed percussion ensemble music composed shortly following it. Henry Cowell's delicate response, *Ostinato Pianissimo* (1934), serves as a balance to Varèse's *Ionization*. The delicacy of the work is an important predecessor to Feldman's *The King of Denmark*, which too is an extremely delicate piece. Cowell's work is scored for dampened pianos, bongos, tom-toms, rice bowls and a solo xylophone. The form of the work is cyclical, with clear yet soft melodic lines played against one another in a seemingly out of phase fashion, until the lines reconnect for a series of short *fortissimo* interjections to end the piece. Cowell uses the gongs and Chinese cymbals in the work to denote structurally important moments in the work. This is a technique often seen in Gamelan music, where the largest gong denotes new sections. This use of the gongs and Chinese cymbals is Cowell's way of dealing with the same problem that confronted Varèse: determining how much of a culture's musical identity is to be used when using their indigenous instruments.

Of course no survey of early American percussion ensemble music would be complete without recognizing John Cage's contribution. Cage's first work for percussion ensemble *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939) was Cage's break of rapport with Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and separated him from the sophisticated European musical traditions. The separation from Schoenberg is further emphasized shockingly by Schoenberg who responded to an invite to Cage's concert of all percussion music by saying he would not be free to attend such a concert "now or at any time."⁴

⁴ Alan Rich, *American Pioneers: Ives to Cage and Beyond* (London: Phaidon, 1995), quoted in: Schick, *The Percussionist's Art, Same Bed Different Dreams*, 58.

Cage's work is the intertwining of what would be two lifelong concerns for him in music. Arguably first and foremost Cage was a structuralist. This deep love for structure is contrasted by his intense and well-known attraction to chance. However, even throughout his aleatoric works, the discipline of process in his composition maintained utmost importance. *First Construction (in Metal)* began a series of works for percussion ensemble leading to two more "constructions" which were concluded in 1941 and *Amores* (1943). All of these works explore the relationship between chance and structure.

In a foreword to the score, Cage describes the structure of *First Construction (in Metal)* as follows: "sixteen sections of sixteen bars and a coda of nine bars. Each 16-bar section is subdivided into phrases of 4+3+2+3+4 bars. On the large scale there is an exposition of four 16-bar phrases (1-1-1-1) followed by a 12 phrase development (3-2-3-4) and a 9 bar extension."⁵ There is no variance from this structural framework, Cage's discipline to the form remains intact throughout the entire piece.

It is notable to address the strange marriage of structure and chance in the work. Cage's obsession with percussion music was the perfect palate to satisfy his interests in structure and chance. The sonic capabilities of percussion made the idiom a logical step for Cage in his venture toward indeterminacy. Cage was not interested in hearing an exact reproduction of the work. The nature of the chosen instruments make the sonic possibilities endless. For example, one has come to terms with the possible differences in the sound of a D played on the violin. The amount of vibrato used, along with bow pressure are equated to interpretation. Other variants such as specific model or age of the instrument can also impact the sonic possibility. However,

⁵ John Cage, *First Construction (in Metal)* (New York: Henmar Press 1962)

the resultant sound is still that of a D being played on violin. Should a composer ask for a cymbal or gong with medium or soft mallet, or the ambiguous instruction of resonant metal - the possibilities of sound become vastly expansive. The range of acceptable options when a composer asks for instance: a medium gong is extensive. Depending on the available options a medium gong can range in size from around 12 or 13 inches to 24, which has a great amount of change in sound between the two extremes. Furthermore, the kind of gong in Cage's music is not specified, does he want a Thai nipple gong, or perhaps a Chinese opera gong? It is in this, the instrumentation even if it is prescribed in the score that there is a great deal of chance in the sonic realization of work.

The driving force behind early chamber percussion works like *Ionization*, *Ostinato Pianissimo* and *First Construction (in Metal)* was largely exploration. The composers of these works were amongst the first to write for percussion ensemble, allowing for a great deal of exploration of the idiom in a very short period of time. However, once Cage completed his "constructions" the exploratory nature of percussion ensemble music began to settle. The onslaught of development extended its limits and the frequency of major works being written for chamber percussion dwindled. Schick with regards to this period of dormancy in the chamber percussion literature claims: "a period of exploration inevitably prefigures a more settled gap between the phase of consolidation and development."⁶

While the intense exploratory phase of writing for percussion ensemble ended in 1941 with the completion of Cage's *Amores* (1941) in 1956 a new exploration was coming to fruition - writing for solo percussionist. Cage's *27'10.554 for a Percussionist* (or colloquially, *27 Minutes*)

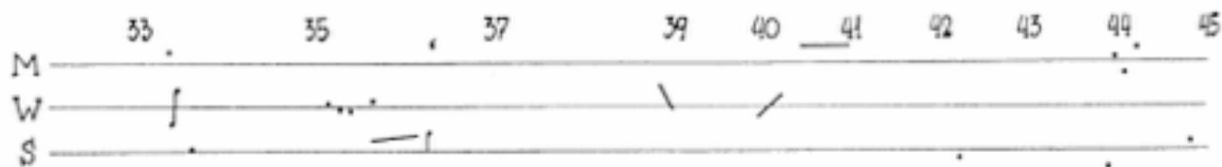
⁶ Schick, *The Percussionist's Art, Same Bed Different Dreams*, 65.

is credited with being the first percussion solo, although the ambiguity lies in the fact that the piece was not premiered until 1962 by Siegfried Rockstroh, with the aid of Mauricio Kagel (1931-2006) controlling the magnetic tape. The work however, was not the first notated percussion solo performed. While the composition was completed prior to Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Zyklus* the premier of *Zyklus* occurred in 1959.

27 Minutes is the final instalment in a larger series of works known as his *10,000 Things*. The intended common thread linking the *10,000 Things* pieces was set to be a common rhythmic structure. This structure, contrasting his previous works was set to be open, rather than closed. Cage's initial conception of the structure was grand: 13 parts with {3, 7, 2, 5, 11, 14, 7, 6, 15, 11, 3, 15}. The sum of these proportions is 100; structurally the works would consist of 100 units of 100 measures each, a total of 10,000 measures. Cage chose 10,000 because of its importance in Buddhist religion as the symbol for infinity.

That grand structure Cage planned for this work proved to be too vast. The structure of *27 Minutes* was made up of a 28 unit, 5 section structure. This structure is also from where the piece draws its name. Each page of *27 Minutes* consists of four systems, 15 inches long, and one inch is equal to one second, each page therefore is equal to exactly one minute in duration. Each sonic event is given a numerical value over top of the note to clarify its place in time. Many large sections of certain pages are left blank to facilitate silence in the work. Each system is made up of four lines. The position of the note related to the line dictates the amplitude of the given note. The line is considered *mezzo forte* whereas everything below the line is softer, and everything above is louder (see Example 1). In Cage's previous instalments of his *10,000 Things*, Cage uses the line as the range, in *27 Minutes* range is left to the performer's discretion.

The four lines mark “M” for metal, “W” for wood, “S” for skin and “A” for all others. Cage states in the score that the use of pre recorded tape can be used to aid in a performance due to the high density of certain sections.



Example 1. John Cage, *27' 10.554" For a Percussionist*, page 1, line 3. Edition Peters, 1960.

While each note's temporal location, instrumental category, and duration are strictly notated, Cage strongly encourages performers to use a multitude of instruments with varying timbres and attacks. Cage states:

A virtuoso performance will include a wide variety of instruments, beaters, sliding tones, and an exhaustive rather than conventional use of the instruments provided. For example: a gong may be suspended or placed on a mat, struck with metal, felt, yarn, wood, rubber, etc. beaters at points on the edge or centre or anywhere in between. It may be lowered into and/or raised out of a tub of water. A tremolo between suspended gongs facing one another is another use. And directional changes following the attack are also effective.⁷

While this work featured changes in direction from Cage's works for percussion ensemble, there are compositional elements that bleed into his solo work. For instance, as Schick pointed out about *First Construction (in Metal)*, Cage's interest in the indeterminate aspect of percussion is present in *27 Minutes*. His suggestion of playing a tremolo on two gongs facing one another shows his interest in the combination of overtones from different instruments.

The *10,000 Things* use a method of chance which we might call Cage's classic era of chance music.⁸ All of the works in this group are essentially closed in structure. In these works,

⁷ John Cage, *27' 10.554" For A Percussionist* (New York: Henmar Press, 1960), ii.

⁸ James Pritchett "The ten thousand things", accessed February 15, 2015, <http://rosewhitemusic.com/piano/writings/ten-thousand-things>.

Cage produces very specific results with regards to the temporal structure, however in the case of *27 Minutes* Cage leaves great freedom for the performer to explore vast landscapes of sonic possibility.

The final instalment of solo percussion music prior to Feldman's *The King of Denmark* is Stockhausen's *Zyklus*. The work was written as a test piece for the Kranichstein Music prize for percussion players. Stockhausen, who was greatly influenced by Anton Webern (1883-1945), used a concept created by Webern and continued by Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992): the unification of sonic properties under a single principal of organization.⁹ Based on this concept Stockhausen uses serial control to all aspects of musical sound. In this work, he applies total serialism with indeterminacy allotting freedom to the performer within strictly controlled parameters.

The work is scored for thirteen different groups of instruments, some of which are comprised of only one instrument, such as the marimba, while other groups consist of many instruments. It is the first instalment in the solo percussion literature in which the composer directly engages in the challenge of creating a fixed instrument(s) with which to explore. The piece is made up of seventeen different units which are referred to as periods; it notated on sixteen spiral bound pages with no indication from which period to begin. The beginning point is left to the discretion of the performer, who is instructed to continue in sequence from their chosen starting point through all sixteen pages, and end with a repetition of the first stroke sounded in their given interpretation. The graphic notation is laid out in such a way that allows

⁹ B. Michael Williams, "Stockhausen: 'Nr. 9 Zyklus,'" *Percussive Notes* 39, no. 3 (2001): 60.

the performer to move through the piece in any direction they want. Depending on where the performer begins, the periods either move towards or away from ambiguity.

Zyklus is set on a fixed time grid, the length of each temporal unit is left up to the performer, but must remain constant throughout the work. There are nine different structure types expressing varying degrees of determinacy. The main structure time is present through all seventeen periods of the work, it serves also as the fixed temporal grid. The musical notation consists of dots (which are single attacks), groups which are two or more attacks connected by a beam to be played in rapid succession, and lines that represent sustained notes. The size of each event dictates the amplitude with which to play the given note or figure: the larger the note, the louder you play (see Example 2).



Example 2. Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Nr. 9 Zyklus*, period 1. Universal Edition, 1960.

The remaining eight structures found in the work vary, some give the performer multiple different options of what to play, others give some freedom in the temporal structure, while some employ different combinations of the aforementioned structures. It is the performer's job to convey the ambiguity or regiment found in the different structures and cycles. *Zyklus* is a highly systematic and structured work, its cyclical nature and constant battle between the ambiguous and absolute inspired many to compliment and contrast these features.

Morton Feldman: *The King of Denmark*

With the composition *The King of Denmark*, Feldman offered a gentle, soft spoken response to Stockhausen's *Zyklus*. Feldman's music is meant to be wistful. His goal is to introduce a sound to the listener, and then another - by the time the second sound is initiated his goal is to have the listener forget the sound heard previous to it. To Feldman, sound is king; he wants the listener to hear his music free from compositional rhetoric. Feldman's interest in these sounds is not in the attack. Feldman's true interest lay in the decay of a sound, how that sound sits in the listener's memory prior to the next sound's engagement, this is referred to by Feldman as the "departing landscape."¹⁰

The King of Denmark approaches the departing landscape that at the time of the composition was previously unexplored. It is his only work that is scored for percussion alone, chamber or solo. The instrumentation for this work is largely open, but Feldman gives some parameters to the performer. The performer is to use only their hands and parts of their arms to strike the instruments, no mallets can be used. Feldman's early music features a graph notation which gives the number of attacks and the sound's register as parameters to the performer.

As it relates to *Zyklus* this work is quintessentially an "anti-percussion piece."¹¹ So much of the percussion repertoire is loud, bombastic, highly rhythmic, and carefully structured. The wistfulness of *The King of Denmark* floats in a timeless vacuum, seemingly free from structure and determinacy. In contrast, *Zyklus* moves the performer down a path of decision making where each decision seems to lead into the next. Each instrument has a structural role independent from

¹⁰ Thomas DeLio *The Music of Morton Feldman* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group 1996), 207.

¹¹ Schick, *The Percussionist's Art, Same Bed Different Dreams*, 162

the others, for instance the density of each instrument increases and decreases throughout the work. This effect causes a great sense of forward momentum, which is felt even when there is much freedom allotted to the performer. There is no such structure determined by Feldman in *The King of Denmark*, it seemingly goes nowhere. The work is comprised of colourful moments with no impact on what happened before or what's going to happen next.

Feldman conceived of this work while he was on the beach on the south shore of Long Island. The piece was written in a few hours. Feldman was inspired by the sounds occurring around him, the way that sounds of transistor radios and kids playing seemed to grab his attention and then disappear in the departing landscape. Particularly what caught Feldman's attention was the short-lived duration of these sounds. This led Feldman to primarily use dry sounds in the work. While he never outright says to use dry sounding instruments in the score, the performer gathers this through Feldman's occasional use of the *laissez vibrer* sign as seen in Example 1, most events in the work are not marked with this sign, leaving the performer to gather dryer sounds are desired. In his interview with famed percussionist Prof. Jan Williams (1939-), Feldman states:

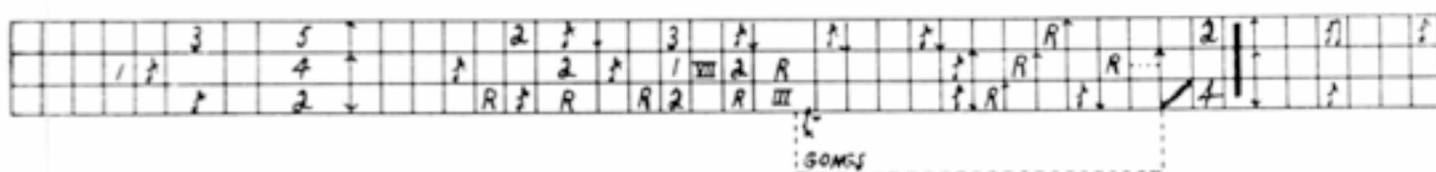
And I can actually conjure up the memory of of doing it - that kind of muffled sound of kids in the distance and the transistor radios and drifts of conversation from other pockets of inhabitants on blankets, and I remember that it did come into the piece. By that I mean these kinds of wisps. I was very impressed with the wisp, that things don't last, and that became an image of the piece: what was happening around me.¹²

This wistfulness is from where he drew the inspiration for the metaphoric title. Christian X (1870-1947), the King of Denmark while it was under Nazi siege, would ride through the streets of Copenhagen on horseback wearing the Star of David. He did so without speaking, a

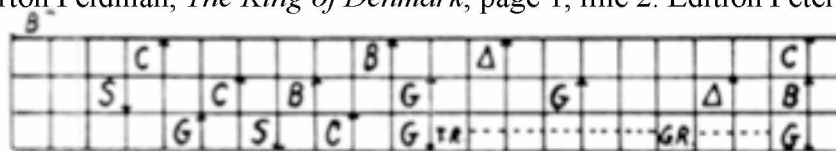
¹² Jan Williams, "An Interview with Morton Feldman, 22nd April 1983," accessed February 23, 2015, <http://www.cnvill.net/mfjw1.htm>

kind of silent protest, if you will, to show the people of Denmark he had not given up his national sovereignty.

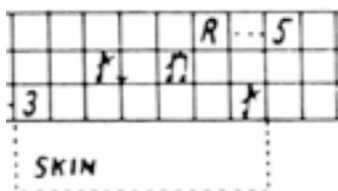
In *The King of Denmark* Feldman uses a three box grid as the staff. Each line represents a group of instruments sorted by their range, from top to bottom the instruments are sorted from high medium to low. On the grid there are eleven different notational markings. The arabic numbers represent the number of sounds to be played in a given box. The thick vertical lines (which are mistakenly listed in the score as horizontal lines) designate clusters (although no further performance direction is given on how to play the clusters) (see Example 3). Roman numerals represent simultaneous sounds. Diagonal lines represent the registral span and direction of a glissando. Grace notes represent one or two notes to be played in fast succession. In certain instances Feldman also designates other properties of the note: B - bell like sounds, S - skin instruments, C - cymbal, G - gong, R - roll, T.R. - tympani roll, Δ - triangle, G.R - gong roll (see Example 4). There are also sections which Feldman designates to a certain instrumental category (see Example 5). A vibraphone and either glockenspiel or antique cymbals are called for in the last moments of the work.



Example 3. Morton Feldman, *The King of Denmark*, page 1, line 2. Edition Peters, 1965.



Example 4. Morton Feldman, *The King of Denmark*, page 2, line 3. Edition Peters, 1965.



Example 5. Morton Feldman, *The King of Denmark*, page 2, line 2. Edition Peters, 1965.

The notational system used in this work bears some similarity to both Cage and Stockhausen's solos. The use of specified instrumental groups such as B, G, or S, resembles the way Cage instructs the performer which instrumental group to play. The difference here is that Cage had a single line on a modified staff that is assigned a certain instrument group, where throughout the majority of Feldman's work the instrument group is not specified. The diagonal lines in *The King of Denmark* are used in the same way as Stockhausen uses them in *Zyklus*, although Stockhausen indicates clearly on which instrument to play the *glissando* and from what pitch to begin from, and end on. While Cage too uses diagonal lines, the y axis in his work represents amplitude, so a diagonal line signifies either a *crescendo* or *decrescendo* on a sustained note. In the case of Feldman and Stockhausen they are *glissandi*. Both Stockhausen's and Feldman's work are on a fixed temporal grid. In Cage's work, each note has a number inscribed over top of it, representing how many seconds into the page it is to be played.

The three box grid used here by Feldman was first conceived in John Cage's apartment; it occurred without prior thought, and was the result of Feldman scribbling on a piece of paper while he waited for Cage to finish cooking dinner.¹³ Cage was very excited about the new form of notation and encouraged it as Feldman began using it in his compositions. Feldman became more disinterested with this form of graph notation and stopped using it all together between 1953 and 1958. Feldman felt that the performer had too much freedom while using this notation. He returned to using the graph notation in 1960. Feldman felt the notational system was well suited for percussion. In his interview with Williams, Feldman states this about the graph notation: "The percussion just made the balance between the specific, and, at the same time to

¹³ Williams, "An Interview With Morton Feldman."

some degree general.”¹⁴ The sentiment on percussion instruments and their indeterminate aspects closely mirrors that of Cage.

While the published score states clearly the percussionist is not to use sticks or mallets, this direction didn't exist at the time of the realization. Percussionist Max Neuhaus (1939-2009) gave the premiere of the work at the New York Avant Garde festival in the fall of 1964. The summer prior, Feldman and Neuhaus would frequently meet and go over different instruments and techniques. At this time, Feldman was insistent that the sounds were too loud. Neuhaus was being challenged to extend his technique to meet the dynamic needs of the composer. It was Neuhaus who first had the idea of playing the entire work with his hands. Neuhaus writes:

In the second or third session, he was still insisting, 'no, it is 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.¹⁵

This brief moment of experimentation changed the piece's aesthetic drastically, a fine example of how the performer and the life of this work are connected. This discovery would open up a vast landscape of performance practice in notated solo percussion music.

The structural freedom in this work opens up the possibility for endless different realizations in the work. The open instrumentation has been interpreted on both sides of the spectrum from large to small. While some performers attempt to incorporate as many instruments as possible to give them the largest pallet from which to choose, others have allotted to use few instruments. To use fewer instruments creates the challenge of having the work not

¹⁴ Williams “An Interview With Morton Feldman.”

¹⁵ Max Neuhaus, “Morton Feldman, *The King of Denmark* (Realization date, 1964), accessed March 1, 2015, <http://www.cnvill.net/mfneuhaus.htm>.

sound repetitive, which inherently would imply some sort of compositional rhetoric. The small set up version of this work is referred to by Feldman as a “capsule version.”¹⁶

When Williams first learned this work, he decided to do this capsule version. Williams claims he held off on learning the piece because of how many great performances he had seen. When he did learn it, he decided he did so with a small set up in reaction to the “big band version.”¹⁷ Feldman doesn’t state affinity for either larger or smaller set ups of this work, a strong realization is dependant on the percussionist’s use of their allotted sounds, not only the pallet from which they choose.

The final product of this work was born from a number of different factors; the composer’s friendship with Cage, and use of aspects of the notation in Cage’s work, the compositional landscape, and the response to Stockhausen’s piece. Additionally an open instrumentation allowing for endless performance opportunities, and finally, the performer’s input based on experimentation which dictated how this piece would be played for all performances to follow.

¹⁶ Williams “An Interview With Morton Feldman.”

¹⁷ Williams “An Interview With Morton Feldman.”

Michael Gordon: *XY*

Michael Gordon's *XY* is a piece for solo percussionist playing five tuned drums. The concept of the work is exemplified through one of the title's meanings, *XY* referring to both the horizontal and vertical planes on a two-dimensional graph. The other significance of *XY* is that the work was written while Gordon and his wife, American composer Julia Wolfe (1958-) were expecting the birth of their son. The work separates each hand, giving them each a staff, and pits them against one another in a constant battle of volume and density. While one hand plays six beats, the other might play five or four, while one hand gets louder the other gets softer. The effect is a seamless crossfading of tempo that emerges and submerges, which allows up to five drums to emerge from the texture at various times. Each passing off of dynamic between hands takes at least one measure going from *piano* to *forte* or vice versa.

This work was commissioned by Scottish percussion soloist Dame Evelyn Glennie (1965-), although it was premiered by Schick. The work explores multiple tempi occurring at one time, through Gordon's use of polyrhythm. The idea of multiple rhythms and tempi occurring at once is an idea Gordon has explored many times. In a 2002 interview Gordon writes this about his work *Yo Shakespeare* (1994):

With *Yo Shakespeare* there's basically three types of dance rhythms going on at the same time. The three rhythms are almost as if there are different dance rooms with three different dance bands playing at the same time. As if they're playing different songs and different tempos, but somehow you could dance to it or somehow you could feel that there was a common rhythm. That's how I think of *Yo Shakespeare*, and that's how it began in my mind. It began as this thing, I wanted to move; I want you to feel like my body's moving.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gordon, Michael. Interview with Alan Baker. "American Mavericks: An Interview with Michael Gordon." American Public Media, 2002.

This concept was largely popularized by American experimentalist Charles Ives (1874-1954) who in his work *Three Places in New England* (1914) had the orchestra imitate two marching bands, one moving toward the listener and the other away. The band were playing different pieces at different tempi. *Yo Shakespeare* also shows Gordon's interest in rock and dance music. In *XY* Gordon achieves the multi layered rhythmic foundation by separating the performers hands and treating them as two independent beings. Gordon writes, "I am speaking of the hands of the performer as if they were independent beings, and indeed they practically are. When I was imagining the music of *XY*, I thought of the double helix of DNA, which wraps around itself and spirals upwards."¹⁹

At the beginning *XY* Gordon uses a 1:1 ratio, eight notes in each hand that are separated by one sixteenth note. The dynamic shift in the opening of the work takes three full measures to occur giving copious time to establish the rhythmic and melodic relationship (see Example 6). As this material develops, the crossfading of *crescendi* and *decrescendi* occurs over the course of two measures, and the frequency of one hand changing drums increases.



Example 6. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 1, measures 1-18. Red Poppy, 1998.

The passing back and forth of dynamics in this 1:1 ratio continues throughout the first 124 measures, with the hands moving drums at various slow rates. In measure 125, Gordon uses opposing rhythms in each hand for the first time in a ratio of 3:2 (see Example 7). Gordon continues to use the rather rhythmically consonant ratio for the next 27 measures. However, in

¹⁹ Michael Gordon, "XY - Program Notes," accessed March 15 2015. <http://michaelgordonmusic.com/music/xy>.

measure 153, Gordon introduces a new, more rhythmically dissonant ratio 5:4 (see Example 8). Gordon then introduces the most rhythmically dissonant ratio of 6:5 in measure 201 (see Example 9).



Example 7. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 2, measures 117-132. Red Poppy, 1998.



Example 8. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 2, measures 149-164. Red Poppy, 1998.



Example 9. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 2, measures 201-214. Red Poppy, 1998.

Leading to the Example 10, the rhythmic relationships are all played on opposing drums. This allows even listeners unfamiliar with polyrhythmic relationships to clearly heard the shift between each hand in a given ratio. However in measure 217, Gordon begins to move both hands in a independently melodic fashion. When doing this he returns to the 1:1 ratio for a brief instant, introducing the melodic structure coming in the next section in a manner that is more familiar to both there performer and listener. (see Example 10).



Example 10. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 2, measures 217-220. Red Poppy, 1998.

In measure 225 Gordon uses independent polyrhythmic melodies played between each hand. This section opens with a ratio of 3:2 and juxtaposes each hand in groups of two, which gives the sensation of two crossfading melodic figures at different tempi in each hand. After a repeated four-bar figure, the ratio changes to 6:5, still with each hand playing groupings of two (see Example 11).



Example 11. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 3, measures 225-241. Red Poppy, 1998.

In measure 241, a new four-note grouping is introduced one hand at a time. This new grouping is first introduced in the right hand, which is playing five beats, and then is introduced in the left hand, which is playing six beats. After the first note in each grouping of four line up twice, the voice playing five is removed, shifting to a single voice texture for the first time in the work (see Example 12).

 Musical score for Example 12, showing two systems of two staves each. The first system shows a 5:6 polyrhythm with dynamic markings of *f* and *p*. The second system shows a single voice texture with dynamic markings of *f* and *p*. The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulation marks.

Example 12. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 3, measures 241-255. Red Poppy, 1998

The section using a single voice introduces the melodic figures prior to their use at the beginning of the next polyrhythmic section beginning at measure 277. In this section, Gordon introduces a series of different melodic figures heard previously in the section before. It begins with a 4:3 ratio, and increases the density over time until he reaches 6:5 once again. Throughout this section, the hands melodic lines have similar contours, giving the impression that one hand is chasing the other (see Example 13).



Example 13. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 4, measures 295-298. Red Poppy, 1998

At the completion of this section, Gordon returns to a rather stagnant melodic line similar to the first half the work. While the melodic motion is minimal in this section, the frequency of drums changing varies on average between once every one or two measures. However, for the first time in a melodically inactive section the hands changes simultaneously throughout measures 319 to 341. These simultaneous changes use ratios of 5:4 and 6:5. The melodically stagnant section continues until the new melodic material in measure 413 marking the last section of the work.

This new melodic section once again features juxtapositions of a 6:5 ratio with both hands grouped in four (see Example 14). Gordon's use of dynamic changes throughout this repeated section, using his crossfade method found through the majority of the work, as well as using the same dynamic in both hands. The completion of this section is met with more melodic material using a 6:5 ratio that features the use of *subito* dynamic changes in each hand. This

section begins with a dense texture and is made increasingly less dense through the use of smaller ratios, the ratios are changed from 6:5 to 5:4, to 4:3, to 5:3, finally to 5:4 in 5 repeated sections varying between eight and four measures long. At the end of this section, it returns for a moment to a monophonic texture before a brief coda. The 3/8 measure seen at the end of the monophonic section is the only meter change in the piece.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, labeled 'M.413-420 THREE TIMES', consists of two staves. The top staff has three parts: 1st (f), 2nd (sub), and 3rd (p). The bottom staff also has three parts: 1st (p), 2nd (sub), and 3rd (p). Dynamic markings include *f*, *p*, and *sub*. The second system, labeled '417', continues the notation with similar dynamics and articulation.

Example 14. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 5, measures 413-420. Red Poppy, 1998.

The coda is largely made up of recycled material with two exceptions: use of new melodic content in the repeated section, and the use of two new ratios in the final eight measures of the work. As the work comes to an end Gordon uses the ratios of 12:5 and 5:3 for the first time to close out the work (see Example 15). By drastically decreasing the density in one voice, and then the next, and by accenting the less dense voice, Gordon brings aural clarity to each individual voice at the conclusion of the work.



Example 15. Michael Gordon, *XY*, page 6, measures 490-487. Red Poppy, 1998.

This work challenges performers in a variety of ways. While many of the percussionists who perform this work will likely have an aptitude for playing polyrhythmic passages, this piece presents them in an extremely challenging way. One issue lies in the fact that the hands move in such a way making it difficult for a performer to stand in one position. Many percussionists such as Dr. Morris Palter (1970-) and Steve Schick address this problem by circling the drums sometimes up to 360 degrees to facilitate easier arm motion throughout the work.

While the melodic contour poses a slight issue to the performer, the major challenge in performing this work is the tempo. Gordon marks the piece at a blazing 202 beats per minutes, which is excessively fast, and for this reason he concedes “or as fast as possible.”²⁰ The brisk tempo that Gordon marks for the work, mixed with the lengthy duration requires a great amount of physical and mental endurance to perform the piece. Much of the spectacle of watching the performance of *XY* is indeed in watching the struggle of the performer maintaining the rigorous drumming over the course of sixteen minutes. The work fully embodies the compositional style of Michael Gordon as described by *The New Yorker*'s Alex Ross (1968-). Ross states that Gordon's music includes “the fury of punk rock, the nervous brilliance of free jazz and the intransigence of classical modernism.”

²⁰ Michael Gordon, “*Timber* - Program Notes,” accessed March 15, 2015, <http://michaelgordonmusic.com/music/chamber-ensemble>.

Jacob Druckman: *Reflections on the Nature of Water*

In 1986 occurred one of the most influential commissioning events ever for the marimba literature. Three percussionists: Leigh Howard Stevens (1953-), Gordon Stout (1952-), and William Moersch (1954-) were issued a consortium commissioning grant from the National Endowment for the Arts through the Percussive Arts Society. Three Pulitzer Prize winning composers were commissioned to write three new concert works for solo marimba. The resultant works were Roger Reynolds' (1934-) *Islands from Archipelago: Autumn Island* (1987), Joseph Schwanter's (1943-) *Velocities* (1990) and Jacob Druckman's *Reflections on the Nature of Water*.

Druckman's *Reflections on the Nature of Water* was first premiered in its entirety in 1987. Five of the six movements were performed in 1986 at the Percussive Arts Society's international convention (PASIC), both performances were done by William Moersch. The work is an exploration of the abstract nature of water. Druckman gives the work's six movements character names to indicate feel and tempo. The order is as follows: "Crystalline," "Fleet," "Tranquil," "Gently Swelling," "Profound," and "Relentless." Each movement contrasts with the prior movement. Movements I, III, and V are lyrical movements, while movements II, IV, and VI are fast and rhythmically driven. Each movement's form is unique.

Druckman acknowledges a great deal of influence from Claude Debussy (1862-1918) in the compositional structure of this work. In a program note for the work he states:

Reflections on the Nature of Water is a small payment towards a very large debt. There were primarily two composers, Debussy and Stravinsky, whose music affected me so profoundly during my tender, formative years that I had no choice but to become a

composer. It is Debussy that I doff my hat with these reflections on his magical preludes.²¹

However, in a 2005 interview with percussionist I-Jen Fang (1979-), Druckman's son, percussionist Daniel Druckman (1959-), points out that this work is strongly connected to Debussy's *Reflets Dans l'Eau*²² which translates to "reflect in water," and that was the work his father was meaning to reference. *Reflets Dans l'Eau* was Debussy's first instalment in his *Images I* series. There are a total of six instalments in Debussy's *Images I & II*. In this work, Druckman highlights his knowledge of established performance practices for the marimba, but introduces challenges that fostered new exciting possibilities for the marimba.

The first movement opens with an introduction of a series of grace note figures. These figures return at various times throughout the movement. Druckman's unique notation of these grace notes is worthy of mention. Seven of the eight grace note figures are notated with the principal note (given rhythmic duration and a full sized note head) occurring at the beginning of the figure, leaving the grace notes to be played after the initial note is struck. On only two of the eight grace note figures are there not a notated *diminuendo*. The unique manner in which Druckman has notated these give the sensation of interruption to water's calm state that continues to ripple until it fades away (see Example 16).

²¹ William Moersch, *The Modern Marimba*, program note by Jacob Druckman. Newport Classic NPD 85528, 1991, compact disc.

²² Fang, "The 1986 National Endowment for the Arts Commission." 20.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Crystalline" by Jacob Druckman. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 54. The score consists of two staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The music is characterized by dense textures with multiple notes per beat, often indicated by grace notes. Dynamic markings include *ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, and *p*. The second staff continues the texture and includes a double bar line with repeat dots. The dynamics in the second staff include *ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, *ppp*, *p*, and *pp*.

Example 16. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water I*, page 1, measures 1-5, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

After the introduction of the grace note figures, Druckman introduces new material. This material features two distinct voices, one voice maintains a tremolo while the other strikes notes in opposing ranges of the instrument. In this section one gets a sense of tonal centricity due to the repeated use of the pitch A. This distinction of voices is an important step in the development in the literature, because as the performer is to strike sometimes up to four notes, the tremolo continues (see Example 17). This task is impossible for one to do literally when playing with four mallets, so the performer is required to convey this with gesture. It is a compositional tactic that a marimbist would not use when composing for the instrument, as it is technically impossible.

Example 17. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water I*, page 1, measures 6-12, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

The second movement “Fleet” features variations on a motif introduced at the beginning of the movement. It is an iteration of open fifths using a permutation that for marimba players, facilitates fast tempos. Here Druckman demonstrates his knowledge of the idiosyncrasies for the marimba. The permutation is 4-3-1-2 (marimba mallets are numbered from left to right: 1-2-3-4). After this initial motif a second motif is introduced - a stream of constant thirty second notes on the same pitch (see Example 18).

Example 18. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water II*, page 4, measures 1-2, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

Beginning in measure 10, Druckman inserts *sforzando* accents that interrupts the initial permutation motif which is played in a dynamic range from *pianississimo* to *mezzo piano*. These accents, coming out of a soft thirty-second note texture, are played both above and below where the permutation occurs. However, these accents are all to be played by the right hand due to the notated “M.d” which is an abbreviation for *Main Droite* (the French translation of right hand) (see Example 19). This marking gives a visual representation to the listener that all of these accented notes, although changing in register belong to the same voice throughout the movement.



Example 19. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water II*, page 4, measures 11-12, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

The third movement “Tranquil” is the second lyrical movement in the work. This movement features the prominent use of both the “one handed roll,” and double-stops.²³ Most of the double-stops in this movement occur between the pitches A and B (see Example 20); later in the movement they are iterated in their inverted form. The double stops and rolls are interrupted by a series of linear runs up and down the instrument. The use of the pitch F throughout the movement, and the hinting of an F triad, indicate F as the tonal centre of the movement. Once

²³ The one handed roll is a roll between two pitches using both mallets from one hand, as opposed to a roll using one or more mallet(s) from each hand.

again, Druckman proves his knowledge of standard performance practice for the marimba in this movement through use of conventional techniques such as double-stops and one handed rolls.

$\text{♩} = 52$ *Tranquil*

The image shows two systems of musical notation for marimba. The first system is in 4/4 time and contains measures 1 through 6. It features a right-hand melody with slurs and accents, and a left-hand accompaniment with double-stops and rolls. Dynamic markings include *mp*, *pp*, and *f*. The second system continues the piece, showing a change in time signature to 3/4 and then 4/4, with dynamic markings like *mf*, *pp*, and *f*. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns and slurs.

Example 20. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water III*, page 7, measures 1-6 Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

The greatest technical challenge in the work is without doubt the fourth movement “Gently Swelling.” This work features a variety of ostinatos in the left hand with the right hand playing various melodies. Each hand is assigned its own dynamic in the movement, moving independently from the other one. This compositional aspect is yet another example of a performance practice rarely found in the marimba literature due to its technical difficulty. There are three different ostinatos in the movement whose contour gives the impression of waves rising and falling. Each ostinato is comprised of the same rhythm with contrasting pitches. The first two ostinatos move upwards and downwards, while the third ostinato is the opposite. The third ostinato also begins a *mysterioso* section which unifies the dynamic in both hands. The sudden



Example 21. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water IV*, page 11, measures 19-21, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

At the climax of the *mysterioso* section an abrupt, loud double stop statement occurs which is reiterated, followed by a descending permutation figure (using the same permutation used in movement two). The descending permutation begins at Eb6 and arrives at D3, which is the opening note of the piece beginning the opening ostinato once again. A recapitulation of the first two sections occurs with slight variance, including a more active right hand, changing many of the double stops to two articulated sixteenths and a slightly shortened second section.

The fifth movement, “Profound,” is the least conventionally notated in the work. The movement is also the longest in the set, although it comprises of only two pages. This movement’s temporal scale resembles the temporal arrangement found in Cage’s *27 Minutes*. There are no bar lines in the movement, only a staff. Each system is meant to last twenty seconds each, although no grid is used as in *Zyklus* or *The King of Denmark* to inform the performer of where each event occurs in the grand temporal scale.

The last of three lyrical movements in the set, “Profound” features again two distinct voices throughout. One is made up of quiet rolls, while the other voice is a series of grace note interjections at a strong dynamic. The rolls in this movement are played hand to hand, however the composer introduces one mallet from each hand at a time. The second mallet introduced is to start from *niente* and is to *crescendo* to the dynamic of the pitches being rolled prior to their

initiation. This is a challenging task for the performer, as they must crescendo one mallet in each hand while the other stays at a constant dynamic (see Example 22). The movement also features one *ritardando* and one *accelerando*, however the beaming also represents this speeding up and slowing down of the rolled chords. The temporal scale is meant to remain constant through both of these.



Example 22. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water V*, page 14, line 1, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

The sixth and final movement “Relentless” rhythmically driven in a similar manner to the second and fourth movement. The work is based on sixteenth-note triplet figures that are first presented incompletely, but are completed on the seventh iteration. The triplet figures feature a strong use of the major second interval as seen in the third movement. Druckman also uses a duple figure beginning in measure 10. The movement features two voices, although often times the bottom voice is connected by beam to the top voice, accenting the eighth note triplet within the sixteenth note triplet in the upper voice (see Example 23). The movement’s climax occurs at measure 50, where Druckman superimposes the duple figure in the left hand underneath the triplet in the right hand.



Example 23. Jacob Druckman, *Reflections on the Nature of Water VI*, page 16, measures 5-9, Boosey & Hawkes, 1991.

Druckman's work is essential to the evolution of solo marimba, with established and respected composers writing for the marimba as they did for the 1986 NEA commissioning project, the marimba's exposure began to increase beyond the scope of percussionists. This commissioning project opened the door for several like it, which in turn has encouraged more established composers to compose for the instrument. Being written at a time when most of the marimba literature was written by percussionists in a largely improvisatory fashion, this work introduced a world of new performance practice possibilities to the world of marimba.

Percussionist Mark Ford states:

This new work for solo marimba will be hard to ignore if you are an aspiring marimbist or college percussion instructor. It requires an experienced performer with dauntless technique. With composers like Druckman writing quality new works for the marimba, it is a sure guess that the marimba world is out of its infancy.²⁴

These three commissions help what was seemingly, a divide between the worlds of solo percussion and solo marimba. This divide was created by the lack of established composers

²⁴ Mark Ford, review of *Reflections on the Nature of Water*, By Jacob Druckman, *Percussive Notes*, vol. 30 no. 6 (August 1992): 71.

writing for the instrument, contrasted to the idiom of solo percussion who's genesis was founded through the compositions of established contemporary composers.

Conclusion

While the use of percussion as a standalone form of expression in Western Art Music is young, the development of it has been drastically fast. Percussion literature houses many different challenges and concepts, and often times each new work a percussionist learns will have completely different issues for the performer to overcome. For a percussionist, establishing a unique creative voice can often mean learning many different techniques on many different instruments and trying to relate them all on common ground. Each work requires a unique skill set. *The King of Denmark* forces the percussionist to explore the quietest dynamics possible using only their fingers. *XY* is a challenge both to the mental and physical endurance of the performer. *Reflections on the Nature of Water* explores an array of coloristic possibility using techniques that are not exactly intuitive to a percussionist when approaching a marimba. These works offer a brief survey of the demands placed on percussionists when approaching contemporary solos.

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