

O R I G I N S: forgotten percussion works

The Percussion Art Ensemble & SIUC Percussion Group

Kreating SounD 04

In 1933 Henry Cowell wrote, “Up to this year, in my experience as a music publisher I have never been offered any work for percussion instruments alone. This season I have been offered fifteen different works for such combinations...”¹ And the review of a John Cage concert in 1942 reported, “When he played his first percussion concert in 1938, there were only two pieces written for percussion groups. Now there are more than 100...”²

These two statements, if accurate in whole or part, point to a significant body of forgotten percussion literature from this formative period. Interestingly the dates of these statements mark the beginning and ending of the most important period in the development of the percussion ensemble in pan-European music. It is not coincidental that Cowell and Cage are the focal points at these particular dates. Cowell was a highly influential progenitor and facilitator of percussion music in the American Experimentalist tradition and perhaps the most important figure in the initial dissemination of percussion music via his organization of performances, publishing, recording, teaching, mentorship, and social networking activities. These groundbreaking efforts, beginning earnestly in 1933, prepared fertile ground in which he cultivated countless opportunities for many fellow pioneers in the percussion medium. Cowell’s percussion related activities had definite influence and benefit to Cage’s interest and activities in the medium; for example, Cowell introduced Cage to Lou Harrison who assisted Cage in procuring his job at the Cornish School in Seattle, WA in 1938. There he formed his first percussion group, The Cage Percussion Players, and presented his first public percussion concert at the Cornish School Theatre on December 9, 1938 with compositions from Cowell’s 1936 publication, *New Music Orchestra Series, Collection No. 18* and his own percussion compositions: *Trio* and *Quartet*. From this date forward Cage’s composition, performance, commissioning, and concert presentations of percussion music expanded in a flurry of activity until the final percussion concert he organized on February 7, 1943 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Cage’s move to Chicago in September 1941 and subsequent move to New York City in June 1942 ultimately led to the abandonment of his percussion-centered activities, due in large part to the difficult logistics of instruments, rehearsal space, performers, and insufficient external support.

Cowell and Cage formed the nucleus in a sphere of percussion music development around which other important composer-performers coalesced such as those represented herein, as well as Ray Green, William Russell, Gerald Strang, Harold Davidson, Jessie Baetz, and others. In spite of being so near to the inception of the percussion ensemble in pan-European music, it is apparent that there is a less than complete comprehension of the gamut of achievements

¹ Henry Cowell, “Towards Neo-Primitivism.” *Modern Music* 10/3 (March/April 1933): 153.

² Pence James, “People call it Noise – but He calls it Music.” *Chicago Daily News* (19 March 1942): 4.

from the diverse individuals involved, and this is to say nothing of the insufficient recognition for these pioneering efforts in their original context. The present recording is the first in a series to excavate and present some of this neglected, or entirely unknown, music to the world and posthumously honor its brave creators.

The composers and their works on this volume represent the obscure to the known of the formative period from 1934 to 1942. At present, the most obscure composer to the percussion establishment on this recording will be Franziska Marie Boas (1902-1988), who was an American dancer, percussionist, teacher, social activist, improviser, and composer of percussion music. Boas, the daughter of renowned anthropologist Franz Boas, was a highly regarded disciple of the German dancers, Mary Wigman and Hanya Holm and developed a unique improvisation based pedagogy and dance style influenced by non-European cultures. She composed, improvised, and performed percussion music for her own choreography and for others such as Holm. For a time, Boas employed John Cage to teach music analysis and composition at her New York City dance school. Cage and his percussion group performed Boas' work *Changing Tensions* at Mills College on July 27, 1939.

Also of note are the works *Oriental* by Lou Harrison and *PERCUSSION* by Johanna Magdalena Beyer. For decades the fourth movement of Beyer's *PERCUSSION* has been considered a complete, free-standing composition titled *IV*, when in fact it is a single movement from this larger five movement work. *IV* was Beyer's only published work during her lifetime appearing in Cowell's 1936 *New Music Orchestra Series, Collection No. 18*. *PERCUSSION* is the first known percussion composition to use unspecified instrumentation, thus allowing endless reinvention of the work. It should also be noted that Beyer's *HORIZONS* is scored for unspecified instrumentation. Lou Harrison's *Oriental* is yet another previously unknown composition and was composed for the noted dancer and choreographer, Lester Horton's dance work, *Something to Please Everybody* – a suite of dances that varied widely in style.

This first volume of forgotten works begins unearthing a rich history of innovation deserving of audience and documentation. Future volumes of this series will continue to present unknown and neglected percussion compositions and composers from the Twentieth Century. Related articles on the composers and their percussion works will be forthcoming in publication.

–Ron Coulter

Track Listing

1. *Preludio a 11* (1942) for 10 percussionists & piano, 3:41
José Ardévol (1911-1981)

Changing Tensions (c. 1939) for 4 percussionists, 3:23
Franziska Boas (1902-1988)

2. I. *Moderately Fast*
3. II. *Slow*

4. *STRIVE* (1941) for 8 percussionists, 4:40
Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888-1944)

PERCUSSION (1935) for 9 percussionists, 12:07
Johanna Magdalena Beyer

5. I.
6. II.
7. III.
8. IV.
9. V.

10. *Canticle No. 5* (1942) for 4 percussionists, 5:33
Lou Harrison (1917-2003)

11. *Oriental* (c. 1940) for 3 percussionists, 1:50
Lou Harrison

HORIZONS (1942) for 14 percussionists, 15:41
Johanna Magdalena Beyer

12. *Liberty*
13. *Utopia*
14. *Destruction*
15. *Reality*

The **Percussion Art Ensemble** (PAE) was formed in 2001 by Ron Coulter, Nathan Douds, and Craig Hill. The PAE's eclectic repertoire encompasses a broad spectrum, from free-improvisation and electronica to pop music and the New Complexity. A majority of the ensemble's repertoire is composed or arranged by the members themselves, resulting in an inimitable collection of music reflecting each member's interests. Each PAE performance creates a unique aural experience for the listener, while the ensemble's beautiful collection of instruments, dramatic staging, animated choreography, and captivating presence creates an engaging visual component.

The **SIUC Percussion Group** (SIUCPG), established in 2005 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale by Ron Coulter, is a multifaceted chamber music group whose repertoire encompasses classic and contemporary percussion works, improvised, electro-acoustic and various world musics. Their intermedia performances integrate technology, spoken word, dance, and mixed instrument collaborations. To date, they have presented 49 premieres including a concert of commissions from the Chicago Composer's Consortium. Past performances include IMEA, MENC North Central, and CMS National conferences, PAS Illinois Days of Percussion, Athena Festival, and WSIU Television. The group has performed Henry Cowell's *Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra* with the SISO; Zhou Long's *Tales from the Cave* with Music from China; and premiered Stephen Whibley's *Espiritu Libre* with Maraca2 (UK), as well as performing with Mwabatu Okantah, Bolokada Condé, and HaZMaT.

Performers: Jim Beers, Ron Coulter, Eric Hendrickson, Craig Hill, Eric Mandat, Evan Romack, William Shotton, Derek W. Smith, Nathan Staley

Producer: Ron Coulter

Recording Engineer: Brian Wagner

Mixing, Post-Production, and Digital Mastering: Kelly Caringer

Graphic Design and Liner Notes: Ron Coulter

Recorded at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, School of Music, Altgeld Hall (Carbondale, IL) between July 7 and July 26, 2011.

All works are unpublished, except the fourth movement of *PERCUSSION*, published by New Music Orchestra Series in 1936 (currently out of print).

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