

Prelude to *Small Essay On My Early Percussion Music*

By Larry Snider

There is a demon inside of Michael Colgrass. It is the same demon that goes into a candy store and, from a very large barrel, picks out only the red ju-ju candies because they “feel the best to eat today.” It is the same demon that checks into a fancy hotel and immediately climbs to the roof to see if he can see something that no one else has seen. It’s the same demon who invents a toy drum that later develops into the RotoTom. It’s the same creative demon that shuns commercialism and materialism yet wins the Pulitzer Prize in 1974, is elected to the PAS Hall of Fame in 1987, gets asked to give commencement addresses and seems to win every award possible for composition.

That same demon created a body of percussion literature when there were so very few pieces to play in the 1950s. Percussionist/educator Paul Price, while teaching at the University of Illinois, was a catalyst for this demon on its path by saying, “If you don’t like the music, write some yourself.” Since then, it is safe to say that every percussionist who has played solo or ensemble literature has somehow been affected by Michael Colgrass’ demon.

Small Essay On My Early Percussion Music

By Michael Colgrass

THREE BROTHERS IS A JAZZ work. It is a four-minute jazz drum solo for eighteen arms: six solo arms and twelve accompanying arms. I put it like that because this was my first attempt at composing, prior to which I had only improvised. Composition appealed to me specifically because I realized that, with a pencil in my hand, I could have as many arms as I desired. So by composing, I could write a solo that I could never improvise by myself. *Three Brothers* is a drum solo that I had been developing for five years as a jazz drummer and soloist.

John Cage referred to the title, *Three Brothers*, as evidence that I was concerned about humanity and the family of man. His remark is an example of how quick Cage was to create unfounded pre-suppositions about life and music, as were many of his followers to create self-serving assumptions about Cage. I am concerned about the family of man, but the title was, in fact, inspired by Woody Herman’s 1940’s composition *Four Brothers*, featuring four saxophonists. If Cage had known anything about his native music he could not have missed that fact.

Percussion Music was my second piece and I wanted to stretch myself and enter new areas of music. This piece is baroque in character and was inspired by J. S. Bach in that it has like contrapuntal voices but without specific pitches. I asked myself: “What would Bach-like counterpoint sound like on drums?” So I set up a “keyboard” of sixteen sounds, from low bass drum ascending to temple blocks, and divided this “keyboard” into four players. Since Bach’s music is non-percussive, a

gentle form of drumming was the result. This piece also served the psychological comfort of giving me—a jazz musician entering the domain of classical music, and a percussionist feeling inferior to string, wind and brass players who were referred to at that time as “real musicians”—the feeling of musical equality and respectability.

Chamber Piece for Percussion Quintet is a sonata, with an introduction, theme, development section and a recapitulation. I had just studied sonata form with Lukas Foss at Tanglewood and was profoundly affected by its logic and power. This piece is all about logic, and is somewhat “dry” as a result and intellectual in its formal construction. My idea was to write an “elegant” work for percussion. I asked myself: “What kind of percussion piece might Haydn or Mozart have written?” Since no pitches are involved, except for the tuned drums and a few xylophone notes, structure becomes all important—an architectonic logic, which is the power of the sonata form.

Six Unaccompanied Solos for Snare Drum were written in 1955 while I was awaiting assignment to the Seventh Army Symphony Orchestra in Stuttgart, Germany. With time on my hands and a request from Walter Gould of Lawson-Gould Publishers (a division of Schirmer), I dashed off these solos. “Dashed off” is not actually the proper word, because I put a lot of thought into what a snare drum could do. From my jazz-drumming days I had learned to think melodically, largely from the styles of Gene Krupa and Max Roach, two very different kinds of

drummers, but both among the most lyrical players ever. I knew that a snare drum could almost “talk” if it were played right, so I tried to capture different effects in these solos: playing from the edge to the center of the drum, making sudden crescendos and decrescendos, playing staccato and legato, dramatic and sudden changes in volume, all things that can convey a musical feeling. Also, I was trying to get a different color with each solo to create a sense of texture that differed from one piece to the other.

These solos were also strongly influenced by my studies with Paul Price, who used to talk about staccato and legato on the snare drum as being a matter of “thinking long” and “thinking short.” The idea was that what the musician feels will be conveyed in the playing. I used to practice for hours, both on a drum and a practice pad, playing tenuto—drawing the sound out “long” and making it feel “broad” and “big.” Then I would reverse my mind-set and think about pulling the stick off the drum almost before it touched the head, which produced a “short” sound. I would feel the tenuto and the staccato in my lower back and this sent a message right up through my arms to the drum. The feeling, therefore, was produced physically and kinesthetically, not just through reasoning.

Techniques like this were on my mind in my quest to write melodic snare drum solos that could convey something beyond technique. If I were listening to contestants in a state high school contest, my main criterion for excellence in a performance by a young drummer would be: Do I feel something when s/he plays? Do I feel like moving my body when s/he

plays? Flashy hand technique cannot cover up lack of musicianship, and musicianship can produce music without an extraordinary mechanical ability. Of course, ideally I would like to have both the mechanical skill and the musical richness, but if I had to choose between one or the other, the musical feeling would come first.

Inventions on a Motive was written in 1955 in a hotel room in Kassel, Germany while I awaited a phone call that never came from a girl I was crazy about. I can, therefore, thank her for the piece, since I wouldn't have written it had she responded. This is a light piece, and in some parts a satire—probably making fun of my ridiculous self at the time. It is based on a single motive stated right at the beginning from which all the sections are created. This is an extension of the classical idea of developing a motive, which I learned from Beethoven (his development of the “da-da-da-duhhh” motive in the *Fifth Symphony*) through my first and best composition teacher, Eugene Weigle. Gene had an excellent sense of how to milk a motive to develop all its possibilities. So these movements are variations, in reality, but since variations are usually on a theme as opposed to a motive, I called these developments “inventions,” since they were based only on a motive. My “what if” question here was something like, “How might Beethoven have written a little suite for percussion if he had only a rhythmic motive and no pitches?”

Variations for Four Drums and Viola: When I was free-lancing with the NBC Orchestra in New York City in 1957, violist Manny Vardi, then principal violist with the orchestra, suggested that it would be a good idea to have a piece for viola and percussion, specifically for tuned drums with him and myself as the duo. He invited me to his house and played for me the Bach *Chaconne* and some Paganini caprices, and I was instantly fired with the idea of writing for Manny. I didn't know at the time that the viola was not generally considered to be a virtuoso instrument. I just assumed everybody played Paganini on the viola. So I pulled out all the stops in writing for the instrument: double and triple stops, trilled octaves, ricochet bowing, just as I would write for the violin. This worked well with my con-

cept of the drum writing, which I wanted to be virtuoso in every way possible.

For the percussionist I wanted to write lyrically and show that a percussionist could shape a melodic line as well as any other instrumentalist. I was on a quest to show that a percussionist is as much a musician as a string player—that musicianship is a way of thinking not dependent on the sophistication of the instrument. Although four tuned drums are extraordinarily limited compared to a string instrument, one can think and play musically on the drums; however, the music needs to potentially demonstrate that fact. I saw *Variations* as an opportunity to place the percussionist on a par with the violist in a demanding piece of music.

When I finished the piece we recorded it for MGM Records and then played many live performances, the first of which was at the Five Spot Cafe in the East Village of New York, a club famous for jazz. I would have never guessed at that time that the piece would become a repertory work for violists, especially because of its apparent difficulty for most violists four decades ago. The viola has since come into its own, however, and so has the concept of the solo percussionist as a musician in his own right.

The drums I wrote for in the *Variations* were cardboard-shelled instruments, eight inches in diameter and four inches deep, made as children's toys by Walberg of Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The heads were calfskin and the drums were tuned by the wingnut-and-screw system. They sounded wonderful. Later, percussionists started using RotoToms, which tune more easily but have no shells and use plastic heads, and therefore do not have the same richness of tone. The larger RotoTom can sound fairly good within ten to fifteen feet when played softly, with padded sticks. If a strip of wool is placed between the counterhoop and the drum-head so the metal rim doesn't touch the plastic head, the sound is improved. However, beyond ten to fifteen feet, the ring of the drums, which is minimal to start with, dissipates completely and playing *forte* or louder produces a “splat” sound typical of plastic heads.

Put simply, my *Variations* does not sound as I intended it to sound when improved RotoTom, perhaps with a



Michael Colgrass

wooden shell and a return to calfskin, at least for these drums that are intended for subtle artistic purposes—not for the rock band or the football field.

In this piece, the word “variations” refers to the opening motive, not a theme in this work. Themes are made from this motive into five sections designed to show off the viola and drums in all their variety. The percussionist has fast tuning changes to make between movements and the violist has everything from trilled octaves to triple stops to contend with. The piece is dedicated to Mr. Vardi.

Fantasy-Variations was written in 1960 after a five-year hiatus from percussion writing. In the meantime I had studied twelve-tone music, which profoundly influenced the character of this work, making it more abstract. Color and contrast were key factors in my mind and I constructed all the movements out of a single opening theme, stated in the first measure. Sections of this piece have no relation to major or minor keys; thus, I mixed the single-theme sonata form ideas with atonal character.

This is the first percussion ensemble piece of mine in which tuned percussion is basic to the melodic structure of the piece. The drums are tuned atonally, since no specific key can be absolutely defined from the eight drum pitches. Melody in an atmosphere of musical elegance and grace were my guiding ideas in this piece. The soloist must think like a pianist or violinist; the touch must be of a caressing nature on the solo drums, except for a few places toward the climax in the last movement. So I was thinking here of writing for percussion as if I were writing for a piano

sextet; I think Chopin's piano music was the prime influence in this piece in creating the ornamented lines of the solo percussion part. I had just recently been the page turner for the piano soloist in Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1* on tour with the American Ballet Theater and was amazed at the piano writing—so rich and full. I tried to duplicate those interesting rubato lines in some way in my eight-drum solo part.

Now, for the overall view. My percussion writing from the beginning has been meant to be melodic. I was never taken with Buddy Rich and that school of drumming, fantastic a technician as he was. He was more like a drumming athlete in my mind, miraculous in his ability to throw rhythmic Karate chops with great speed and skill, but a skill foreign to the profound and subtle considerations of music. I found myself getting quickly bored by that kind of playing. On the other hand, I was strongly influenced by the melodic playing of

Gene Krupa and later of Max Roach. It was evident to me that these drummers were musicians, singing their lines melodically to themselves as they played, and the more I heard them play the more influenced I was toward creating a lyric form of drumming, melodic by suggestion (I say suggestion because drums usually have no specific pitches). Even *Three Brothers*—with only bongos, snare drum and two kettle drums as soloists—was melodic in conception. This idea was easier to implement in *Percussion Music*, since I had a “keyboard” of drums with sixteen separate pitches. Of course, my lyrical conception culminated in *Fantasy-Variations*, where melodic thinking took over completely.

In other words, to me, drums sing. Or they did, when the heads were animal skin. Plastic heads have had a profound effect on the nature of the drum, making it a different instrument, devoid of sensuality. A drum—a real drum—is perhaps the most sensual of musical instruments, which is perhaps why no one can resist

touching a drum when close to it. Drums talk. Natives of many countries have used drums to converse. I love drums and I hate what has happened to them. This may be one reason why, as plastic and cheap wood took over the percussion industry, I lost my interest in composing for drums—especially the RotoToms, which were invented at first to play my music.

However, having said all that, I just wrote a new piece for solo percussionist called *Te Tuma Te Papa*, which features drums, among other percussion instruments. I was inspired by the playing of Beverly Johnston, who premiered the work on May 8, 1996 at the Guelph Spring Festival. My newest work for percussion is a 35-minute piece for Nexus with flute soloist Marina Piccinini, called *A Flute in the Kingdom of Drums and Bells*.

So I guess my old love of writing for drums never dies. And somewhere deep inside, I harbor the dream that percussionists will one day arise *en masse*, destroy all plastic drumheads and return to natural skin on drums. PN

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