

Texture Over Melody: Creating Sonic Landscapes

By Austin Keck

For decades, the musical landscape has been dominated by melody and thematic writing, with composers like John Williams and Sergei Rachmaninoff crafting sweeping themes that have become iconic. However, there is a shift happening in the world of film composition, one that prioritizes the emotional and subconscious impact of music over direct thematic expression. This shift is not just confined to film scores but is beginning to influence other musical genres, including concert percussion.

As a composer who has ventured into the realm of film music, I have observed this transformation firsthand. Directors increasingly seek music that evokes a feeling rather than a specific, identifiable

melody. They are looking for compositions that affect the audience on a deeper, almost subliminal level. This approach opens up exciting possibilities for percussion, an area that is uniquely equipped to explore a wide range of textures and sounds.

In my PASIC session, I will explore how these principles can be applied to concert percussion to create something truly original. My aim is not to reinvent the wheel; our field's incredible educators and leaders have laid a solid foundation over the past century. Instead, I seek to innovate on existing ideas, infusing my compositions with my own voice and personality to offer a fresh experience to audiences.

The core of my presentation will focus on how I utilize texture, particular-

ly in mallet percussion instruments, to build soundscapes that are not reliant on traditional themes or melodies. These instruments, in my view, are often underutilized in this regard. We have fallen into the habit of recycling familiar styles and sounds, with only minor variations in harmony and instrumentation. My approach challenges this by focusing on *how* these instruments are used, rather than merely on *what* instruments are chosen.

In the session, I will delve into five key principles that guide my composition process:

1. **Rhythm:** The foundation of any composition, rhythm can create structure, drive momentum, or evoke a specific emotion.

2. **Timing/Offset:** Subtle shifts in timing can significantly alter the feel of a piece, creating tension or surprise while also creating unique overlapping textures.

3. **Vertical Layering:** By stacking different sounds and textures, I can build complex soundscapes that envelop the listener.

4. **Timbre:** The unique color of each instrument, as well as the implement you choose, is essential in crafting a distinctive sonic palette.

5. **Harmony:** While less central in my approach, harmony still plays a role in supporting the overall texture and mood. It is also the core "DNA" of my writing style.



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These components allow me to stay true to my identity as a composer while also pushing the boundaries of what percussion music can be. Through my studies and experiences, I've learned that innovation in music often stems from building on the ideas of past composers. For me, this means drawing inspiration from film music by such composers as Hans Zimmer, John Williams, and Ludwig Göransson, and finding ways to translate these influences into the world of percussion.

I believe that the future of music composition lies in contemporary, atmospheric, and textural writing. My journey also focuses on making music more accessible and inspiring the next generation. Music should be enjoyable and approachable for everyone, yet much of our current

repertoire is rooted in exclusivity and complexity. This can make it difficult for non-musician audiences to fully appreciate contemporary music, creating a divide between musicians and listeners, particularly in the U.S. By programming more diverse and inclusive pieces, we can help ensure that classical music remains vibrant and relevant for years to come.

In conclusion, my PASIC session will offer a glimpse into this new approach to percussion composition. By embracing texture and the unique qualities of our instruments, we can create music that resonates on a deeper, more intuitive level. I look forward to sharing these ideas and exploring texture with you in November!

Austin Keck is a Los Angeles-based percussionist and composer specializing in contemporary solo and chamber music. With a passion for innovation, Keck has performed worldwide, including at the IPEA International Percussion Competition and the Music for All Summer Symposium. His compositions, such as "Passage to an Uncharted World" and "Evanescence," have premiered at major events like PASIC. Keck has earned numerous accolades, including first prizes at the Great Plains International Marimba Competition and the Yamaha Young Performing Artist Competition. He holds a B.M. and is pursuing an M.M. in Contemporary Media and Film Composition at the Eastman School of Music. [PN](#)

EVENING CONCERTS

ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ AND BAD HOMBRE WITH THANA ALEXA, BIGYUKI & LEX SADLER

Four-time Grammy-award-winner Antonio Sánchez is among the most sought-after drummers on the international jazz scene. Following 21 years and nine albums with guitarist/composer Pat Metheny, he has also recorded and performed with, among others, Chick Corea, Gary Burton, Michael Brecker, and Charlie Haden. In 2014 Sánchez scored Alejandro Inarritu's *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, which won four Academy Awards and for which Sánchez was also a Golden Globe nominee. Sánchez has close to a dozen recordings as a leader and solo artist. Recent projects include *Three Times Three* with Brad Mehldau, John Scofield, Joe Lovano, Matt Brewer, John Patitucci, and Christian McBride; *Bad Hombre*, a sociopolitical journey through electronica and percussion; *Channels of Energy*, featuring the WDR Big Band with arrangements of Sánchez's compositions by Vince Mendoza; *Lines in the Sand*, Sánchez's protest against social injustice and bigotry as well as a tribute to every immigrant's journey; and most recently, *SHIFT (Bad Hombre Vol. II)*, where Sánchez plays every instrument on an album featuring Trent Reznor, Dave Mathews, Kimbra, Ana Tijoux, Meshell Ndegeocello and more.

Thana Alexa is a Grammy nominated artist and winner of the International Songwriting Competition. Her latest album, *ONA*, which earned her two Grammy nominations

including Best Jazz Vocal Album, was inspired by the cross generational and cross-cultural stories of the immigrant women in her family and evolved into an exploration of the experiences of contemporary women everywhere. Alexa, together with Grammy nominated artist Nicole Zuraitis and bassist Julia Adamy, formed Sonica, a trio that incorporates intricate vocal harmonies, electronics, vocal loops, percussion, electric bass, and keyboards over a blend of original music and modern arrangements. Alexa also created the project Founding Mothers of Jazz in conjunction with MusicTalks Concerts to honor the history of women in jazz. One of Alexa's ongoing collaborations has been with her husband, Antonio Sanchez. Alexa has recorded three albums with his band Migration and is a featured artist on Sanchez's release *SHIFT (Bad Hombre Vol. II)*.

Masayuki Hirano — better known as BIGYUKI — is a ground-breaking songwriter and virtuoso keyboard player who blends jazz, soul, hip-hop, and electronica to create a sound that's wholly his own. Alongside releasing his own inimitable music, BIGYUKI is highly sought-after as a performer and collaborator by the likes of A Tribe Called Quest, Kamasi Washington, and Lauryn Hill. In November 2017 he released his debut album, *Reaching For Chiron*, a collection of music that connects the dots between experimental jazz, soulful funk, and deep hip-hop beats.

Lex Sadler is the Musical Director, programmer, and bassist for Abir, has performed with Def Jam artist Arlissa, RocNation artist Nicole Bus, has toured extensively with R&B artist Jor-

dan Bratton, and is the house bass player for Producer Mondays at NuBlu — New York's premier music innovation session and open jam. As a programmer and producer, Lex has designed and produced Ableton backing tracks for Abir, Arlissa, and Nicole Bus.

SŌ PERCUSSION Evening Concert

Sō Percussion will present an evening of commissions and collaborations designed to highlight the breadth of work being made in the world of contemporary composition for unique and diverse percussion groups. The program will include: Olivier Tarpaga, "Fêfê," Jason Treuting, "Nine Numbers 5" (with Ji Hye Jung), Nathalie Joachim, "Note To Self," and Julius Eastman, "Stay On It" (with alumni of So Percussion Summer Institute, members of Bard Percussion, and other special guests).

For over 20 years, Sō Percussion has re-defined chamber music for the 21st century through an "exhilarating blend of precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam" (*The New Yorker*). They are celebrated by audiences and presenters for live performances featuring "telepathic powers of communication" (*The New York Times*) that bring to life the vibrant percussion repertoire; for an extravagant array of collaborations in classical music, pop, indie rock, contemporary dance, and theater; and for their work in education and community, creating opportunities and platforms for music and artists that explore the immense possibility of art in our time.