

Mitchell Beck: Original Music for Live Looped Percussion

By Javi Garza

Mitchell Beck is a well-known percussionist based in Seattle. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees in percussion performance from Indiana University. Since 2012, he has performed in solo, chamber, orchestral, and experimental settings, with a strong focus on live looping. He's passionate about electroacoustic composition, audio processing, and multimedia collaboration.

Javi Garza: Tell us a little bit about your background and how that's influenced your area of expertise.



Mitchell Beck

Mitchell Beck: In college I got really into electronic artists like Aphex Twin. I was curious; how do they make these sounds? That interest pushed me to explore electronic music and technology, especially in graduate school. The composition side of things was early on in my undergraduate. I kept writing contemporary classical pieces throughout school. Graduate school is where I got into the tech side of things. Some of my friends were into audio production, so I started exploring that world. By the end of graduate school, I was just starting to get deeper into it.

Garza: How much did you learn in a classroom setting versus going out to the real world on a gig and performing trial and error?

Beck: A lot of the aspects like composition or writing songs were supported through lessons and feedback. One of my percussion teachers helped a lot with composition alongside playing. And then I took composition lessons for a few years in school. So, there's a lot of crediting some of my decision-making as a composer to more of studying it in school with someone. But as far as technology is concerned, a lot of that was after I graduated. It's basically just YouTube University. There are many resources out there, so I did a lot of

self-learning. It was right in the pandemic area era too, so, I had a lot of time to just sit at home and learn about that stuff.

Garza: What can people expect from your PASIC session?

Beck: As the title indicates, it's heavily based on the use of live looping to create music. A lot of the looping is going to be percussion-based, but also voice looping and software synthesizers, so some is electronic. I will be looping percussion and applying live processing such as re-pitching sounds through MainStage. I will demonstrate how several tunes are constructed and performed in this way, so it should be fun. My session will include different styles,

Tribute video included in the web version of this article.



which should offer a little something for everyone there.

Garza: How did you choose this specific topic for PASIC?

Beck: It's what I'm most passionate about right now. I started using loop pedals in grad school. I was inspired by the band El Ten Eleven. The guitarist uses a double-neck guitar and loops, and the drummer brings in electronics. I thought, "What would that look like with percussion?" It became my favorite way to perform.

Garza: Walk us through your typical setup for a live loop percussion performance. Tell us about your go-to instruments, interfaces, and software.

Beck: The setup is no bigger than hauling my drumset somewhere. I use a lot of found-object instruments like bottles and pans, smaller percussion instruments like maracas, and a vibraphone, which is essential to the setup. I started incorporating a kick drum, too. In addition to the instrumental aspect, I do vocal performance. I run everything through a Scarlett interface and MainStage, then into a Boss RC-300 loop station, and out to a P.A.

The setup is always changing. I've homed in on the vibraphone, and my found objects are consistent these days, but I continue to switch other things out now and then. I also use this for singer-songwriter sets with smaller instruments like the ukulele. I like how flexible it is. I don't think I'll ever reach a point where I'm always using the same things.

Garza: When you're creating live looping, how do you approach your layering and your structure?

Beck: Mostly, I improvise. I pick a rhythm or groove and layer from there. I'll explore for 30 minutes, then condense it into a short piece. I rarely write full pieces in advance; the setup really encourages improvisation.

Garza: Would you say your music has a distinct sound?

Beck: For sure; I think some of that lends itself to the setup and instruments and how it changes depending on what I'm doing. I find myself being attracted to certain types of sounds, such as diverse types of found objects. And again, the vibraphone is very integrated as my melodic and harmonic percussion in-

strument. Those sounds create a cohesive sound world that I use a lot. In that way, I can reflect contemporary, progressive, and ensemble compositional elements. Perhaps because I did a good bit of Afro-Cuban playing in school, a lot of my music is in six or in three.

Garza: What kind of experience are you hoping to create for the audience at your session?

Beck: My session will be performance-driven. My goal is to demonstrate the musical capabilities of this type of technology integrated with percussion. I will stop occasionally to explain things, especially for people unfamiliar with looping. I hope everyone finds something to connect with. In terms of education, I am going to explain a lot of my process on a very fundamental level. I am hoping to cover a large variety of styles and sounds so that everyone can enjoy it.

Garza: Will people need experience with tech or looping to enjoy it?

Beck: Not at all. Through different genres and sounds, I can get into the experimental side of things deeply, so this session should have music that just about anyone in the audience can enjoy. I have always wanted to be experimental but still be accessible to a general audience with the way I write and perform. A constant philosophy for me is trying to write music that pushes boundaries in a way that anyone could enjoy or at least appreciate. The challenge is blending the experimental, pop, and rock influences in a way people can connect with each other.

Garza: What challenges came up while preparing this presentation?

Beck: We have talked about trying to create a session's worth of music that an audience member can relate to in some way. Staying accessible in some way and appealing to a wide audience is always a challenge. In a more technical sense, performing with the loop



pedals is very enjoyable, and it is obviously based on recording small snippets of sound that continue to record or play back. As a performer, the difficulty can be to get lost in adding layers to the loop and then, all of a sudden, it's been ten minutes on the same developing line. That can get really boring for an audience, especially when it's really redundant. In looping, you develop ideas, but you don't want the listeners to start wondering if it's going to go anywhere. Building form through this structure can be a little bit tricky sometimes. You have to develop ideas in a concise way to let the song truly evolve and continue forward like a piece of music should. I want to maintain an interesting form, without any idea overstaying its welcome. It feels like a puzzle. This is really one of my first deep dives into using MainStage. I've always been aware of it and used it a little bit, but this was a really good chance to build out a full session in a full concert file on MainStage.

Garza: Do you have any advice for percussionists hesitant about technology?

Beck: Start small. There is a ton of information online. I learned most of it from YouTube. Pick something that interests you and take it one step at a time.

Garza: What do you hope your session adds to the field?

Beck: I want to show that percussion can be central to more than just concert music. Technology opens new ways to compose and perform. I hope it expands people's ideas of what percussion can be.

LINKS

mitchellbeckmusic.com

Instagram: [@mitchellbeckmusic](https://www.instagram.com/mitchellbeckmusic)

VIDEO

<https://vimeo.com/1110363679?share=copy#t=0>

Javier Garza is a percussion educator and performer based in the Manhattan, Kansas area. Javier holds bachelor's degrees in Music Education and Percussion Performance from Texas Tech University and is currently pursuing a Master of Music degree in Percussion Performance at Kansas State University under Dr. Kurt Gartner. **PN**

ELECTRONIC / TECHNOLOGY

Kevin Zetina

Electronic/Technology

Clinic / Performance

Polyrhythms Through Pop Music:

Advanced Snare and Tape Solos

Set to Popular Music

This session explores the snare drum + tape pieces featured in my book, *Polyrhythms Through Pop Music*, accompanied by corresponding video projections for each piece. Published through Liquidrum, the book includes seven snare drum solos, each scored to a song in a distinct popular style, with genres ranging from mathcore to microtonal EDM to hip-hop. These solos present a fresh approach to phrase development, emphasizing tension and release through nested tuplets and polyrhythms that interact with the tape and video elements. While the snare writing can be complex, the electronics keep the rhythms grounded in simple meters, making the pulse and groove more accessible. The book includes exercises designed to target specific measures in each solo as well as broader rhythmic concepts found throughout the book.

Kevin Zetina is a performer, composer, and arranger specializing in contemporary music. He has collaborated with members of such renowned groups as Eighth Blackbird, Ensemble Signal, the JACK Quartet, and the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Kevin serves as Lecturer of Percussion at the Natalie L. Haslam College of Music at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he directs the UT Chamber Percussion Ensemble, teaches applied lessons, and fulfills a variety of other duties for the college. He also serves as percussion faculty at the Nief-Norf Summer Festival.

ELECTRONIC / TECHNOLOGY

James Mauck

Clinic / Performance

Forebeat: Improvisation through

Acoustic-Electronics

James will briefly explain the process behind his project Forebeat, how to incorporate electronics into your acoustic setup, and demonstrate how he utilizes electronics in his improvisations. James uses Forebeat as a means to explore the relationship between rhythm and texture, either balancing the two or treating one as accompaniment to the other. The goal of this session is to showcase the freedom and musicianship that can be developed when you introduce electronics and looping into your improvising practice and performance.

Since developing Forebeat, James Mauck has brought his project to clubs, festivals, farmers markets, and art exhibitions, and he often collaborates with the University of Illinois Dance Department as a composer and accompanist. James has brought Forebeat into higher academia by showcasing the musical possibilities of combining electronics with acoustic instruments as a professor of percussion at Illinois Wesleyan University and Eastern Illinois University. In January 2025, James released his sophomore album, *Stages of Growth*, a collection of prepared pieces and improvisations that explore the processes of overcoming substance dependency and self-improvement through introspection.

The Charles Brooks Collective

Virtual Clinic / Performance

A Modern Approach to Vibraphone Performance

In June 2024, *Percussive Notes* published Charles Brooks' article "A Modern Approach to Vibraphone Performance through Electronic Manipulation, Modulation and Amplification." He will demonstrate live performance practice discussed in the article and new techniques he continually discovers through live performance. The session will consist of performance examples, education on technological approach, and focus on explaining how he achieves a particular sound and for what musical purpose.