

Contemporary Problems and Solutions in the field of Modern Percussion Repertoire

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Abstract. Contemporary music presents a unique set of challenges to its performers. This is especially so for the modern percussionist. Aside from being both mentally and physically draining, the performer must convince an audience, that what he/she is presenting is “Art.” This study proceeds to analyze tactics used by top performers of the idiom. These tactics include: *Memorization of Music*, *Choreography and Movement*, and *Oral Presentation*. These will be demonstrated through audio, video, and live performance. Although this study is inspired by solo percussion repertoire, it is meant to be observed by all musicians as an aid in their performance.

In the modern school of percussion, there are many demands on the individuals who choose to study the craft. If a patron were to attend a senior percussion recital, the stage will bear resemblance to a modern sculpture gallery. The music being played will be as diverse as the instruments producing the sound and the performer must display multiple techniques learned over the course of study. There will be pieces for marimba, vibraphone, timpani, and of course the required “Avant Garde” piece that most refer to as “noise.” It can be a very stimulating experience for the concert goer if the performer executes beyond the page.

This study focuses on the preparation process of top percussionists, as well as investigating audience reaction to music. As music continues to evolve, it is crucial to remember who the music is being presented to. Understanding tactics that can aid the lay persons experience can benefit the art form.

Memorization

The fourth chapter of Steven Schick’s *The Percussionists Art “Same Bed, Different Dreams”* is appropriately titled *The Affliction of Memory*. It is true that many musicians have trouble with the process of memorization. If one takes the initiative, it can serve as a wonderful performance aid and also help the audience enjoy the performance. If the performer were to not

memorize a snare drum piece that would mean their music stand would have to be placed between the performer and the audience. This is a crucial mistake. Music stands are not attractive looking pieces of hardware. Snare drums on the other hand can be beautiful instruments that the audience would enjoy seeing. Continuing with the visual aspect, the audience will also find enjoyment seeing the sticks move during the piece. Some will say the solution is to set the music stand in its lowest position so that the drum and sticks are visible. This is true; however, there is still a barrier between the performer and audience. The performer’s eyes are tethered to the music giving the audience the impression they are not comfortable with the music.

This idea of the music stand creating a barrier between performer and audience can be transferred to any piece. Subconsciously, everyone wonders what the performer is looking at; this is a distraction from the music. In a University of California San Diego Lecture, Mr. Schick sat down to perform a piece only to get up and remove a music stand from the stageⁱ. Mr. Schick knew for that piece, having an unwanted piece of hardware would serve as nothing more than a distraction.

Choreography and Movement

Memorization has a direct correlation to choreography. Performers will move their bodies more naturally when they are comfortable with a piece and not tethered to a music stand. When playing the trombone or clarinet, one does not need to concern themselves with carefully planned movements. Instead, they must think about posture and looking comfortable. When preparing a multiple percussion solo, the actual choreography can be the most difficult part. The performer can spend months learning and memorizing the music, figuring out the choreography, and still not look comfortable playing the piece. An audience can catch this, so the performer must figure out what they need to do to gain

that extra edge. In a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Zyklus*, Mr. Schick appears to be dancing amid the array of percussion instruments. Every movement leads somewhere. This comes from years of performances and practice with the piece. Additionally, Mr. Schick arranges his setup in a manner that is comfortable for him to reside but also allows the audience to see his movements.

Oral Presentation

It is very common for the young percussionist to prepare the fore-mentioned "Avant Garde" piece and simply perform it to an audience with very little explanation. There is nothing more taxing on the average patrons head than the aging questions "What is the?" or "When will this end?" When performing an esoteric piece of art, the audience needs something to grasp onto, to listen for and think about. In the fore-mentioned performance of *Zyklus*, Mr. Schick tells the audience how long the piece normally lasts, showed them the music, and informed them on the way he chose to perform itⁱⁱ. Sitting down with the audience and explaining the composer's intentions can be very nice for an audience.

In a video interview, Oberlin Conservatory instructor Timothy Weiss described contemporary music as something that does not always need to be understood. "I would encourage an audience to take it

in fully without a need to understand it."ⁱⁱⁱ This can be a difficult notion to grasp at first. Once the audience is comfortable, they will start to hear melodies, shapes, and colors in the piece.

The ideas mentioned above are still in hypothesis form since data is still being collected. The most effective way of judging audience reaction and acknowledgement to these tactics is in survey form. One experiment being done is to have a group surveyed after performances. Each performance treats the audience differently. For instance, one performance is given to an audience that is not given any information about the piece. At the conclusion of the performance, the groups reaction is surveyed. Every other performance gives the audience a different level of information.

Another experiment is to have an audience listen to a piece without seeing it performed. Next, a different group is subjected to the same performance only with video and audio. Each group is surveyed concluding the session. This will prove the theory that music is as visual as it is audible.

Since data is still being collected, this study is inconclusive. The projects goal is to find credible evidence that all of these tactics are linked and are necessary for use in contemporary art music.

ⁱ YouTube, "On the Bridge: The Beginnings of Contemporary Percussion Music with Steven Schick." 2012, accessed February 28, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lkAOZC1w3g>

ⁱⁱ YouTube, "On the Bridge: The Beginnings of Contemporary Percussion Music with Steven Schick." 2012, accessed February 28, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lkAOZC1w3g>

ⁱⁱⁱ YouTube, "Oberlin Faculty Profile: Tim Weiss." 2009, accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7za4BCNkseY>