

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

### Heart, Body And Soul, All On Percussion

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#### Adesso Percussion Ensemble

By Thomas Goss

It takes a special sort of listener to attend a percussion ensemble concert. A taste for eclecticism helps, but also a penchant for pulse. These two qualities and a pair of cast iron ears were all that were needed to enjoy every second of Adesso's return to Old First Church on Friday.

The hall was a little too friendly to the concussive patter and rumble of works like Steve Reich's *Music for Pieces of Wood* and director Rick Kvistad's *Concerto for Timpani*. The warm resonance tended to amplify the shock waves to an uncomfortable intensity while mixing the lines of rhythm confusingly. Yet the crowd seemed comfortable, and comfortably large for a new music concert, contributing in their scattered mass not only presence and enthusiastic support to the performers, but also an acoustical buffer to some of the loud overtones.

The heart of the program was shared by two works, Michael Gandolfi's *Grooved Surfaces* and John Cage's *Second Construction for Percussion*. The Cage, first played in the 1940s and cited as Kvistad's second-favorite percussion piece, still sounds fresh. In keeping with the rest of the program, it bore a strong resemblance to gamelan, from the tuning of the row of sleigh bells to the sudden roars and episodes of plashing gongs. Yet in place of ceremonious poise we got rambunctious fun: this precisely notated jam session played as if written for the sheer experience of playing it. And those who did, did well, in particular Luanne Warner, whose handling of prepared piano brought out the sense of suspense in the motivic repetition so integral to Cage's vision.

As for Gandolfi's opus *Frame Shifting*, from the standpoint of the Ghanaian music that inspired its rhythms, the first movement represented a fascinating blend of thematic interaction and pulse. But given the tonality of the instruments that executed these interweavings, the piece seemed thematically terse: a skipping, almost "Heart and Soul" punch underlining the text without much room for development.

*Pitching Rotation* fared somewhat better as follow-up. Its pentatonic ground-bass ascensions lifted the melodic texture through constant permutations of pitch and emotional intensity, creating an edge of breathless expectation to the very last bars. As finale, *Flipside* was all unbridled fun and grooving gallop, the cross rhythms of 3 against 4 fighting merrily for the soul of a basic but elusive riff. The musicians broke into smiles as they oomphed their way through the score. Indeed, the piece was a nonstop musical grin.

Christopher Rouse's *Bonham* needed no explanation. Arrayed across the stage were all nine percussionists, each playing something timpanic, led by the cautious

yet precise baton of conductor Anne Krinitsky. A paean to the departed rock god of Led Zeppelin fame, the piece validated the respect that Rouse's pupils at the Eastman School of Music, such as Gareth Farr, hold for him. Naturally, riffs and breaks from old Zep songs were in evidence, although somewhat intellectualized. The effect was suitably offensive to the ear but brilliant to the mind. Yet I couldn't help noticing how many percussionists it took to recapture the excitement of one man's spontaneity and musicianship.

If Cage and Gandolfi dished up heart, and Rouse body, David Meckler provided the soul with *Bliss*, an instrumental transformation of the "Accomplishment" aria from his *Apollo 14: A Space Opera* and an oasis of serenity between the Cage and the Rouse. The percussion was restricted to a simple back-and-forth ostinato of two intervals of a seventh, while a solo cello emoted deeply felt, cautiously unveiled conviction. Part love song, part prayer, it soothed while stirring, underlining the expressive abilities of cellist Victoria Ehrlich.

In the rendering of Kvistad's Concerto, a sparse "orchestra" of piano, flute, clarinet, cello, and two percussionists forced the timpani obbligato into a sonically dominant position. Soloist John Burgardt's playing was on-the-spot and intuitive throughout, his stickwork releasing a panoply of colors and overtones from the quintet of kettles. The volume of the piece, which varied from medium loud to relentless, missed opportunities to show the subtlety and tension in softly played heads. Nevertheless, the overpowered arrangement did not lessen my desire to hear an orchestra perform the work. Its structure was satisfying, if a bit disjointed. It partnered soloist and corps with episodes, themes, and textures that bespoke the composer's many influences from both the music of the Far East and the 20th century conceptual aesthetic.

Grooving, in the sense both of sharing a piece of music and sharing the intellectual presence of another performer, is perhaps most potent among percussionists, as the first three pieces demonstrated. Burgardt and Kvistad brushed the dust off a 17th century duo by Andre and Jacques Philidor, the *March for Two Pairs of Kettle Drums*. The challenge of picking a melody out of the rumble was coupled with the concussive penetration of shock waves in this brief opener. Kvistad's *Gending Bali* eschewed some of the extreme postures of gamelan for a catchy groove that cleverly emphasized offbeats of fours into threes over the steady rippling pulse of hand drums and the incessant thump of a tiny gong hit square on the nose by a kick pedal.

Steve Reich's quintet, *Music for Pieces of Wood*, was exceptional for what it didn't say more than for what it did. In the wide, enveloping acoustic space, this intricate work came off like a cross between an all-night campus quad jam and a legion of shoemaker's elves--that is, if you were trying to make sense of it. Yet the internal logic of the overlapping patterns beckoned to no internal images, awaking rather the innate response of the tickling of internal clockworks.

(Thomas Goss is a composer whose works have recently been performed by the Onyx String Quartet, Citywinds and the Marin Symphony, and has worked internationally as a vocal artist, music journalist and mentor of young composers.)

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