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Book Review: The Cambridge Companion to Percussion

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Abstract

Review of *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, Russell Hartenberger (Ed.), Cornwall: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Book Review: The Cambridge Companion to Percussion

Russell Hartenberger (Ed.)

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Developments in percussion performance practices, pedagogy, and industry are recognised as some of the major advancements to have taken place in western art music in the last century. Taking the composition dates of landmark percussion ensemble works *Ritmicas No. 5* and *No. 6* by Amadeo Roldán (1930) and *Ionisation* by Edgard Varèse (1929-31) as a point of departure, there are now nine decades of creative activity in this field. Although ‘the relatively short history of contemporary percussion music has forced percussionists to include research in their daily routines, in order to invent and master new instruments, and to accelerate their technical development’ (Huang, 2015), scholarly literature focussed on this creative research have not emerged in parallel. To date, publications focussed on percussion have been largely been confined to journal articles and dissertations. *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion* is one of a handful of recent book publications including *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams* (Schick 2006) and *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of the Progressive Artist* (Lewis & Aguilar 2014) that begin to address a gap in the literature, and is a must-have for academic and personal libraries internationally. Russell Hartenberger, editor and author of two chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, states that he hopes that this collection of essays is ‘representative of the growing significance of percussion in Western music’ (p. 3), which this volume achieves.

The Cambridge Companion to Percussion offers twenty-one essays that address a variety of percussive concerns, organised into seven chapters titled as follows: Orchestral percussion, The development of percussion instruments, Percussion in performance, Composing music for percussion instruments, Drum sets and drumming, World Percussion, and Percussion and rhythm. Commencing with an essay on historic timpani traditions, the range of topics examined spans centuries of percussion practices, however an emphasis is placed on examining developments in the twentieth century including the roots of electronic percussion, the rise of the marimba in western art music, the impact of percussion instrument design and building on performance, conducting, acoustics and the influence of world music traditions on the contemporary percussionist.

The twenty practitioner-scholars whose essays are included in this volume are amongst the world's leaders in their respective specialisation who have had significant influence within the field, and their essays offer readers an 'insider' perspective. For example, essays by Steve Reich, Steven Schick, Jason Treuting and Garry Kvistad focus on each authors' experience and influences, and serve to show readers potential pathways for innovation by example. Others draw attention to smaller percussive sub-disciplines, such as Aiyun Huang's chapter 'Percussion theatre: the drama of performance', which is one of the only published writings on this topic. Some essays go further, almost sounding a call to action for readers. In 'Finding a Voice', Bob Becker explores the role of the composer and the role of the percussionist-composer in the creation of the existing body of percussion repertoire, observing the emergence of two compositional streams as the first generations of contemporary percussionists sought to fill gaps in the repertoire. In encouraging the creation of meaningful new works and discussing contributions to the repertoire by percussionists-composers, he states that 'unfortunately, an abundance of percussive skill does not ensure the ability to approach the rigors of creating a compositional voice of any originality or significance' (p.164). This is one of many statements that points to a theme running throughout the book; the desire to see percussion continue to develop with the pioneering spirit of the earliest practitioners. This is expressed by Adam Sliwinski as a wish to 'rip the seams off our limited perception of what truly new music might sound like' (p.114). Sliwinski's essay 'Lost and Found: percussion chamber music and the modern age' is a well-researched exploration of the percussion ensemble, using John Cage's *Third Construction* as a case study.

The combination of heretofore undocumented first-hand experiences, insightful observations of trends in the field and dissection of key issues facing new generations of percussionists makes this a notable collection of essays. Further, the variety of research methods used by the authors showcases an effective range of approaches to scholarly research in percussion. Autoethnography and historical musicology is presented alongside interviews and reflective writing. The inclusion of author biographies, a detailed index and select bibliography of suggested texts further increase the benefit of this publication for students, professionals, musicologists and industry in the percussive arts.

The one minor flaw in this edited collection is the dominance of the North American perspective. On one hand this is understandable; as recent book publications and conferences demonstrate, North American practitioner-scholars are championing the advancement of scholarly activity in parallel with the advancement of performance activity. Colin Currie's chapter 'Taking centre stage; percussionist as soloist', is a welcome inclusion that discusses the evolution of percussion concerti as experienced by this London-based percussionist. This book would have been enhanced with inclusion of writings by authors based in other

centres of percussion activity such as France, Switzerland, Germany, Japan and Australia. It must be stated that this does not detract from the value of the chapters. Rather, this observation should encourage the addition of other voices to future percussion publications.

The Cambridge Companion to Percussion is an ambitious undertaking. A complete examination of percussion in the twenty-first century is challenging, as it draws on influences from numerous art forms, global traditions and technologies and is in a constant state of evolution. As these essays demonstrate, a twenty-first century artist identifying as a percussionist could be an artist whose practice revolves around electronics, or an artist who primarily performs concerti with symphony orchestras, or an artist whose practice stems equally from a fusion of western art music and the Carnatic music of South India. Although the goal of this book is not simply to articulate ‘what percussion is’ selecting topics to include here would have brought this question to light. It has been suggested by various practitioners that percussion music is on a path to emerge as a distinctive art form in its own right; a discipline connected with contemporary western art music but with its own unique performance practices and identifying features (Devenish, 2015). How far percussion might be from reaching this status is unknown, but the front matter of this book suggests it may be closer than one might think. The dozens of Cambridge Companions to Music are grouped under one of three categories: Topics, Composers, or Instruments. The Topics category comprises musical genres including electronic music, French music or hip hop; the Composers category is self-explanatory. It would be reasonable to assume that this book might fall under the Instruments category, along with the Companions to Brass Instruments, Guitar or Singing, however *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion* is listed under Topics. Whether made by editor or publisher, this small detail speaks volumes about the place of percussion in western art music in the twenty-first century.

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