

PERISHABLE STRUCTURES
Music for Speaking Percussionist

Bonnie Whiting Album Launch

Sunday, October 4, 2020
3:00 pm, livestream from Brechemin Auditorium

UW MUSIC
2020-21 SEASON

PROGRAM

. . . perishable structures that would be social events (2010) _____ Bonnie Whiting

IV. Varèse

text: Writings and letters of Edgard Varèse

To the Earth (1985) _____ Frederic Rzewski

text: Homeric Hymn, 500 BCE

Your Thoughts While Listening (2014) _____ Richard Logan-Greene

Toucher (1973) _____ Vinko Globokar

text: Bertolt Brecht, Life of Galileo

Exercise for Hands Right, Left and Deserted Mouth: _____ Susan Parenti

No. 4, Speaking Percussionist and Ditties (1987)

text: Parenti, and excerpts from American patriotic and popular songs

PROGRAM NOTES

Speaking percussionist music has always seemed natural to me, in part because our discipline is inclusive, tied not only to the traditions of experimental music and theater, but also to narrative and storytelling. We are asked to cue the birdsong in Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, play the siren in Varèse's orchestrations, splash in Tan Dun's *Water Music* and construct the next fantastical instrument out of everyday objects. The surface simplicity—someone striking something and vocalizing simultaneously: a creative re-imagining of seemingly familiar everyday tasks—gives this music strength and immediacy. Percussionists deal

with sonic inclusivity on a professional level: finding audible ‘readymades’ throughout our everyday environments.

In these pieces, I see myself as a storyteller rather than an actor. This distinction allows me to better remain myself when I play these works. When I tell these (albeit abstracted) stories, I become a conduit for the narrative. As a storyteller, I feel closer to the role of director or dramaturge, guiding an audience while preserving the self in performance.

The works in this particular collection, found on New Focus Recordings’ August 2020 release FCR 259, *Perishable Structures*, exemplify ways in which speaking percussionist music encompasses an individual human voice ranging from abstracted utterances to traditional narrative, punctuated with all of the touch of the percussive sound world. One can also hear the inverse: a kind of timbre and touch and resonance music extended by a single human voice that amplifies and transforms the familiar through a lens of ritualistic performance. In particular, I’ve followed the thread of translation from instruments to voice.

My composition . . . *perishable structures that would be social events: IV. Varèse (2010)* integrates the writings and personal letters of Edgard Varèse with snare drum playing that is inspired by his percussion writing in *Ionisation*, *Intégrales*, and *Amériques*. Varèse was obsessed with the idea of music as a language that encompassed “intelligent sounds,” and at moments the drums intentionally speak this language or cover the words. When one considers this music within the context of a uniquely-generated series of emotionally-charged abstracted utterances, it is useful to understand language as a connotative rather than denotative force. This music is not simply reflective of speech patterns: it is a reflection on speech patterns.

~~Today with the technical means that exist and are easily adaptable, the differentiation of the various masses and different planes as these beams of sound, could be made discernible to the listener by means of certain acoustical arrangements. Moreover, such an acoustical arrangement would permit the delimitation of what I call “Zones of Intensities.” These zones would be differentiated by various timbres or colors and different loudnesses. . . . Moreover, the new musical apparatus I envisage, able to emit sounds of any number of frequencies, will extend the limits of the lowest and highest registers, hence new organizations of the vertical resultants: chords, their arrangements, their spacings, that is, their oxygenation. Not only will the harmonic possibilities of the overtones be revealed in all their splendor but the use of certain interferences created by the partials will represent an appreciable contribution. An entirely new~~

magic of sound! ~~Being master of the greatest range of sensations and emotions, from the most physical reactions to the most abstract conceptions,~~ organized sound may be called on to intervene at the point where the spoken word has reached the limit of its efficacy, and the precision of the image only tends to limit the flight of the imagination. Think ~~of the thousands who flock to the Boulder Dam and are moved. It speaks of a new language. In music we have hardly begun to make use of laboratory discoveries.~~ We have not yet revealed to people the new language of their own day. *Quand on me demande ma nationalité, je me dis planétaire, mais quand je me suis dis planétaire, et que je songe à toutes les galaxies environnant, je me trouve bougrement provincial.* “The best definition of music is the corporealization of the intelligence that is in sound.” Our new medium [electronics] ~~has brought to composers almost endless possibilities of expression. For instance, I have always felt the need of a kind of continuous flowing curve that instruments could not give me. “jumping like a bird from branch to branch.” I found that it had the same smooth flow as when played normally, scarcely altered at all.~~

(Sources: 1936 lecture at the Mary Austin House in Santa Fe, 1940 article “Organised Sound for the Film” in *The Commonwealth*, 1962 lecture at Yale University, and selections from Fernand Ouellette’s biography *Edgard Varèse*.)

Richard Logan-Greene’s *Your Thoughts While Listening* (2014) explores aural imitation. This realization is a transcription and augmentation of an audible electronic score, rather than a notated one. This is the only offering here that doesn’t involve the voice, but I have always understood it as a piece that has been translated to the language of percussion instruments.

Both Globokar’s *Toucher* (1973) and Susan Parenti’s *Exercise 4 for Hands Right, Left and Deserted Mouth: Speaking Percussionist and Ditties* (1987) explore percussive sound as an imitation of and a stand in for the human voice. While the latter was conceived as a work for a percussionist and an actor (usually Parenti herself), she has consented to performances by a single percussionist. Eugene Novotney gave the first solo speaking percussionist performances in the 1990s. The piece begins as a one-sided telephone conversation; the percussionist speaks with an imaginary correspondent who we hear only through the instruments. It devolves quickly into misheard turns of phrase that can be understood several ways, bombastic vocal and percussive utterances, threats, pleas, and satirized versions of popular and patriotic songs. While the piece is more than 30 years old, it’s quite timely in this age of “alternative facts.” In the

end, it examines what we try to do as we communicate through language, exploring what is lost and what might be beneath the surface of our words.

Globokar's text in *Toucher* is taken from a French translation of Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo* (1938), and it includes stage directions and denotations of character. The performer must embody thirteen different characters throughout the work, and also speak aloud all of the given stage directions. The musical score consists of a non-traditional notation that connects the percussion instruments to the voice in a strict one-to-one relationship, relying on rhythmic speech patterns alone to advance the music in time. To help solidify the translation of instruments to voice for listeners, Globokar creates a sort of introductory solfège for different syllables as the opening of the piece.

While the narrative of the original Brecht play does in fact treat the entire life of Galileo chronologically, *Toucher* deals with only fragments of that life-story. Furthermore, these fragments are presented out of order. While narrative, character, and even storytelling function as vehicles, the music itself commands attention above and beyond words. The work is divided into six scenes (excerpts from the Brecht), separated by hyper-notated, polyrhythmic percussion-only interludes. We get full voice only in the outer scenes. Scenes 2 and 5 are performed at half-voice (the instruments begin to speak for the percussionist.) In the innermost scenes, the instruments become the percussionist's only language. The stage directions and the names of the people speaking are always spoken.

There's a meaningful connection between Brecht's *Lehrstück* works (experimental "learning-play") of the 20's and 30's, and Globokar's evening-length *Laboratorium* of the 70's and 80's. Scored for ten instrumentalists in various combinations (including percussionist Jean-Pierre Drouet, for whom *Toucher* was written), Globokar considered the piece to be a sort of experimental "work diary" compiling techniques in improvisation and extended techniques in acoustic and electroacoustic performance settings. In this spirit, rather than giving you a word-by-word translation (from German, to French, to percussive soundscape, to English) of these six excerpted scenes, I playfully offer a few of Brecht's *Limericks* which introduce the scenes from the American version of *Life of Galileo* (1945/7):

In the year sixteen hundred and nine
Science's light began to shine
Galileo set out to prove
The sun is still; it's the earth that moves

*

June twenty second, sixteen thirty three
A momentous day for you and me
Of all Inquisition days, that was the one
An age of reason could have begun

*

From sixteen thirty seven on
His great work was discoursed upon
That all should now guard science's light
Kindle it, and use it right
Lest it be a flame to fall
Downward to consume us all

*

To close, I have one new limerick, composed for our time by poet Don Bogen:

In twenty twenty, now we find
Galileo's left behind,
Scientific truth dismissed
At the bidding of the rich.
The age of reason's overruled--
Make way for the age of fools!

-Bonnie Whiting

Biography

Bonnie Whiting performs, commissions, and composes new experimental music for percussion. She seeks out projects involving non-traditional notation, interdisciplinary performance, improvisation, and the speaking percussionist. She lives and works in Seattle, WA, where she is Chair of Percussion Studies and an Assistant Professor at the University of Washington School of Music.

Her debut solo album, featuring an original solo-simultaneous realization of John Cage's *45' for a speaker* and *27'10.554" for a percussionist*, was released by Mode Records in April of 2017. Her second album, [Perishable Structures](#), launched in 2020 and places works for speaking percussionist within a context of storytelling. 2021 brings the premiere of *Through the Eyes(s)*: an extractable cycle of nine pieces for speaking/singing percussionist collaboratively developed with composer Eliza Brown and nine incarcerated women, and the world premiere of a new percussion concerto by Huck Hodge with the Seattle Modern Orchestra.

Recent projects include performances as a percussionist and vocalist with the Harry Partch Ensemble on the composer's original instrumentarium, and a commission from the Indiana State Museum's *Sonic Expeditions* series for her piece *Control/Resist* (2017): a site-specific work for percussion, field recordings, and electronics. Whiting has an ongoing relationship as a soloist with the National Orchestra of Turkmenistan via the U.S. Embassy Cultural Affairs Office, playing concerti in Ashgabat in 2017 and 2018. She collaborates frequently with percussionist Jennifer Torrence, giving concerts of new experimental work for speaking percussionists throughout Norway and the US, and with multimedia artist Afroditi Psarra. Their album *<null abc>* was released on the Zero Moon label in 2018, and their current project with designer Audrey Desjardins on transcoding data from IoT devices as performance is a recipient of a 2019/20 Mellon Creative Fellowship, and was explored in a workshop at the 2020 Transmediale Festival in Berlin. It can be experienced as interactive net art at voicesandvoids.net.

Whiting has presented solo and small ensemble shows at The Stone in New York, the Brackish Series in Brooklyn, The Lilypad in Boston, The New York City Electroacoustic Music Festival, at Hallwalls in Buffalo, the Tiny Park Gallery in Austin, The Wulf in LA, the Carl Solway Gallery in Cincinnati, The Grove Haus in Indianapolis, on the Wayward Music Series in Seattle, on tour throughout New Zealand, and at colleges and universities around the country. Whiting has collaborated with many of today's leading new music groups, including red fish blue fish percussion group, (George Crumb's *Winds of Destiny* directed by Peter Sellars and featuring soprano Dawn Upshaw for the Ojai Festival), eighth blackbird (the "Tune-in" festival at the Park Avenue Armory), the International Contemporary Ensemble (on-stage featured percussionist/mover in Andriessen's epic *Die Materie* at the Park Avenue Armory, and the American premiere of James Dillon's *Nine Rivers* at Miller Theatre), Bang on a Can (Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* for the LA Philharmonic's Green Umbrella Series) and Ensemble Dal Niente (the Fromm Concerts at Harvard.)

Many thanks to:

The composers:

Frederic: for hours of conversation, your inspiring performances, and your bluntly honest mentorship at various Music X festivals in Cincinnati, and for our lively email conversations over the years.

Susan: for making a long drive to hear me perform this version of your piece for the first time, for engaging in skype coachings, and for your patience and flexibility as I grappled with this “old” piece of yours while you tirelessly work toward new ways of engaging art and society.

Richard: for making me such a personal, surprising, and intricate score, and for the friendship our families have enjoyed across years and distance.

Mr. Globokar: For making *Toucher* - the first piece of speaking percussionist music - something that endures so well and has taught me so much, and for your thoughtful comments and encouragement during our work together at the 2014 Livewire Festival in Baltimore.

My family:

David Nikki Crouse: for your many ideas and creative contributions throughout our life together, and for all your encouragement. Thanks for running the camera today so I could perform unmasked!

Mom and Dad: for your unwavering support, and the immeasurable privileges you have given me.

My teachers and mentors, who heard many hours of the earliest drafts of these performances:

Michael Rosen, Steven Schick, Robyn Schulkowsky, and especially Allen Otte.

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You inspire me to keep working.

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