

# "The Cambridge Companion to Percussion," edited by Russell Hartenberger

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**Book Review: Hartenberger, Russell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*. Cambridge Companions to Music. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-107-09345-4.**

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Until recently, the definition of *percussion* included instruments whose sound is produced by means of striking, plucking, scraping, or shaking either a membrane or some other hard or resistant material; percussion instruments are typically classified as either membranophones or idiophones in the Sachs-Hornbostel system, and both classes include pitched as well as unpitched instruments. More recently, as the present volume makes clear, the concept of *percussion* has come to include electronic means of producing percussion-like effects such as rhythm machines, digitally sampled drum computers, and stand-alone percussion controllers. While not technically percussion instruments in the traditional sense (their sounds are not produced by striking, plucking, scraping, or shaking anything), these instruments are essential components of the early twenty-first-century percussionist's world – as are, by the same reasoning, body percussion and vocal percussion.

That world, then, more than the traditional definition of *percussion*, is the subject of Russel Hartenberger's *Cambridge Companion to Percussion*. The volume is organized into seven broad sections representing different facets of the modern percussionist's world: Part One (chapters one and two) deals with orchestral percussion; Part Two (chapters three-six), with "the development of percussion instruments"; Part Three (chapters seven-ten), with "percussion in performance"; Part Four (chapters eleven-thirteen), with composing music for percussion instruments; Part Five (chapters fourteen-sixteen), Part Six (chapters seventeen-nineteen), with world percussion; and part Seven (chapters twenty and twenty-one), with percussion and rhythm from biological and evolutionary perspectives. The text proper is followed by a select bibliography (pp. 296-300) of English language resources intended to complement (and overlap with) the items in most of the chapters' plentiful endnotes. The volume's editor authored two essays: "Timpani Tradition and Beyond" (ch. one) and "Speaking of Rhythm" (ch. seventeen, included in the "World Percussion" unit), as well as the Introduction.

For the historically inclined readership of this journal, Part One ("Orchestral Percussion") is probably the most obviously relevant portion of the book. Russell Hartenberger's chapter on "timpani traditions and beyond" gives a historical overview of



the emergence of the orchestral timpanist and of various schools of timpani performance, beginning with Ernst Pfundt (1806-1871; timpanist of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig in the age of Mendelssohn and Schumann) and moving through the development of different approaches to the technique and repertoire of the timpani at the hands of Alfred Friese and Saul Goodman, Oscar Schwar and Cloyd Duff, George Lawrence Stone, William Street, and Fred Hinger. While quite informative about the twentieth century's schools of timpani performance and their roots in the practices of nineteenth-century German orchestras, this chapter anachronistically views the timpanist in concerted, operatic, and church music as essentially an invention of nineteenth-century orchestras (for example: "the first orchestral timpanists had no historical precedent for their playing techniques; the interpretation of their parts was based on their innate musicality combined with their imagination," [7]). While it is true that the relative peace and economic stability of the Restoration encouraged a proliferation of concert orchestras and these produced some of the early great names of the timpani's history, to say that Pfundt and his contemporaries had no historical precedents for their techniques is not even remotely true – in fact, a lengthy and distinguished repertoire extending backwards through Beethoven, Mozart (especially K. 188/240*b* for four timpani, 1773), J.S. Bach and especially his contemporary Christoph Graupner (1683-1760), all the way back to Johann Philipp Krieger (1649-1725) demonstrates that those composers had timpanists at hand whom they trusted, to put it bluntly, not to massacre their music. Their techniques were geared toward use in the church and the theater, certainly – but, despite that difference in venue, they provided a firm foundation for the techniques of Pfundt and his contemporaries. Indeed, the chapter's focus on concert orchestras and complete neglect of the repertoires, performers, and performance issues of church music and opera is deeply misleading, since the latter venues, being more reliably funded and capable of paying instrumentalists, were home to some of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century's most important innovations in terms of writing for instruments.

This chapter also treats the timpani techniques employed in realizing the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concerted (and operatic) repertoire exclusively from the perspective of performers using the larger drums developed for the larger concert halls (and different acoustics) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – thereby overlooking the fact that the techniques that (for example) Mendelssohn and Schumann, as well as countless earlier composers of now-canonical orchestral and operatic works (Beethoven and Schubert come readily to mind), expected to be used in realizing their musical wishes were often quite different than those of the later performers discussed in this chapter. To cite one obvious example: in 1849 Pfundt published a short, thirty-nine-page manual on timpani titled *Die Pauken: Eine Anleitung, dieses Instrument zu erlernen* (The Timpani: An Introduction to Learning This Instrument [Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel]); a second, completely reset version of the same treatise was published by the same press in 1880, anonymously updated and expanded. Despite significant changes in the 1880 edition, it, like Pfundt's 1849 version, admits (at lower dynamic levels up to *mezzo-forte*) the option of the double-stroke or bounced rolls still commonly used on snare drum (p. 7 of 1849 edition; p. 5 of 1880 edition) – anathema to

modern timpani technique. Hartenberger neither cites nor mentions either edition of Pfundt's manual – nor, for that matter, does he mention or draw on the *Méthode complète et raisonnée de timbales* published in 1840 by the French composer and polymath Jean-Georges Kastner (1810-67), a friend of Berlioz. (Incidentally, Berlioz is never mentioned in this book despite his innovations in percussion scoring.)

Of course, not all percussionists are interested in these historical sources or necessarily able to use them. Since few performers today are, however, willing to say outright that a composer's tastes and assumptions about sound and style are irrelevant to music-making, it would be helpful for a chapter on orchestral timpani playing such as this to inform modern performers of the options that historically informed performance practices make available when these differ from modern assumptions and tastes.

Chapters two through six all center in one way or another on the modern percussionist's musical landscape and the role of the science of sound therein. Thus, in chapter two, William L. Cahn discusses issues including the need for percussionists to embrace new techniques, styles, and technologies; preparation for orchestral auditions; planning for and dealing with the situation of smaller and community-based orchestras; networking; and the necessity of engaging in school and community educational programs to compensate for the fact that, in North America, few collegiate music majors today have much usable substantive familiarity with the orchestral repertoire that forms the livelihood of the orchestral percussionist. William Moersch, in chapter three, discusses the *de facto* revolution in marimba technique, mallets, instruments, and repertoire that has unfolded in recent decades, while, in chapter four ("Instrumental Ingredients"), Garry Kvistad discusses modern percussion instruments primarily from the perspectives of acoustics and technologies of construction. In chapter five (pp. 67-81), Rick Mattingly discusses the percussion industry from a manufacturer's and consumer's/practitioner's perspective, while, in chapter six (pp. 82-94), Thomas Brett provides a short but fascinating history of electronic percussion from Léon Theremin's "Rhythmicon" produced for Henry Cowell in 1931 to controllers and software developed in the last twenty years – as well as the influences these developments have exerted on performance practices and how composers and performers think about musical time.

The seven chapters in Parts Three and Four collectively deal with modern percussion repertoires from the perspective of performers and composers, respectively. Thus, Adam Sliwinski's essay on modern percussion chamber music (ch. seven) naturally overlaps with Colin Currie's essay on the percussionist at center stage in both solo and chamber works of the same period (Ch. eight), both focusing on repertoires and practical issues when the percussionist is the featured figure in the musical experience rather than a member of a large ensemble. This perspective is then further re-directed by Aiyun Huang and Steven Schick in chapters nine and ten. These contributions focus on the theatrical dimension of percussion performance and the increasingly frequent situation of percussionists who are called upon to lead an ensemble (percussion or not) from the podium. The leadership requirements of the latter are subsequently taken up in chapters

fourteen through sixteen, in which Peter Erskine, Steven F. Pond, and Jeff Packman discuss issues of style and technology as they pertain to drum sets.

Chapters eleven-thirteen adopt a composer's perspective on writing for percussion: in chapter eleven, Bob Becker discusses how to find an individual voice as "explorer and adventurer" in writing music for percussion that will "create an account of [the composer's] imagination in a comprehensible form" (162); in chapter twelve, Jason Treuting focuses on ways that composers can conceptualize the instruments and music in a "flexible" fashion that will empower the performing percussionist to make music more effectively; and, in chapter thirteen, based on interviews with the editor and including further material added for this volume, Steve Reich offers thought-provoking perspectives on how his own experiences with percussion, thinking about rhythm, and several individual works have been influenced by African, Balinese, and Indian musics as well as speech rhythm. Reich's chapter in turn interfaces conceptually with the thoughts on percussion and rhythm contained in chapters seventeen, twenty, and twenty-one (by Russell Hartenberger, Michael Schutz, and John R. Iversen), as well as with the more focused essays on gamelan ensembles and African influences on Western percussion in the essays by Michael B. Balan and B. Michael Williams in chapters nineteen and eighteen, respectively. The styles of the essays vary as widely as their subject matter does, ranging from interview transcripts through casual and anecdotal explorations, to well-documented research chapters. All are easily approachable and well-illustrated.

If there is a weakness to this elegantly produced volume, it is this: even though percussion instruments have been ubiquitous in all human cultures since prehistory and have figured increasingly prominently in Old and New World cultivated and vernacular music since the mid-nineteenth century, *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion* is predominately devoted to music since ca. 1870 – indeed, the bulk of the volume is devoted to European and American music of the post-World War II period. Although the volume's diverse essays give a significantly richer perspective on the world of percussion instruments than does James Blades' classic but seriously dated and limited *Percussion Instruments and Their History*,<sup>1</sup> those who wish to learn about the instruments that were used prior to that most recent heartbeat in the historical lifespan of the percussionist's world will need to consult other sources such as Jeremy Montagu's *Timpani and Percussion* and more specialized studies.<sup>2</sup> Those who approach this volume especially looking for information on historically informed performance practices concerning the timpani or other percussion instruments, or indeed for any information about the physical construction and acoustic properties of those instruments themselves, will come away empty-handed. Nor, given the emphatic globality of percussion instruments' usage today and before, is the volume's exclusively Anglophone profile an advantage – indeed, none of the essays cites any literature in languages other than English, even though French,

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1. James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and Their History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1984; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1992).

2. Jeremy Montagu, *Timpani and Percussion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

German, Italian, Latin American, and Spanish authors (among others) have been assiduous in writing about the world of percussion that is the volume's focus. It is probably important to note that percussionists and scholars from non-Anglophone countries will find little or nothing of their native cultures' perspectives on the world of percussion here, nor of their scholars' contributions to the modern understanding of that world.

These shortcomings may not be shortcomings at all for some readers: no single book can be everything to everyone, and every author or editor has to draw the line somewhere in deciding what to include and what to omit. Nevertheless, one hopes that, if a second edition is undertaken, a greater effort will at some point be made to acknowledge not only late-breaking issues in the world of contemporary percussion but also the rich and diverse findings of scholars from around the Western world in dealing with percussion instruments' more distant past, their repertoires, and their performance practices. In the meantime, *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion* represents a thoughtful, well written, and well produced handbook for the twenty-first century percussionist interested in the concepts, instruments, and issues entailed in the post-1900 selectively ethnomusicological percussionist's world.