

Table Talk

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Abstract

Table Talk is a musical composition by contemporary classical composer Alyssa Weinberg. It was commissioned by chamber percussionists Arx Duo in 2016. Drawing from the idea of piano “4-hand” music, Table Talk translates the concept to become percussion “4-hand” utilizing a shared percussion set-up. The two percussionists face each other on opposing sides of a prepared vibraphone. The two players work together and are sometimes against each other at different points in the piece. This can be heard in the tight fitting grooves and in the perceived cacophony of sound. The piece evolved as an attempt to stretch the idea of what a vibraphone could sound like, from “exploiting the subtle timbral shifts of a single note, to masking its identity completely through the combinations of other items placed on top of it.”

Introduction

Traditionally, the vibraphone is used in a Jazz setting or in chamber percussion music. It typically does not have a place in Classical music because of the instrument was not invented until the early 20th century. Chamber percussion music is also a very young genre and has grown substantially within the past century. Edgard Varese’s 1929 composition, *Ionisation*, was the first piece to ever be written for percussion ensemble alone. Compared to Classical music, chamber percussion music is still an infant. The first professional touring percussion ensembles were created in the very early 1970s and since then, the discipline has continued to grow steadily. *Table Talk* is one of the many chamber

percussion pieces emerging in the current Contemporary classical genre.

Creative Commentary

What mainly attracted me and my friend Chris O’Leary to this piece was the vast variety of timbres we heard when listening to the piece. We both keep up with online videos posted by the percussion equipment manufacturer Vic Firth who produces quality recordings and video of new works.

When things are added to an instrument or the instrument is altered in some way, the instrument is considered “prepared.” This term is used because modifications are done before the piece is performed. Both O’Leary and I are

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experienced in playing traditional percussion instruments as is, but this piece was an opportunity for us to stretch our understanding of the vibraphone and how it can be used musically.

The initial learning curve was notation. With so many different objects on the vibraphone, there is no line or space on the traditional staves for things like soup cans or woodblocks. To notate all these different sounds the composer, Alyssa Weinberg, created her own representation of the sounds using a combination of traditional staves and general lines (Figure 5). She also re-designated the lines on a traditional staff to represent the necessary objects (Figure 2). Contemporary classical pieces today have all kinds of new notations, allowing musicians to break away from the typical tonal sounds and textures.

Then there are the varying of techniques. Added to the primary motion of striking the vibraphone keys, different implements like violin bows or flexible mallets are used to alter the pitch of the keys of the vibraphone itself. The bow allows for a long sustain and a flexible mallet allows for the bending of pitch. Both of these are noted specifically in the score (Figures 4 & 6).

The main challenge with the piece was how to make it musical. Often times pieces that showcase sounds are not easily received by listeners. The questions we needed to ask were: where is the melody in each section? How do we make a crotale, gong, soda can, plastic cups, and vibe keys sound interesting? How can we make these competing rhythms sound cohesive?

We needed to be very specific about how we strike objects. We needed to be very aware of the other opposite players parts and how they interact with each other. Even

though there is so much going on, we need to be clear with what rhythms are written and which rhythms take precedent in different sections. Because the piece heavily relies in the varied sounds we need to be able to give time for the listener to process all the things they hear.

In the end there is an overall purpose to the piece that the composer wanted to convey, and trying to convey that to the listeners takes attention to all the details.

Conclusion

Pieces like table talk are vital to growing new music in the Contemporary classical genre and percussive arts. It is also important for music students to hear these types of works and experience the possibilities of new sounds and techniques. This piece has been performed for students' recitals at the Winter Visual and Performing Arts Center and has been performed on April 17th 2018 at the Made in Millersville Conference.

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SCORE EXCERPTS

Figure 1:

Instrument list:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Vibraphone | 2 crotales |
| Low Tom | 2 temple bowls (with bottle caps loosely taped inside) |
| 2 very thin sheets of wood | 1 small plastic cup |
| 1 soup can | 2 small gongs |
| 1 soda can | 2 thin stacks of paper to place under the outer setups |
| 3 miniature woodblocks | small cushion to prop up the bottom gong |
| 1 thin metal plate | *some items may need to be taped down |

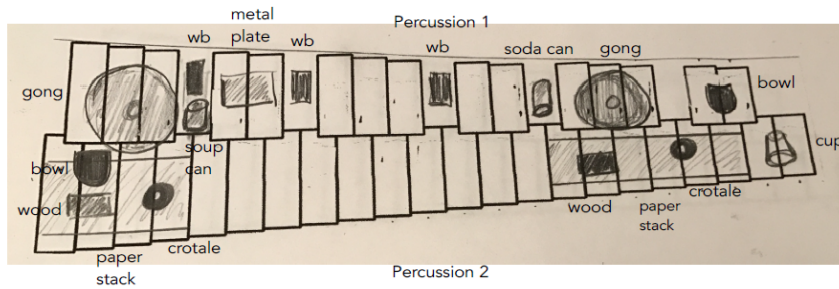


Figure 2:

The following key should be used for "x" noteheads:

Toys key:

	cup	crotale	gong	wood block	metal plate	can	bowl
Perc. 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	bowl	wood	can	wood block	wood block	crotale	gong
Perc. 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	tom	bowl	gong	wood block	wood block	can	wood
	wood	crotale	can	metal plate	wood block	gong	crotale
							cup

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Figure 3:

Musical score for Percussion 1 and 2, both labeled "Vibraphone". Perc 1 is in 4/4 time with a sustain pedal symbol. Perc 2 is in 4/4 time with dynamic markings *p* and *f*.

Figure 4:

Musical score for Percussion 1 and 2. Perc 1 has a treble clef, 4/4 time signature, and a note with a pitch-bend arrow. Perc 2 has a treble clef, 4/4 time signature, and a note with a pitch-bend arrow. A page number "11" is in the top right.

Figure 5:

Musical score for Percussion 1 and 2. Perc 1 has a treble clef, 4/4 time signature, and a list of instruments: crotale, bowl, gong, wood. Perc 2 has a treble clef, 4/4 time signature, and a "Tom" label. A page number "58" is in the top left.

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Figure 6:

Musical score for Percussion 1 and Percussion 2, measures 6 and 28. Perc. 1 is marked "bowed" and features a melodic line with dynamics *p* and *f*. Perc. 2 features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and triplets.

Figure 7:

Musical score for Percussion 1 and Percussion 2, measures 129 and 130. Perc. 1 features a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and accents. Perc. 2 features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and triplets.

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