

**IMMANENT PRACTICE: The Meta-ontology of Percussion Performance**

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## Questions

In the context of your research on the Meta-Ontology of Percussion Performance,

1. Reconstruct the main approaches to machine aesthetics in the early 20th and 21st centuries and compare their reception in Western art-music compositions for solo percussionist.
2. Describe and compare dialectic and immanent ontologies and apply them to the analysis of Western 20th and 21st century practices of composition and performance of percussion music.
3. Discuss sociopolitical impacts on and implications of contemporary percussion performance practice and possible consequences for pedagogy in the field.

## **Abstract**

The twentieth century was a time of rapid upheaval, war and destruction, globalization, and immediacy, with a marked expansion to imperial power and a repeated and large-scale domination of the Global South from the Global North. Despite – or possibly because of – specific sociopolitical stressors of the century, solo percussion, as both a medium and a performance practice, became an established form of the Western art canon. As Curtin (2013), Curtis (dir. 2011), and Koloogani, Marzieh Aalee, and Parissa Shad Ghazvini (2017) show, machine aesthetics fascinated not only artists but humankind by the end of the 20th century; through an examination of Beaton (2020), Jones (2024), and Zinman (2005), we see how machines – characterized as extant forms of imperialism made initially for the purpose of capital production or war – mediate our ontologies of sound. Therefore, it follows that machine aesthetics informed the metaphysics of percussion performance practice and sound production in the Western art music canon in the 20th century, especially in its early history as part of the Dadaist movement (e.g. Russolo's *intonarumori*), where and mechanisms dominated artistic conceptualization of percussive artworks. Capital immanence and a rising trend of neoliberal individualism, as noted by Curtis, marked the post-war West with an indifferent, “pass-the-buck” austerity, which served as a sociopolitical backdrop to many of the musical works for solo percussion examined in analytic sources.

Case studies from percussionists Amy Knoles, Steven Schick, Stuart Saunders-Smith, and Bonnie Whiting serve to provide lived experience – manifestations of material realities – which show the proximity of percussion practice to machine aesthetics. While most studies are fed primarily by published writings by each performer, this section also includes a set of original conversations with Jones over his career as a percussionist, providing new insights into the

metaphysics of sound production as it concerns Western solo percussionists in the last 100 years. Ontologies of touch are explored through interpretations of texts by Jones (2024) and Zinman (2005) to present a plurality of possible ontologies for sound production at once, which I define as immanent practice (i.e. an artistic practice which acknowledges a plurality of possible ontologies, a practice which is localized on the plane of immanence). Jones presents a viable argument on the ontology of touch as it pertains to percussion, rejecting notions of an ontology of action: we are not what we do, but what we have proximal access to. This paper seeks to extend such a conclusion to a plurality of possible ontologies, mediated by proximity, proximity to imperialism and its relation to machine aesthetics. I present percussion performance practice as acting in the way described above, through an ontology of ontologies, yielded from the top-down by sociopolitical factors manifested as material reality. Finally, as percussion itself also acts through visual mediums, a visual analysis of the analytic of motion through the works of Koloogani, Marzieh Aalee, and Parissa Shad Ghazvini (2017), Godard (dir. 1967), and Zinman (2012) is useful in understanding how motion, vibration, and visuals impact the ontologies of sound production in percussion performance.

I conclude that percussion ontologies, whether strictly dialectic or immanent,<sup>6</sup> are enforced at least in part by machine aesthetics and their proximity to imperialism; this aesthetic theory is historically utilized by various artists and exploits machinery and technological innovation, often downwind of imperial and colonial applications. This conclusion has implications for the realm of percussion ontology, as it serves to complicate the field's understanding of such a possibility of a strictly functioning ontology toward an atomized ontology of ontologies. There are many such forays into the metaphysics of being a percussionist or striking a drum, but none which seek to provide a unifying theory of these identities, and none

which seek to do so using Deleuzian and Guattarian metaphysics. As such, this paper both continues and establishes dialog while opening pathways for new conversations in percussion performance practice and offering original research in the form of recorded conversations with Josh Jones as a living practitioner of the described material realities.

**keywords:** percussion, solo percussionist, ontology, phenomenology, machine aesthetics, Josh jones



## IMMANENT PRACTICE: The Meta-ontology of Percussion Performance

### I. INTRODUCTION and HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Among the small collection of sound objects Jean-Luc Godard implemented for his film *La Chinoise* – about a budding-yet-floundering Maoist cell<sup>1</sup> – were a few contrasting pieces of music across both Baroque, popular, and contemporary modes of composition. In total, the listed soundtrack composes the following works:

- 1.) *Mao Mao*, a popular composition for the film by Gerard Hige, with lyrics by Gerard Guegan, performed by Claudes Channes.
- 2.) *L'International*, the composition by Pierre Degeyter
- 3.) Vivaldi, Concerto for 2 Violins in A Minor, RV 523
- 4.) Schubert, Piano Sonata in A major D. 664, and, possibly most striking;
- 5.) Stockhausen, *Zyklus*

The film, throughout several interstitial moments and bumpers, presents Stockhausen's *Zyklus* as a sort of sonic bookend or palate cleanser. Every one of these interjections works to punctuate a point regarding the machination of a postwar society: the icing over of tensions mediated by a cybernetic global politic. *La Chinoise*, a seminal film by French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard, is a primary example of percussion ontologies defined from the top-

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<sup>1</sup> After Dostoevsky's 1872 work *Demons*, this film follows a revolutionary student cell in 1967 Paris.

down, by sociopolitical stressors. This work also reflects conclusions set out by Curtis (dir. 2011) regarding the incorrect assumptions of mankind on “the State of Nature,” showing that the construct of the ecosystem, the self-sustained cell, is null: as student groups in Curtis’ documentary rose and eventually disbanded due to a lack of coherence, the student group, despite its best efforts as a militant and heavily-organized cadre, eventually falls into complete dissolution.

At a time where solo Western classical percussion performance was a new (or newly revived or re-embodied) art, Godard seemed to readily employ this form into his own work, using it as a vehicle for critique. Through a careful creation of an association between soundtrack and image, Godard manipulates the analytic of sound<sup>2</sup> which comprises compositions like *Zyklus*<sup>3</sup> in order to magnify (amplify) his message; indeed, these spots jump out as moments of high energy in his works, even if the image on screen is blank or bare. Godard, in this way, understood the capability for solo percussion music to enact a machine aesthetic, as well as the ways which film itself embodied the methods of its production (the self-advancing film camera itself being a machine of the modern era).

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<sup>2</sup> Zinman, Gregory. “Eradicating the Psychic Space Between Eye and Ear: Synthetic Film Sound’s Challenge to the Index.” *Animation Journal No. 20*, January 1, 2012.

[https://www.academia.edu/4264050/Eradicating\\_the\\_Psychic\\_Space\\_Between\\_Eye\\_and\\_Ear\\_Synthetic\\_Film\\_Sound\\_s\\_Challenge\\_to\\_the\\_Index](https://www.academia.edu/4264050/Eradicating_the_Psychic_Space_Between_Eye_and_Ear_Synthetic_Film_Sound_s_Challenge_to_the_Index).

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Rebonds*, *Psappha*, or other works by Xenakis. Duinker, Ben. “*Rebonds* : Structural Affordances, Negotiation, and Creation.” *Music Theory Online* 27, no. 4 (2021).

The rise of the contemporary Western solo percussionist can be charted from many paths, so it is necessary to delineate an established timeline of percussion history with regards to this specific sub practice, though that does not necessarily negate any other historiographies with regards to percussion as a practice in general. This is to say that, while we are treating this sub practice as new, there are many such examples of a “solo percussionist” before the 20<sup>th</sup> century that do not fit our – admittedly narrow – model of understanding. To that end, this paper is limited to two concatenating scopes:

- Percussion *performance*, the structure handed down by classical Western artforms and ideologies, as is performed by the solo percussionist, further limited to
- The setting of the United States post-1925 (one century ago this year)

### ***Institutional canon: from Stockhausen to Schick***

When we speak about percussion as a practice, unless specified, it is limited to the scope outlined on the previous page. In this window of context, the rise of solo percussion can be seen as an extant form of the orchestral percussion section. Three pieces stand out as “key works” as outlined by Duinker in their account of this history: Stravinsky, *L’histoire du soldat* (1918); Milhaud, *La création du monde* (1922), and Milhaud, *Concerto for Percussion and Small Orchestra* (1932).

*L’histoire du soldat* is a seminal work as, beyond being among the first works scored for multi-percussion as an instrument, it also places that instrument on stage. Throughout the work, percussion is integral alongside a narrator to provide a quixotic account of a soldier as he wanders back home. In this way, percussion (along with trumpet and a slew of other instruments)

acts as an embodied sound to a world at war. In this new configuration, the multiple individualized instruments were subsumed into one object, mirroring in a way the ruthless nature by which capital squashes the dialectic down into a base commodity-form. In this way, multiple instruments with multiple ethnologies are instead filed under the same label of *multipercussion*. “Multiple percussion” as a configuration obscures the various externalities present in a group of objects into one single organ-like object.

In this burgeoning classification within Western classical music, there was not yet a suitable notation which Stravinsky could use, so he sought to create his own. In the early stages of this type of music (not yet solo works), we see a varying many kinds of notational systems. Jazz, as was making its rounds across the world, became of great import for classical Stravinsky, as well as Milhaud. However, the key work that these pieces performed, above all else, was to begin the labor of lifting the percussionist out of the orchestral percussion section and into a soloistic context.

Works like Cage’s *27’ 10.554’’ for a Percussionist*, Stockhausen’s *Zyklus*, and Feldman’s *The King of Denmark* then establish a foundational repertoire for the solo percussionist. Tantamount in any percussion studio’s repertoire list, these works are not only technically challenging but require specific thought upon the percussionist regarding the materiality of their performance. Contrary to other instruments, a foundational element to the practice is the concept of the “found sound”. This includes the works of Iannis Xenakis, like *Psappha* and *Rebonds*; in the case of the found sound, there is a great potential for emergent properties to arise from this coupling of practice as rehearsal and practice as *techne*. First, the act of finding a sound itself is an emergent act. When one finds something, when it comes into view per se, that something is said to emerge to us. Thus, the very nature of searching for the right sounds (say, for the wood

blocks in *Rebonds*) induces the performer into an immanent state, wherein any set of localities may act upon them as the sound emerges – or rather, wherein any set of localities may be able to affect the state of emergence of a sound. Moreover, the qualia of found sound differs from landscape to landscape, thus the context of the ‘found sound’ implies a wide gamut of localities within the plane of immanence.

It is within this period where the structuring of contemporary solo percussion as a field of study was set forth. To Schick, this is a marker that “the music has migrated from contemporary to classical—from a personal statement to a communal understanding. (Schick 209)” “Traversing the distance between Xenakis and performers of his work embodies something of a ‘Xenakian performance practice’ and appeals to an analytical approach that foregrounds interpretations as agents in actualizing the structural affordances of his compositions. (Duinker)” Modes of performance practice (playing things one way or another) are solidified through the inherencies in the composition. Duinker describes passages across Xenakis’ body of work that present technical problems to the performer; how they handle those challenges (which sticking, what tempo, etc.) lands the performer in one of several localities within the framework of the piece. As performance practice is iterated upon by generations of percussionists and the artform moves from nascent to an established apparatus of Western classical music, certain choices are favored over others, promoting certain performance practices (with their own assumed worldview) above others. This supports Schick’s claim of our current state being one of prescribed choices rather than earned choices or choices borne out of primordial, pre-semiotic exploration.

***Curtis: rise of individualism in Neoliberalist, post-war US***

Adam Curtis' documentary *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* explores the material reality and historiography of humankind's interfacing with technology. Curtis, a master documentarian, often exploits television and closed-circuit footage along with original interviews to construct macroscopic arguments over the organization of human systems,

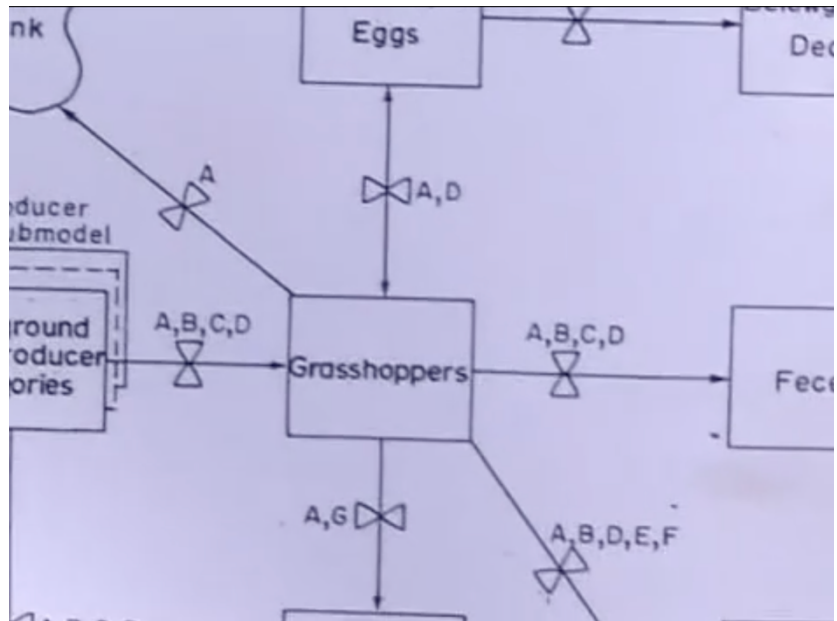


Figure 1 George van Dyne's cybernetic maps of ecology, in which he maps species and then-current ecological models to cybernetic systems. Screenshot from Curtis' Curtis, Adam, dir. *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*. Episode 2, "Chapter 2: The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts,"

more specifically how neoliberal institutions have distorted our perception and relation to material realities of governance. Through an analysis of surveillance, computation, government systems, communal and individual action, game and group theory, and humankind's relation to these systems, Curtis presents often-overlooked perspectives on sociopolitical concerns. The first episode, "Love and Power" explores Ayn Rand's Collective and their rise in the mid-20th century, namely Rand's decades-long connection with Alan Greenspan.

Further, he juxtaposes this observation with the rise of the "Californian Ideology" in 1990's Silicon Valley, which espoused that cyberspace, an interconnected system of free actors, would usher in a new era of cybernetic homeostasis (e.g. immediate computerized risk

calculations for loans, nonhierarchical systems of decision-making and governance) that would allow for the radical proliferation of the individual.

Instead, he concludes, relations of power were not ablated by computerization but rather shifted, toward the executive financiers at Wall St. Whereas wars were waged by governments prior to this era, now wars were waged by speculative bankers.

## **II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS and AIMS**

We begin by asking a set of clarifying questions about the nature of the percussionist. This case – “the percussionist” – unless specified, is the case of the contemporary (1925-) Western classical solo- and solo-adjacent<sup>4</sup> percussionist. The questions are as follows:

- Which ontological models best map onto localized percussion gestures? How are they operationalized analytically?
- What historical processes facilitated the rise of solo percussion in the Western classical music canon?
- How do these models align with the short history of solo percussion as a genre within the contemporary Western classical music canon, as well as the long history of percussion as a discipline?

These questions are at the heart of this inquiry into percussionist’s modes of being.

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<sup>4</sup> Solo percussion history in the contemporary western classical sphere arises mainly out of the orchestral percussion section, therefore not everything discussed in this paper is strictly regarding solo pieces explicitly.

This paper advances a new model of conceptualization regarding the contemporary Western classical solo percussionist using immanent theory derived from Spinoza, Deleuze-Guattari, and recent output in percussion anthropology. As such, this paper establishes the notion of the percussionist as an immanent figure, decoupling the solo percussionist from current ontological models of access, action, and function, among others. Proposing a robust, resilient field of ontologies rather than a fixed, given identity, the idea of an immanent practice supersedes any static structures through the assertion of percussion as a field by which all is possible. As such, a visual, auditory, and gestural semiotics is enacted in situ, derived from localized qualia acting upon the percussionist in a cybernetic oeuvre. This enactment is rhizomic, negating any dialectic materiality or causality.

Overall, this paper aims to explain the mechanisms by which percussionists enact a material semiotics mediated by a plane of immanence, rejecting any one static teleological account of solo percussion as a discipline. Machine aesthetics informed (and continue to inform) ontologies of percussion, which are downstream of military and imperial apparatuses. The paper acknowledges the inherent contradictions between ontological and immanent metaphysical models, and attempts to integrate the two through a reconstitution of Deleuze-Guattarian philosophy.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This paper employs a wide range of methodologies in its aims to confront the research question. Primarily, the paper invokes a Spinozist, Deleuze-Guattarian, and immanentist framework to represent percussion as a field of immanence onto which local ontologies may be mapped. These frameworks are elucidated upon in a section labeled THEORETICAL



FRAMEWORK AND EXPLANATION OF TERMS. These definitions do not only provide a common ground by which the author and reader may exchange information but also serve to ground practical knowledge in formal terminology. This practical knowledge is presented as a series of case studies into contemporary percussionists and their practice. These case studies are fed by either writings from the percussionist authors or, in the case of Josh Jones, a semi-structured interview. Alongside these structures, the paper also presents an analysis of the modes of the contemporary solo-percussionist through a historical, immanent, and sociopolitical account of the rise of the solo-percussionist through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At its core, this paper is an interrogation of what it means to be a percussionist, especially during a time where, as Schick puts it, “instruments are mastered, degrees awarded, boxes ticked off, (Schick 204)” and how that meaning can be commonly found both:

- a) Immanently organized
- b) Downstream of that which is military.

In that aim, real-world accounts of being are both reified and traced into an immanent framework which resists the ontological pressures of most recent attempts at classification by Jones and Beauton. While these accounts are a step in the right direction, their “best fit” tendencies excuse out certain modes, scenarios, or ways of being that leave the conversation incomplete.

Describing percussion an immanent practice accounts for a plurality of being.

There are, of course, a set of methodological challenges involved in framing such a large and complex practice in such a manner, and we avoid them through careful definition and scoping. Specifically, we run into issues of transference and metonymy, i.e. there comes an issue with using this theory universally. Inasmuch, the scope of the paper is precisely, by necessity, limited to only one movement (specifically, contemporary Western classical solo-percussion) in

one setting (in the United States as influenced by Western classical music between the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and now). However, an immanent theory, by necessity has no bounds. As such, admittedly, this paper constitutes a degradation – a vulgarization – of established immanentist theory to provide relevant modes of critique and perspective within the subfield without overgeneralizing to other fields of percussion, music, art, or being in general. It should be said that I am a percussionist, myself trained for the better part of a lifetime in the Western classical percussion tradition. There are benefits and detriments to holding and invoking this identity during the undertaking of such a body of research.

In conducting such research, this paper bridges together the concepts of phenomenology, immanence, and the machinic fascination that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK and EXPLANATION OF TERMS**

Before any further discussion of phenomenology, machine aesthetics, and immanence, these terms should be defined to avoid any argumentative errors and inconsistencies. A proper account of immanence begins before Deleuze and Guattari and, as such, we'll start with Spinoza's account of God as Nature as an immanent framework. Spinoza, in Ethics vol. I, outlines an immanent structure through logical induction:

“PROP. XIV. *Besides God no substance can be granted or conceived.*”<sup>5</sup>

“*Proof.* — As God is a being absolutely infinite, of whom no attribute that expresses the essence of substance can be denied (by Def. vi.), and he necessarily exists (by Prop. xi.); if any

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<sup>5</sup> This statement by itself holds a rational kernel of the immutability of immanence which we will use going forward.

substance besides God were granted, it would have to be explained by some attribute of God, and thus two substances with the same attribute would exist, which (by Prop. v.) is absurd; therefore, besides God no substance can be granted, or, consequently, be conceived. If it could be conceived, it would necessarily have to be conceived as existent; but this (by the first part of this proof) is absurd. Therefore, besides God no substance can be granted or conceived. Q.E.D.

“Corollary I. –Clearly, therefore: 1. God is one, that is (by Def. vi.) only one substance can be granted in the universe, and that substance is absolutely infinite, as we have already indicated (in the note to Prop. x.).

“Corollary II. –It follows: 2. That extension and thought are either attributes of God or (by Ax. i.) accidents (*affectiones*) of the attributes of God.”<sup>6</sup>

In this way *Deus sive Natura* is immanence (“substance”) itself. It is the field by which every *thing* is sublated. By Spinoza’s induction, any other such element that bears existence must, by necessity, be created by or an operate mode of God’s immanence. This lays the framework for a philosophy of immanence which later counterparts like Deleuze/Guattari, Lefebvre, Husserl, Simondon, and Badiou, among many others, picked up. For Spinoza, the infinite was not transcendent but rather emergent, a field through which every other being pops into and out of existence; God exists, then, as the single substance through which all things are

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<sup>6</sup> This can be expressed in logical terms:  $\exists! x[S(x) \wedge S(G) \wedge \forall \alpha[A(G, \alpha) \rightarrow \infty(\alpha)]]$ .

modes (*affectiones*). Other propositions from *Ethics I* provide a reaffirmation of this theory of immanence:

“PROP. XIII. *Substance absolutely infinite is indivisible.*”

“PROP. XVI. *From the necessity of the divine nature must follow an infinite number of things in infinite ways –that is, all things which can fall within the sphere of infinite intellect.*”

Leibniz uses Spinoza’s monistic definitions<sup>7</sup> of immanence to craft his own immanent teleology, without any of the deterministic qualia that Spinoza suffuses into his writing.

“The Monad, of which we shall here speak, is nothing but a simple substance, which enters into compounds. ... Indeed, each Monad must be different from every other. For in nature there are never two beings which are perfectly alike and in which it is not possible to find an internal difference, or at least a difference founded upon an intrinsic quality [denomination]. “

With Deleuze and Guattari, the object is not seeing the immanent as a substance, but a field by which the immanent propagates. This plane – a *plan d’immanence* – is a field of changes, where all transformations and interactions thereof are exchanged, affixed, carried out: “plan fixe de la vie, où tout bouge, retarde ou se précipite . Un seul Animal abstrait pour tous les agencements qui l’effectuent. (Deleuze-Guattari 312)”. To them, this plane carries out the intersection of all concrete forms. This is hardly contradiction, a static plane of changes; on the other hand, whereas dialectic philosophers enact a *poeisis* from a compaction of opposed ideas, immanent philosophy handles these contradictions through sublation rather than dialectics: “Le

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<sup>7</sup> Outlining that causality is downstream of being: “PROP. I. *Substance is by nature prior to its modifications.*”

plan de consistance est l'abolition de toute métaphore ; tout ce qui consiste est Réel. (Deleuze-Guattari 89)”

To Deleuze, immanence is life itself. “On dira de la pure immanence qu’elle est UNE VIE, et rien d’autre. Elle n’est pas immanence à la view, mai l’immanence qui n’est en rien est elle-même une vie. (Deleuze 2003)” Inasmuch, Deleuze asserts that immanence is that which *necessarily is*. “Une vie est l’immanence de l’immanence, l’immanence absolue : elle est puissance, béatitude complètes.”

Opposed by – or, rather, sublated by – immanence, are our modern ontologies, ontologies of action, of access, and of function. These notions require further definitions of related terms. Speaking first on an ontology of access, we can define it as *a material identity ascribed to an entity on the basis of access*; when applied to our scope, this can be read as the following: *we are what we have access to*. Deleuze, via Spinoza, rejects any ontology of action through a telos which dictates that one is who they can affect and be affected by; as is such, reality, amongst other constructs, is a series of affects: “On ne sait pas ce que peut le corps...”<sup>8</sup>

If we, instead, consider the viewpoint of an ontology of action, we are not what we affect, but *what we do*. This is essentially opposed to immanent realms of thought. Marx, through his Theses on Feuerbach, asserts the notion of a being realized through praxis: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza, Philosophie Pratique*. 2003.

<sup>9</sup> *Spinoza, Ethics*, III Prop. 6 — to exist is to “affect and be affected.”

Finally, we will also speak on the notion of an ontology of function. If an ontology of action describes us as we enact change and an ontology of access describes us as we affect and are affected by others, then an ontology of function describes us as we relate to others, specifically in a hierarchical system. Simondon outlines an ontology of function in *Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* through an assumption of being as a definition of a convergence of functions: "... the technical problem has to do with the convergence of structures into a structural unity rather than with the seeking of compromises between conflicting requirements. ... It is such a convergence that gives the technical object its specific identity because, at any given time, an indefinite plurality of functional systems is not possible." In this setting, being is defined as conforming to a set of necessarily limited functions. "Those marginal consequences of functioning which in the abstract technical object are eliminated or attenuated by correctives, become evolutionary stages or positive aspects of the concrete object."

### ***On machine aesthetics***

"Everything revolves around desiring-machines and the production of desire. (Deleuze-Guattari 380)"

Machine aesthetics, a longstanding human fascination with the production, embodiment, replacement by and interaction with machines, found its heyday in the pre- and immediate postwar period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As mechanical computers gave way to electronic machines, theories of the mind began to reflect that change. Historically, Freud conceived of the brain as behaving like an electrical machine, which Sir Arthur Tansley took to encapsulating the relational experience of all entities across nature, a concept which he coined *the ecosystem*. It is through this nescient form of machine aesthetics by which we derived the modern construction of our society today: a unitary earth, a single people striving for balance.

“Only desiring-machines produce connections according to which they function, and function by improvising and forming the connections. (Deleuze-Guattari 181)” Curtis argues that, as the society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, a shift in the structures of power occurred, which aligned with the modern shift from the mechanical to the electrical. This shift was itself a change in global power concentration from the pre-established notions of power to a single top-down hierarchy governed by an ecosystem of machines. Wars, waged now instead by speculative bankers instead of generals, were modeled on cybernetic systems. The computer brought with it a destabilization upon a global scale, and this happened around the same time as the rise of the solo-percussionist.

Capital, as defined by Marx in *Capital*, Vol. III, is “not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society;” a more commonly repeated version is possibly Bourdieu’s assertion of capital as *accumulated labor*. *Technocapital* is then a suffusion of technics into the nature of capital. A reading of these terms through two theorists, Emilie Carrière and James Beauton, provides useful constructs.

To Carrière, the term is an enumeration of the mélange of the value-form with cybernetic systems of self-assertion and balance: “the mystique of technocapital, which has so thoroughly excited some imaginations, lies in the separation of technical knowledge from the worker’s consciousness, where this knowledge confronts the worker as the alien power of the machine itself”. Capital, thus, is a sublative speculative reason realizing itself through the process of autopoiesis. She puts it plainly, placing the cybernetic at the center: “immanence then appears as a historical process leading to technocapital realized as a God: Artificial Intelligence. (Carrière 25)” Interestingly, to Carrière, *techne* as such then – borne out of this definition of technocapital

and the production of space – involves the production of a dwelling, a *thoughtspace*, rather than being a mere relation of a person to their practice.

Beauton provides examples by which these definitions fit a musical scope. “Success may be defined here as the accumulation of capital in all its forms. ... accuracy equals time spent, time spent equals effort, and effort equals labor. Labor is then able to be converted into capital gain, placing value on the motivation behind the labor. Therefore, by the transitive property, accuracy equals value.” He presents the case that technocapital immanence – the power by which advancements in technology, driven by increased capital production, sublate any material externalities (non-capitalist uses) that technology might have contained – and the phenomena by which it manifests in individualized material realities drive the classical interpreter percussionist. Beauton delineates the structures of power that share influence over contemporary performance practice for percussion, taking into consideration especially the specific individual liminalities that may shape one performer’s practice in one way over another. For Beauton, this is a function of proximity to capital: “[if] cultural gain becomes a commodity, then it is in the economic interests of the concert hall as an institution to ensure they are offering the most commodifiable product. That product of course being the musical experience. The musician loses value concomitantly with the decline of legibility of the audience. (Beauton 16)” This “monoculture of interpretation” Beauton warns about is echoed in concerns espoused by Schick, Whiting, and Josh Jones.

## V. CASE STUDIES

### *Steven Schick: Critique of the performative “problem”*

Schick, in his essay *Meandering*, takes a grand retrospective on solo contemporary Western percussion practice over its history, positioning its current standing as one corrupted by



its own evolution. To him, this subset of percussion currently stands in a precarious position.

“Percussion was supposed to be a grand un-stretched canvas—the last arena in classical music where you could invent your life. There was supposed to be this great conversation among all of us in order to imagine just what a life in percussion could mean. ... In the most naïve and fragile way, it was all supposed to be about the music.”

How did we get here? To Schick, the nature of our predicament comes from an unwillingness to address our proximity to capitalism, which has commodified the study of Western percussion into a machine for degrees and best possible musical products. Schick is a reputable voice in this discussion (and, veritably, many of the discussions on the nature of percussion) due largely to his long tenure in the field. The percussionist has premiered several masterworks for percussion, including the polyrhythmic works *XY* and *Bone Alphabet*. In any case, Schick is the authoritative voice for the discussion of the evolution of percussion.

“In the case of *Bone Alphabet*, a work for undetermined instrumentation, I chose from among a huge array of sounding objects in order to build a setup. ... Now, after twenty years of performances and a dozen recordings by several percussionists, ... percussionists who do not know each other choose setups that are remarkably alike simply because ‘this is how it’s done.’ (Schick 2014)” In this way, Schick laments a world which he himself helped create.

Through my personal connections with collegiate percussion study, I can help validate these claims from the other end of the spectrum. In the apprehension and performance of masterworks in my undergraduate studies, I came face to face with this reality, that percussion was crystallizing into a common practice. A major part of the pedagogy involves listening – of course, how are students going to master touch, style, grace, and gesture without suitable

reference points from which to base their interpretations? As such, a prominent portion of my learning strategy was to first listen to popular interpretations of a work (Stoyanov's or Dease's *Khan Variations*, or Drouet's *Le Corps à Corps*, or Glennie's *To The Earth*), which drove style choices. In this exploratory work, something is lost. As such, I made a conscious effort within this work during my undergraduate studies to make my own choices wherever possible. After a few active listening sessions of varied performance works, I performed a sort of score study where I could map out any of the common problems in learning the score before I encountered them in rehearsal. Through a view of multiple recordings, I can dilute just how much coercive power one recording has over my interpretive process. At this point, I try to make minimal material choices (which marimba to use, which mallets to use) are made. From then on, after the score study phase, I move onto the learning phase, where I stop listening to recordings, and instead begin analyzing my own recordings of the work. Even then, masterworks assert their own constructed identity. Over time, tendencies in performance practice solidify into concentrations of choices, rational camps of performance practice, and we are not free from their constraints. As pieces gain a performance practice, we are confronted with a set of decisions that shape our interpretations of the work. Schick explores this concept through specific masterworks like *Le Corps à Corps*: "there is the use of a glass of red wine as a point of focus in George Aperghis's *Le Corps à Corps*, even though the composer does not call for it, simply because this is what people often do."<sup>10</sup> ... We know, for example, to play the mallet music of Steve Reich with rubber

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<sup>10</sup> I can confirm this through my own performance practice. I myself have been affected by these strictures, at times (especially during my undergraduate studies) seeing these hand-me-down performance choices as inherencies of the work itself.

“two-step” mallets, if possible ... we also know that wind chimes and maracas don’t count as instruments “played with the fingers or hands” in Morton Feldman’s *The King of Denmark*. None of these aspects is explicitly addressed in the score. And each is a sign that the music has migrated from contemporary to classical—from a personal statement to a communal understanding. (Schick 2014)”

In my performances of *Le Corps à Corps*, I couldn’t help but resist ending with the piece with me putting down the drum and drinking a glass of wine, even though that is never written – explicitly or implicitly – in the score.

Writing on the proximity of percussion to violence and war, Schick brings up the major issues plaguing the drumming community today. He presses the community to see Robert Champion’s murder as a direct performance of the proximal effects that war and violence have upon percussionists.

“If we could have a conversation about the culpability of the percussion community on the death of Robert Champion, we could also have a conversation about the relationship between our past and our future. We could talk about what it means to be the practitioners of an instrument with a military past in a predominantly non-military present. We could talk about how the military aspect of our past conjoins the numerous other tributaries of our art, from Vaudeville to West Africa, from Dada to New Orleans. We could talk about collateral issues of this mixture: about the way the aggression inherent in our military past has been re-constituted as the aggression inherent in the athletic hyper-virtuosity of works like *Psappha* or *She Who Sleeps with a Small Blanket* or even *Zyklus*.”

\* \* \*

### ***Case Study II – Josh Jones***

Josh Jones, invariably one of the leading figures of today's percussion world, provides some keen insight into what it means to be a percussionist, both as student and leader or mentor, as well as through his professional output. In a world where orchestral, chamber, and solo percussion are amalgamated, no thanks to the current pedagogical system which treats percussion as a catch-all, orchestral insights are incredibly useful into our solo context; in this way, "orchestral percussionist" is an occupation, percussing being the key action which offers transference between both contexts; Jones, in this precise way, did not learn through a different pedagogical system than solo percussionists, though how outlines practical ways in which he faced material differences in his pedagogical upbringing.

In the following interview, Josh and I speak a bit on what a percussionist is, does, and is affected by. Though I have made small edits for clarity and brevity (mainly consisting of removing duplicate words or salutations), this interview is presented in full and without commentary.

#### **Seb**

Just wondering in what way your identity – and that can be in any sort of, you know, manifestation of that word – has shaped your being as a percussionist throughout kind of time and how that manifests today.

**Josh**

I think mainly, I guess, growing up in, like, the church, music was always a conduit for emotional expression. So, I feel like that really shaped how I approach making music. And then I think on another level, knowing that the classical world is mostly, like, a white world, I think in some ways, I found or maybe I – I think in some ways, I saw myself as someone who had access to, like, the *in*. So, I would just take anything I learned and give it freely to, like, classmates when I was in school and things like especially when I was younger. But I think in those two ways, I felt like my identity helped me connect with music really well, and it inspired me to be more giving of information.

**Seb**

Yeah. Have you seen that that kind of knowledge or distribution of knowledge has been I – I mean, there's many words to describe it, I guess – life changing, revolutionary? What have you.

**Josh**

Oh, yeah.

**Seb**

Throughout time.

**Josh**

Yeah. And very fulfilling at the same time. Like, it was never I never did it to get, like, famous or anything. I just did it because I thought it was the right thing to do.

**Seb**

Right. Right. Right. To add to the corpus or to or to give back. Yeah.

**Josh**

Absolutely.

**Seb**

And does community I guess, yeah, can we talk a little bit about community, what that means to you? And, I guess, the focus of this too has been throughout time, how has that changed. Where does that lead you to be or to how you are today?

**Josh**

But what does community you know? I guess we never really talk about that in the orchestral percussion world. I'm steeped in it. Don't do it currently, but, I mean, I have colleagues who do and study it, of course. But we you know, it is a part of what we do even though it's not really, like, talked about that much.

**Seb**

Can we talk about that a little bit?

**Josh**

I think I think the whole thing about community is people helping each other get to where they need to be, you know, in a sense. And I think, specifically in, like, the conservatory, sometimes if it might feel like where we need to be is all at the same place at the same time kind of thing. And I think, in general, if we're all working together to make sure that we're all getting to the same place, then it essentially works itself out. If we're all being stingy about information, then everybody gets there almost later because they're not working together. And then, unfortunately, with it being dependent on what studio environment you're in, it could be very cutthroat, and sometimes teachers don't nip that in the bud early enough or they see competition as a driving force or some unhealthy thing. So, yeah, I think I think community when you're younger, it might be more like, *yeah, we're all helping each other out. We're all gonna get to college. We're all gonna do great things.* But then when you get to, like, the real world, it ends up being more like *well, there's one space for one person in an audition. I wanna be that one person.* We all need to have more like Kendrick Lamar mindset. Like, if one of us gets there, we all get there, and we'll all eventually get there at some point.

**Seb**

Right. Got it. So yeah. Yeah. I mean and in today's kind of sociopolitic, it is kind of yeah, everything. And, I mean, I guess that these questions, I guess, are all simulated to kind of, like, go deeper and deeper and deeper into you as I guess, I don't want you to speak for anybody other than yourself. This really is about localization of one specific, like, moment or things that like,

some moment gets encapsulated encoded from, you know, your cultural understandings. And that all gets mediated maybe through some sort of power structure. Right? And that's, I guess, the core of, like, my research as to, like, why are we not talking about this as percussionists? But, like, all of these questions really are supposed to be, like, you specifically, in moments, how does this crystallize? So, like, your experiences as a church musician, your experiences as, you know, growing up academically, that all kind of, like, fits into it. So, the next question being, how does your identity as a black percussionist intersect with all of this kind of is the most broad one in terms of, like, timing? Like, how has this started out?

### **Josh**

I think starting out, my teachers never – it's not that they never wanted me to, like, notice that I was a black person in a white space. It was more like their whole goal was to reach out to inner city kids and teach them how to play drums really good. Like, that that was essentially what it was, what it should just be. And then, I guess, throughout when I got as I got older, I started to notice how not normal that was as far as, like, you know, me being the only person in college in the orchestral program and then me being, like, one of two people at auditions out of a 180 people. You know? You start seeing how small your percentage actually is in the business. So, I don't know if it impacted in a way where it was negative, but it was just more impactful as far as, like, seeing what the stats actually were in in, like, real life.

### **Seb**

Yeah. Yeah. Is there and also, like, I guess there's so many forms of, I guess, that question because a lot of this has to do with etymology too. Like, when we talk about the it's so it's rather



difficult disentangling some of the research that I'm trying to do due to the connotations of words. So, like, a lot of what I mean too is, like, positively, how has that impacted you you know?

**Josh**

Oh, yeah.

**Seb**

Together now they materialize some sort of understanding. How has that impacted you as well?

**Josh**

I think in a positive sense well, I guess as far as, like, you I you could say I don't know. You could say, like, I'm special or whatever.

**Seb**

Sure. Sure. Sure. Sure.

**Josh**

Like well, you know, like, donors love this kind of stuff. You know? Like, oh, great. And I'm just kind of like, well, yeah, but this is how it should be. It's just like, well, *this is what could happen on a bigger scale if you have access, if you have funding*, like, all of the things that we all fight for, essentially, in this business. But, yeah, it's I guess, a positive sense, it puts more visibility on the issue. Well, me personally and the issue of access and making sure that people at a young age have access to music education.

**Seb**

Right.

**Josh**

And things like that.

**Seb**

Right.

**Josh**

Yeah. But I I've definitely gotten a lot of opportunities because I was as good as I was, but also from the hood.

**Seb**

And I guess the way in this like, the crux of this is, like, as much access as you do. And this is, like, my whole, like, understanding of where we stand today as percussionists. Like, there's a lot of models in coming out of USC and some of the UC schools about, like especially, like, Steve Schick's cohort, like, his group of students right now are talking about, like, what it means to be a percussionist. Like, are we what we hit? Are we how we function? Does our function in institutions like churches or universities impact how we are? Obviously, yes. And, like, I think about a lot of those models, and there's a lot of critical models too, which I think are great. But they have a best fit, and that best fit leaves something to be desired. I think in a lot of those cases, that means that a lot of, like how do I put this? Your experience in Kansas City crystallizes some

form of understanding that a lot of these models don't cover, that you can have, like, all of the access in the world. You can have all of the function in the world. Right? You can have all the resources, and then you encounter this barrier of, like, systemic oppression that just tells you, like, that doesn't matter. Right? So, like, I think that that speaks to a big part of what a lot of these models are missing.

**Josh**

Oh, yeah. It it's assuming that the business is working all on the same plane or with the same intention.

**Seb**

Right. Right. Yeah. That there's that there's equal hands.

**Josh**

Yeah.

**Seb**

Can you shine a little more light about that? Like, just how that might have like, maybe how your viewpoint has changed over time or maybe has emboldened or, you know, have a sense of community elsewhere?

**Josh**

I feel like in a sense, it's kind of a James Baldwin *I can't be a pessimist because*, I can't remember the whole quote. But essentially, you can't be a complete pessimist. You just have to be a realist. Yeah. Because, I mean, at the end of the day, you realize in the business that every orchestra has a different set of rules, a different CVA, a different union, a different strength of strength of union. Like, there's no across the board thing. Yeah. And while and the other thing is, in the principal percussion sense, none of the duties are codified in in, like, an official thing. It's like well, what everybody attributes it to is, like, doing assignments. But then there's, like, okay. Then for assignment, then you have to do hiring. Are you in charge of hiring, or is it the personnel manager?

**Seb**

Right.

**Josh**

You have to read the seat. It's like there's a bunch of different things.

**Seb**

Right.

**Josh**

And then you can have, like it really not a hard job. It's just logistics. It's an email. Like, that's all that's really all it is. But in the situation where you have an organ either you have an organization

or a management or just musicians who, no matter if you do everything correctly with no mistakes, they could just say whatever Right. Essentially, with no, what do you call it, no consequence.

**Seb**

Yeah. No kind of pocket care overseeing. Yeah.

**Josh**

And then a year later, they –

**Seb**

They're on their side.

**Josh**

Yeah. And then a year later, they have more problems with the problem people after you fire the wrong person.

**Seb**

Right.

**Josh**

It's kinda funny.

**Seb**

I mean, I think you hint on a big thing of a lot of these orchestras and arts organizations. So, it's, like, completely isolated. You were completely any sort of, like, requisition of space or power or, you know, recognition because just as quickly as you gain favor, you might lose it. Or okay. So, say an orchestra is doing better, but then another orchestra is completely in the dust. So, it's not like there's any network or mutual aid, I guess. would be the thing. It's like, there's no cross-reach here that I think that—

**Josh**

Yeah.

**Seb**

Yeah. Any other thoughts? I think this, you know, is a really crucial insight into, like, what makes because there's so many things that make one percussionist or one person themselves. But I think especially in percussion, we are not really, you know, acknowledging the facts of, like, what we are implicated in as percussionists. Any other thoughts? Just in terms of, like, what identity means in percussion.

**Josh**

I think, in a large sense, the whole meaning or the whole purpose of making music is for self-expression and connection with people. And I think an organization that their goal is to be supportive of its musicians, supportive of its community, things like that, that's an organization

that really thrives, and that's an organization that connects with not just the people within the community, but it's a destination point. When you have an organization that only protects or only supports certain members of the orchestra or certain members of the personnel, that's where you see high turnover. Like, you can have a \$50,000 a year job that treats you really, really well that gives you a bunch of benefits and things like that make it harder – they should make it harder for you to make your decision to leave, you know?

**Seb**

And I think that's across the board too, but specifically also as percussionists because there's so few of us, and then there's also so few black percussionists. So, it's like the pot of a pot of a tinier pot.

**Josh**

Yeah. And then your whole rep the whole reputation that not only, like, an organization if an organization doesn't treat an African American well, if you if the section or some member of the section is doing the same thing Yep. Then it makes it harder to attract people to come either sub or audition for a permanent spot. Like, what am I gonna do? Yeah. Like, I heard a lot of people weren't even deciding to take auditions over at KC because of what was going on. Like, you know, it's I'm not I'm not surprised. Not just African Americans, but just anybody in general.

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### ***Bonnie Whiting: dynamics in storytelling***

Bonnie Whiting, a percussionist whom I had the fortune to meet through our mutual participation in the 2022 Common Tone New Music Festival, is a pillar of today's percussion society. Through percussive storytelling, Whiting yields a new look into masterworks with common practices. In this way, she embodies the vision of percussion which combats that which Schick sees as detrimental to the oeuvre. As Whiting puts it, "There is a human need to tell stories. ... We intrinsically know how to use our voices and bodies to do so, and we remain riveted by the narratives of our friends, family, and colleagues. When performing these works, I think of myself as a storyteller rather than as an actor."<sup>11</sup> It is curious that Whiting grounds this framework in a communal model; perhaps this is what holds the immanent capability of this practice to sublate crystallized models of performance or material proximities to violence.

In this case study, we take a look into Whiting's chapter in the Routledge publication "The modern percussion revolution: journeys of the progressive artist", which outlines the modes by which she functions as a percussionist. To Whiting, percussion is a functional component to a broader practice of storytelling; percussion, in her domain, operates as a vehicle by which one is able to tell stories to transform others. This redefinition of percussion and percussion objects as objects of storytelling, we may begin the work of resisting the imperial stressors which dominate the field. In her chapter, "The Speaking Percussionist as Storyteller", she compacts a wide variety of sub-practices within the Western classical percussion domain: orchestral percussion,

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<sup>11</sup> Whiting, "The Speaking Percussionist as Storyteller"; Lewis and Aguilar, *The Modern Percussion Revolution*.



solo percussion, ensemble percussion, as well as complimentary analysis into dramaturgical and contemporary philosophical concepts.

Overarchingly, Whiting's view encompasses that of an ontology of function. We function as storytellers, and as such we can tell our own story on the nature of our practice. However, other writings bely an ontology of action. "[a] voice (and of course, a storyteller) implies a body, and bodies (thus individuals, and collectives of individuals) are very present in percussion music. We move through instruments in space. ... we find in percussion instruments a great deal of malleability: different sizes of instruments and beaters, different percussionists with different hands and bodies. When watching a performance of percussion music, the body of the specific percussionist is conspicuously present."<sup>12</sup> This presents the possibility of an immanent practice within Whiting's work, where ontology asserts itself not as a deterministic register of being, past and present, but a continuously invented and re-invented identity asserting itself in local states of being.

Whiting also outlines in this chapter her work in creation of new conceptual avenues for established performance practices of specific masterworks. In this way, she functions as a crafter of new *fabula*<sup>13</sup> for pieces like *?Corporel*. Whiting, in her capacity to establish these new performance practices – a concentration of musical and extra-musical choices – for masterworks

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Defined by Whiting as "the events and perception of the whole" in Lewis, Kevin, and Gustavo Aguilar, eds. *The Modern Percussion Revolution: Journeys of the Progressive Artist*. Routledge Research in Music 10. Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871707>.

with crystallized paths of performance, crafts an immanent framework for these pieces. “It is neither a purely cerebral listening experience linked to contemporary music nor a fully staged theatrical experience, but rather a composite art form linked to these traditions. (Whiting 2014)”

By showing that she can make these decisions and perform them successfully – by showing that a composition is a continuous handshake between composer, performer, audience, and the systems therein – she reminds us that this power is available to all percussionists. The more she injects these alternate systems to established performance practices within the zeitgeist, the higher the possibility this façade (of a set way to perform one work or another) breaks down. In Whiting's own words, “... I made a version of *?Corporel* that is longer than most, coming in at about twelve minutes (some interpretations are closer to seven). At the opening, the light comes up with the performer already in place. I choose to wait about thirty seconds before the first gesture. Drawing out the opening is a way of allowing the audience to first recognize what is (in this country, at this time) a charged image, then accept it, and finally move on to watching and listening to the rest of the work.”

## VI. ANALYSIS

The current understanding of percussion metaphysics places the percussionist or their instruments at the center of the model. According to M. Jones, “contemporary percussion ontology is best understood as an ‘ontology of action,’ which I argue presents an imbalanced account of the art form.” For Jones, touch is by far the most revealing factor of a percussionist's identity. A measure of proximity, this view aligns with Simondon and Deleuze. This viewpoint, while offering a much-needed critique of the current trajectories of contemporary Western percussion as a whole, the ontology of action misses a few points.

For example, assuming an ontology of action, one is forced to discount emergent phenomena. Consider this critique of by Jones:

“What happens when we refer to our body as instrument, and understand its sounds as musical? There is a risk of falling into Cartesian dualism if one is not careful – where an individual’s mind serves as the subject: rational and at a distance, and the individual’s body serves as the object, the machine within which this mind traverses the world and also the condition of its absolute separation from it. This view would understand body percussion as the practice of a rational interpreter who struggles to make their body sound the way the mind wants it to sound, again “exploring” its sonic capacity so as to instrumentalize it. Merleau-Ponty reminds us however that we do not have a body...”

In this commentary, Jones correctly identifies the proximal epistemological characteristics of the work they are critiquing but fails to sublimate the immanent contradictions that arise from the composition’s material semiotics. These kinds of material tensions abound, not only apparent in the specific works Jones is critiquing but hiding as well in our performance practice, wherein pieces are malleable, each soloist crafting a specific version that fits their localized ideals regarding the *techne* of percussion performance. In this way, even our performance enacts an atomized immanence that is not present in other doctrines; Jones does the same (as is common practice by this period in the trajectory of solo classical percussion), using the saying “in my version [of a percussion masterpiece]” multiple times throughout their doctoral dissertation. It is in this capacity that Deleuze, via Spinoza, states the famous *we do not know what a body can do*, reaffirming an ontology of capacity (rather than a representative telos), a capacity to hold, to

affect, and to be affected. From a materialistic standpoint, the study of action upon a mode<sup>14</sup> is a study of *proxima*; resonant bodies vibrate in space, as a function of proximity. Jones, via Rosa, affirms that “resonance is a reciprocal process where two objects cause each other to vibrate and ‘speak,’ but do so in a way where one is not dominating or ventriloquizing the other.”

It is through strict adherence to a single theory of being which allows Jones to justify viewpoints like the following: “listening to the decay of an instrument illustrates not only a sound, but more broadly space and time that sits outside of our intentions. It situates us in our body as we listen to a vibration that gradually stills. The sound “touches” our ears just as reciprocally as our hand touches its source.” Rather than viewing the phenomenon through a plurality of being, it is presented as a dialectic, the negation of pure sound unto that of something broader (“not only a sound, but more broadly...”). This same sort of doxastic error is at the heart of this paper’s claim surrounding the metaphysics of solo-percussion performance. How would Jones, for example, handle other material tensions in the practice of percussion, given that practice is among the oldest instrumental traditions in history and yet both constantly reinvented and burgeoning as a solo practice for only the past 100-or-so years?

My undergraduate dean at the College of Arts and Humanities at UCF, Jeff Moore, used to tell me of a poster he would see at his alma mater’s percussion studio as a student which read: “PERCUSSION: As old as yesterday, as new as tomorrow”; this perfectly ground solo

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<sup>14</sup> Rather than merely strike an excitor upon a surface, percussionists employ a wide variety of actions upon a mode of excitement – or rather, a mode of vibration, to speak literally. This phrasing is more exact.

percussion's telos within an immanent framework, decoupling the inherent tensions between ontology and immanence quite gracefully.

\* \* \*

A simple example of the fallacy of a determined ontological view of percussion performance appears through conjecture. Assume percussion folds in toward an ontology of proximity toward violence. This ontological assumption either:

- Necessarily does not account for percussion as it is not proximal to violence or where it does not concern violence
- Necessarily rationalizes an account for the above through a proximity to violence (i.e. nonviolent percussion is necessitated as a byproduct of violent percussion)

Thus, this ontology fails to capture a real, existent corpus of that which it attempts to capture. In this way this ontological model is one of best fit, a rationalization which eschews any information which does not fit it.

### ***Percussion as a structure mediated by violence***

The percussion genus has a long<sup>15</sup> history of proximity to systems of war and was, up until recent history, an apparatus of military conquest and imperialism. Dating back to ancient times, there are several accounts of the use of percussion of in warfare and the politics of violence. Use of tambourines, cymbals, and other instruments used as such are recorded in the Bible,

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<sup>15</sup> Talk about janissary bands, systrum, etc.

documenting a centuries-long relationship between percussion instruments and their proximity to violence (Samuel 18:5-7 [ISV]) One may think that this is a thing of the past, but this specter seems to continually haunt us; it is a problem we have never solved in a practice that is at the same time older than the printed word and newer than sliced bread. “Percussion is one such vehicle of the imperializing, ontologizing mechanism. (Jones 177) ” Even until today, we see percussion’s proximity to violence in the existence of armed forces bands (whose institutions pour an outrageous amount of funding into recruitment and advancement, a sort of ideological and functional brain drain of musicians into complicity in acts of violence, imperialism, and terror) and in acts of violence involving music and musicians. In 2021, drum major for FAMU Marching 100 Robert Champion, a Black, gay musician was beaten to death with drumsticks by percussionists who, in a hazing ritual, played cadences on his back as he walked from one end of a bus to the other. That it happened is unconscionable, that it happened at the hand of drummers is unthinkable. But one thing is for sure; it damn well wasn’t the winds or the brass. We must reckon with this; under material conditions where we recreate violence with every stroke or gesture, we must confront ourselves with the conditions we enact through a lineage of war-adjacency. When, as percussionists, we model our popular understanding of percussion off army bands, marching bands, and drum and tattoo corps, this creates externalities which affect the localization of percussion ontologies toward military oeuvres.

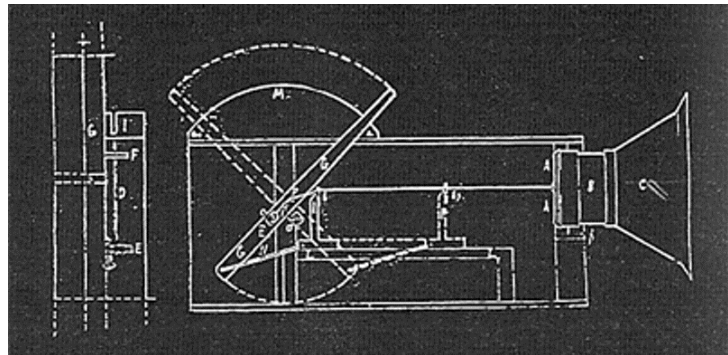
Of course, the way out from this trap is to recontextualize our actions through an immanent framework. When we allow percussion to *be*, infinite and unbounded, we escape the proximal and enter that which is emergent. But this is a step way too far for our current trajectory. As Schick puts it, Champion’s murder should have made the rounds; we – our culture of toxic masculinity, jingoism, chauvinism, sexism, and affinity for the creation of in-groups – killed

Champion, and we're not talking about it. "... one must come to understand how several strands are interrelated: the violent history of drumming as a technology of warfare; the relationship between the body ... and the drum as an instrument; and violent performativity constantly reenacted through the musical embodiment of violent gestures. (Jones 181)"

### ***Machine Aesthetics in Sound Production***

*"In order to draw the means of production or machinery into the realm of individual creativity, artists established a deep rapture between the traditional fine arts and the pioneer art of their time... (Koloogani 55)"*

Machine aesthetics is most generally associated with the Italian Futurist and Dada movements;



Huelsenbeck at a lecture in Berlin in 1918, stated: "we were against the pacifists, because the war had, after all given us the opportunity to exist in all glory..." However, where a machine aesthetic may have in recent history been originally adopted by the Futurists, it very clearly and very quickly (on a societal or historic timescale) spread throughout Europe and across the transatlantic. Russolo's *Intonarumori* frame this fascination perfectly, replacing instruments with speakers, substituting what was once a sonic interface for an autopoietic agent of sound. Percussion constitutes a similar aesthetic. "When in the act of drumming we hear not only the object in question but the act of violence..." It is no guess, then, as to why Iannis Xenakis chose multiple percussion as his method by which to represent the horrors of war. In this sense, these

**Figure 2** A scan of an original sketch for Russolo's *Intonarumori*. Image is in the public domain, sourced from the Wikimedia foundation.

instruments are quite aptly *weaponized*.

Concerning machine aesthetic in the contexts of war and violence, there is much in the history of the creation of our current digital modes of transmission and communication. Namely, the internet serves as both a vast digital frontier for new kinds of expression and a technology developed downstream of military research into cybernetics. In CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, I outline the connection between cyberneticists and the creation of the ARPANET. The lineage of the internet is possibly among the clearest metonym for machine aesthetics. In 2014, social media website Reddit published a year-end blog report that disclosed Eglin Air Force Base, FL as producing the most traffic – “Most addicted city (over 100k visits total)” – over the course of the year, which was taken down and republished without the disclosure. Eglin, a cyberops branch of the Air Force, conducts operations via the internet, negating any need for physical procurement.

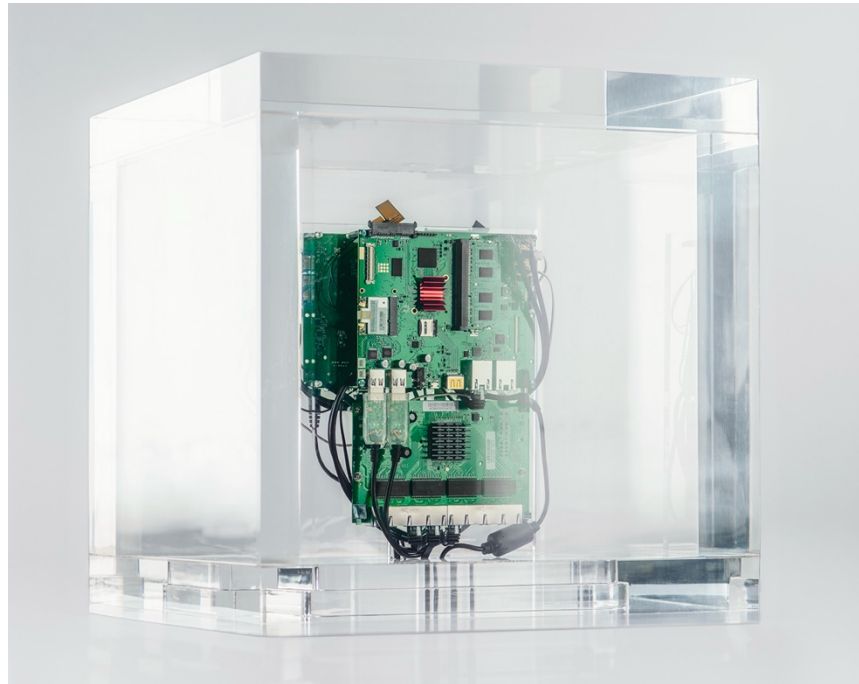
It is then, similarly to the problem that plagues percussion as it stands today, that we must find immanent methods by which to sublimate this proximity to violence. Here, the answer is not negation – we must not turn away from the tools of our time, defined by war or not, but we must instead transmute them into tools for immanent metaphysical expression.

Christina Kubisch and others who perform EMF walks, Wi-Fi enabled and Internet-of-Things works, telematic performances, etc.... are the contemporary renegades, utilizing technology in subversive manners which negate their proximity to the military institutions that invented them. For example, Julian Oliver’s Stealth Cell Tower, which uses a real, contraband law-enforcement-grade cell tower spoofer to grab patrons’ locations and print out a malicious message with their details on a networked printer. This work recontextualizes its proximity to



law enforcement data capture – encroachments upon constitutional law provided under a guise of security – by bringing its methods out in the open. This, in turn, weakens the security of the data spying system by making its victims know of its existence.

In this way, Oliver defangs the technology; this is not without its risks, as carrying such a device at such a caliber is a felony in the United States. Another such work which I consider enacting the same



subversion of proximity is Paglen and Applebaum's *Autonomy Cube*, a form holding a router connected to a Tor network, allowing for the establishment of a completely surveillance-free, unbridged connection between client and network. Beyond an inversion of proximity, this work has profound implications in any

*Figure 3* An image of Paglen and Applebaum's *Autonomy Cube*. Sourced from the artist's website.

discussion of the first and fourth amendments to the constitution of United States.

### ***On vibration***

Curtin outlines the vibratory constitution which vibratory, percussive sounds could effect a primitivist aesthetic, harking back to, or conjuring in the first instance, a notional Other (the 'primitive'). This is perhaps what Godard identified in Stockhausen's *Zyklus* and other solo

percussion recordings used in films like *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967). Curtin shows the transformative power of sound, “moving participants to heightened states of feeling and influencing their behaviour. (Curtin 228)”

That said, it should be noted that, for Godard and those who work on photographic film, sound embodies a visual epistemology, generated from a visual track on the film itself. In this way, the hierarchies of the audio-visual medium are highlighted: sound is sound insofar as it is light first. On a quantum level, this holds true, light and sound both emanating from an electromagnetic superposition of wave functions.

For a percussionist, this distinction is important. We talk so much about touch, feel, and gesture as percussionists – indirect nods to the fact that *audiences hear with their eyes*. It’s within this gaze that solo percussion, like sound on film, constitutes an enactment of the Other.<sup>16</sup>

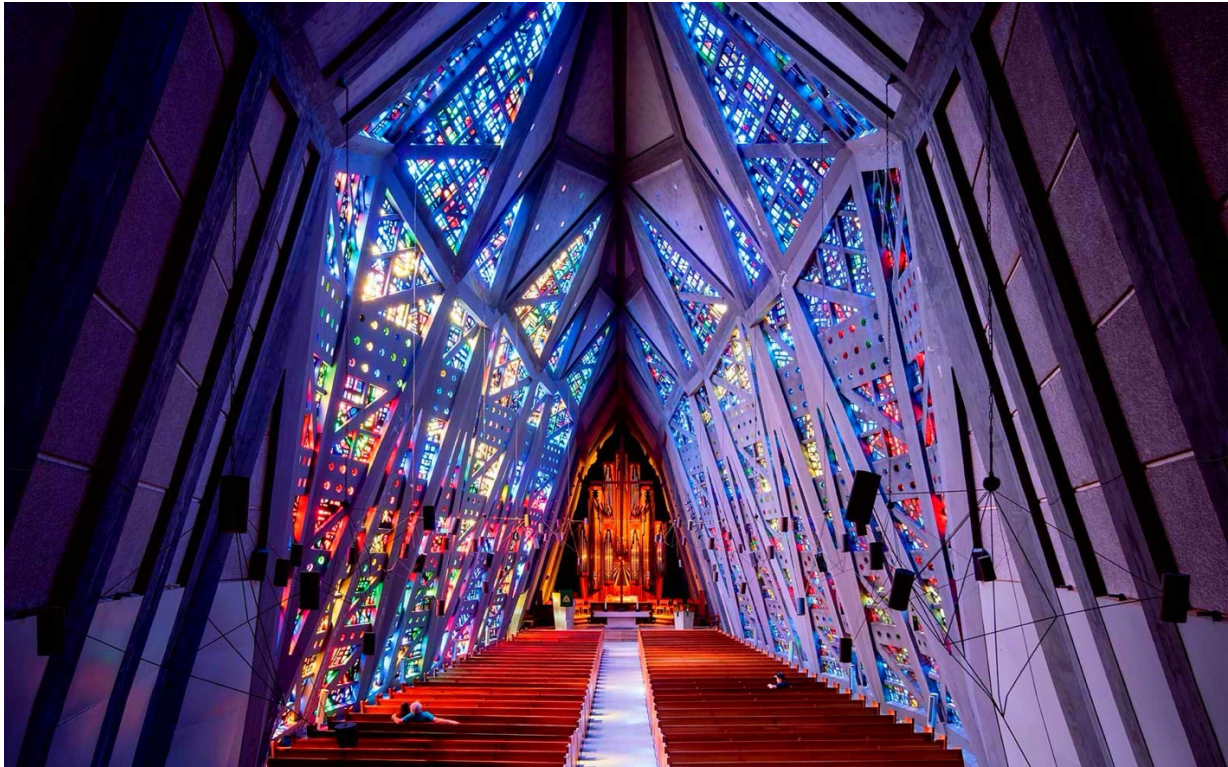
In my own practice, I have employed vibratory analysis to exploit this fact. In my work *Organum quadruplum “lux nova”*, I mount a slab of dalle de verre glass<sup>17</sup> on a test bench in free-free boundary conditions and bow it for ten minutes. The vibration from the glass slabs is sent out via a microphone to a laptop patch, filtered into a multi-channel set of justly intonated partials routed to 4 pairs of transducers, each pair placed underneath a grand piano with the sustain pedals jammed down. Over the course of the work, the laptop patch performs 2 simultaneous ramps: ramping from a single sound to a spectrum of sounds derived from the harmonic spectrum of the glass, and ramping the filter wetness from 0% to 100%. In

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<sup>16</sup> Zinman, Gregory. “Eradicating the Psychic Space Between Eye and Ear: Synthetic Film Sound’s Challenge to the Index.” *Animation Journal No. 20*, January 1, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

understanding the sublation between a visual-sonic dichotomy in performance, I concluded that my single aim was to “sell” the bowing. If I could lock it in my audience’s collective mind that glass -> piano, then I’ve succeeded in performance. Even if the glass itself is broken or cracked



*Figure 4* The First Presbyterian Church of Stamford, Connecticut, known as the "Fish Church" for the unusual appearance of its inner chambers (pictured), employs dalle de verre in its glasswork. CC BY-SA 4.0 John9474, Wikimedia Commons

(which presents more of a challenge, heightening the payoff), the association is constructed as it is inherent on the semiotic level. Once these elements are arranged as such, they create the conditions by which they are reaffirmed; that is to say, I do not get as good a response from glass in rehearsal or testing as I do at the moment of performance.

I have felt the same phenomenon of material incompleteness<sup>18</sup> at the time of rehearsal for many theatrical percussion pieces which could be said to enact the same analytic of motion. Rzewski's *To the Earth*, a piece that I prepared at the undergraduate level at the University of Central Florida under Jeff Moore, Kirk Gay, and Thad Anderson, this was a constant source of my dismay, as was with other masterworks like Aperghis' *Le Corps a Corps*. Up until the moment of performance, I had felt inadequate, as if there was a missing element to my reenactment of the corpus. Then, during performance, I had invariably manifested an emergent causality, one which affected the audience around me and, in turn, caused me to react to their reactions. This cybernetic loop, enacted by an emergent theatrics, is exactly the mechanism at the heart of Deleuze's *plan d'immanence* – boundless self-reference, which then collapses at a point; this loop is what immanentists would call an affective composition, where bodies in shared continua affect and are affected by each other.<sup>19</sup>

## VII. SYNTHESIS

It is thus, knowing what the current ontological models miss, that we might ask what an emergent, immanent model looks like, an infinite rationalization of being that conforms to Spinozist and Deleuzian properties. This immanent theory of practice, in a reconfiguration of Spinozist, Leibnizian, and Deleuzian immanence, posits the following:

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<sup>18</sup> This reflects a Deleuzian idea that being is in a continuous process of becoming.

<sup>19</sup> Ethics I Spinoza, Baruch. "Ethics." 1677.

**Axiom 1.** Substance is singular and infinite; it expresses itself through infinite attributes, of which sound, vibration, and touch are three accessible to human perception.

**Axiom 2.** Each percussive event is a mode of this substance — a local actualization of vibration within the field of immanence.

**Axiom 3.** The percussionist, the instrument, and the sound are not distinct substances but differential constitutions of the same immanent plane.

**PROP. I.** That no percussionist acts through one singular ontology

Demonstration. Every percussive action is a composition of multiple causalities: corporeal, material, cultural, historical, and mechanical. These causalities are not subordinated to a transcendent; they must be taken as a sole subject coexisting within the same plane of immanence. Therefore, any single ontology is only a partial expression of a broader, polymodal being.

Corollary. The multiplicity of ontologies enacted by percussion practice is therefore not a contradiction but a union. Each act of striking, rubbing, or touching expresses a localized modulation of the infinite substance. To say “I play percussion” is already a misnomer; percussion *plays itself*. The percussionist is not a transcendent agent but a node in a system.

**PROP. II.** That local teleological properties of a percussionist being are mapped in situ through an emergence of substance

Demonstration. Teleology here is not a final cause but an emergent configuration — the tendency of substance to fold into intensities. Each moment of percussive contact maps a new network of cause and effect, producing temporary ontological alignments (a mallet's rebound, a membrane's tension, a performer's breath). These do not preexist the act but are generated within it.

Corollary. Thus, the ontology of percussion is *improvised*: not planned, but emergent from the encounter between bodies, materials, and forces.

Scholium. In Deleuzian terms, the percussive act is a *haecceity* — a singular becoming defined by speed and slowness, by intensities rather than essences. The drum is not a drum but a temporary consolidation of vibratory matter, and the percussionist is a vector of its becoming.

**PROP. III.** That immanent practice negates instrumental hierarchies.

Corollary i. If all beings are expressions of Deus sive Natura, there can be no ontological superiority of human over object; each is a co-constitutive mode whose relation is reciprocal, not instrumental.

Corollary ii. In this way, to learn percussion is not to command technique but to assume a *mode of affections*, to learn to affect and be affected, to allow the body to register the intensities of matter.

This asserts a transition away from singular ontologies like the ontology of action as a catch-all (even within such a limited frame of reference as contemporary solo Western classical percussion) to a plurality of localized sets of ontological agency. This plurality is compatible with the set of current percussion ontologies through its redundancy, as it contains all possible ontologies which it sublates into an immanent field bound by localities. This set is compatible with any one ontology because it contains all ontologies.

This can be defined formally. Let  $L$  be the localized ontologies (emergent ontologies, localized to the moment of action upon a mode of being) that map to the immanent plane,  $l$  be a single localized instance of emergence, and  $I$  be the plane of immanence upon which this process takes place. Thus, the immanent field is defined as the closure of all such mappings:

$$I = \bigcup_{l \in L} l$$

It is, by this manner, redundant to its set of ontologies, containing them, while remaining differentiated from any on singular ontology through its properties of localization.

Sociopolitical ramifications for contemporary percussion

We might be tempted to universalize this theory across a broad spectrum of artistic and musical applications, but this is not advised. As we established earlier, the scope of this paper is limited to Western classical solo percussion as it concerns the last 100 years in the U.S. This is for good reason, as I cannot speak as an expert on models of experience in which I have no training. The sources in this paper (and the conclusions I derive from them), for the most part, support only that which is inside the scope of the paper and, overwhelmingly, uphold a Western ideology. I make no attempts to extrapolate this theory beyond its narrow scope, as it is because of this scope that these comparisons may be made.

## VIII. CONCLUSION and FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given that percussion as a field of musicological study is a burgeoning science, it follows that the metaphysics of percussion is an even newer notion. It is my hope that this paper adds some context to this field of percussion ontology through its integration with immanent philosophy. Through the claims outlined in this paper I hope to assert a less doxastically anxious conception of the solo percussionist, eschewing single ontologies of action, access, and proximity to a polymodal model grounded in immanent philosophy via Spinoza, Leibniz, Deleuze and Guattari, and Lefebvre. Artistic critique from musicians and musicologists like Beauton, J. Jones, M. Jones, Curtin, Schick, and Whiting serve to elucidate this framework from its axiomatic strictures and reproduce it in artistic terms rather than formal logic, though a cursory detour into predicate logic helps us reaffirm our understanding of the immanent.

Through a set of case studies into living percussionists embodying this current shift in paradigm we ascertain an understanding of how percussion constitutes an immanent practice. Historical and theoretical accounts of the rise of solo Western classic percussion music (mirroring the rise of machine aesthetics) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century illuminates the field's illusory duality, both belonging to one of the oldest family of instruments and existing as a classical practice for less than 100 years by most general accounts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On paper, there should not be a difference from a tap stroke performed as a solo percussionist than from one performed by an ensemble, band, marching, or orchestral percussionist. But Deleuzian immanence explains that a range of experiences (in fact, *the range of experience*) is acted upon in an emergent, operant manner based on a set of localities, any of which may act upon an object at a given time. As such, there is a difference in the tap stroke (or any rudiment or



More than anything, it is my hope that the claims outlined in this paper point us toward a broader, pluralistic view of percussion as an immanent practice, one where emergence and affect replace conversations of action and touch. Subsequent to this point is the assertion that these modes of being are proximal to a military domain. A reckoning with this fact is long overdue and must be sublated through the enactment of immanent performance practices.

This conceptual shift has implications for both music as a practice and a pedagogy. In the classroom, incorporating an immanent framework involves espousing a constantly polymodal viewpoint as to what it means to be a percussionist. This, of course, presents problems in higher education, where there might not be enough interest, faculty, or budget to support every possible locality. However, perfect is the enemy of the good here in this case, and so I advocate that some attempt at enacting a broader understanding of the field or finer accommodation of ability is better than no attempt (though the idea is always to aim father than we can reach).

"The dominance of modernist ideology does not only specify what kinds of percussion works are composed and how they are performed, but shapes the very orientations of their performers (Jones 108)" Through immanent frameworks, we may be able to invert this paradigm, regaining some sort of conceptual footing within our practices, leading to localized, emergent realizations

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stroke or, more broadly, any action upon a mode) between environments, as there is a difference in performance for the marching percussionist from field to field, depending on objects like weather, visibility, soil/pitch softness (if natural grass), etc. This is all to say, while nothing necessarily changed in the composition of the instruments to form the solo percussionist genre in Western classical music, the way we played them changed, their localities changed, and with new localities, expectations, and musical responsibilities, the way we played changed.

of the nature of *percussing*. Doing so would reshape our proximity to war and violence; it is through immanence that all localities are realized <sup>21</sup> and so it follows that within the plane of immanence exist modes of being that do not constitute reenactments of violence. By shedding fixed, dialectic models of percussion as telos, we can realize an immanent practice which understands ontology not as an end in itself, but a continuous process of becoming; or, as Carrière writes: “*the intellect is anarchic*. Nature is only made of monsters. Let us create.”

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<sup>21</sup> This is a redeclaration of Spinoza: “PROP. XV. *Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.*”

## Appendix A

### Spinoza: Ethics I, Proposition XIV, original text

**PROPOSITIO XIV:** *Præter Deum nulla dari neque concipi potest substantia.*

**DEMONSTRATIO:** Cum Deus sit ens absolute infinitum de quo nullum attributum quod essentiam substantiæ exprimit, negari potest (per definitionem 6) isque necessario existat (per propositionem 11) si aliqua substantia præter Deum daretur, ea explicari deberet per aliquod attributum Dei sicque duæ substantiæ ejusdem attributi existerent, quod (per propositionem 5) est absurdum adeoque nulla substantia extra Deum dari potest et consequenter non etiam concipi. Nam si posset concipi, deberet necessario concipi ut existens; atqui hoc (per primam partem hujus demonstrationis) est absurdum. Ergo extra Deum nulla dari neque concipi potest substantia. Q.E.D.

**COROLLARIUM I:** Hinc clarissime sequitur *If* Deum esse unicum hoc est (per definitionem 6) in rerum natura non nisi unam substantiam dari eamque absolute infinitam esse, ut in scholio propositionis 10 jam innuimus.

**COROLLARIUM II:** Sequitur *If* rem extensam et rem cogitantem vel Dei attributa esse vel (per axioma 1) affectiones attributorum Dei.

*Expressed in predicate logic*

$$S(G) \wedge E(G) \wedge \forall \alpha [A(G, \alpha) \rightarrow \text{Ess}(\alpha)]$$

$$\forall x \forall y [(S(x) \wedge S(y) \wedge \exists \alpha (A(x, \alpha) \wedge A(y, \alpha))) \rightarrow x=y]$$

$$\begin{aligned}
&\rightarrow \forall x[(S(x) \wedge x \neq G) \rightarrow \neg E(x)] \\
&\rightarrow \forall x[(S(x) \wedge x \neq G) \rightarrow \neg C(x)] \\
&\therefore \forall x[S(x) \rightarrow x = G] \\
&\therefore \exists! G[S(G)] \\
&\therefore \forall x[(Ext(x) \vee Cog(x)) \rightarrow \exists \alpha((A(G, \alpha) \wedge (x = \alpha)) \vee M(x, \alpha))]
\end{aligned}$$

### Formal proposition of immanent practice, unabridged

This asserts a transition away from singular ontologies like the ontology of action as a catch-all (even within such a limited frame of reference as contemporary solo Western classical percussion) to a plurality of localized sets of ontological agency. This plurality is compatible with the set of current percussion ontologies through its redundancy, as it contains all possible ontologies which it sublates into an immanent field bound by localities. This set is compatible with any one ontology because it contains all ontologies.

This can be defined formally. Let  $O$  be the set of all percussion ontologies,  $L$  be the localized ontologies (emergent ontologies, localized to the moment of action upon a mode of being) that map to a certain immanent oeuvre, and  $I$  be the plane of immanence upon which this process takes place.

Then:

1.  $\exists L \subseteq O$  so that each  $l \in L$  maps to a localized base of practice where  $S$  is substance (that which is embodied) and  $P$  is practice (the expression of that embodiment):

$$\forall l \in L, l: S \rightarrow P$$

2. The immanent field I is defined as the *closure* of all such mappings:

$$I = \bigcup_{l \in L} \bar{l}$$

(that is, I is the saturation of all local ontological relations).

The relation between I and O is redundant but non-identical since I *contains* all possible ontologies but sublates them through local actions upon the plane of immanence.

$$I \supseteq O, \text{ and } I \neq O$$

3. The transition away from any singular ontology  $o_\alpha \in O$  is expressed such that no single ontology can serve as universal explanatory ground:

$$\neg(\forall x \in O, x = o_\alpha)$$

4. Thus:

$$\forall o \in O, (o \in I)$$

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