New Works for Solo Percussion by Nathaniel Bartlett

By Justin Alexander

Percussionist/composer Nathaniel Bartlett is known for his marimba+electronics performances, in which he and his Malletech marimba interact with real-time computer notation processing in a high-definition, eight-channel, three-dimensional "sound cube" that immerses audiences in a spatialized sound space. While his command of the marimba, knowledge of modern computing (he built his own zero-decibel silent computer), and dedication to touring and performing in a variety of venues are a testament to his skills as a performer, Bartlett is also a dedicated and gifted composer, holding a DMA in Composition from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Bartlett's compositional output has focused on integrating electronics and real-time processing with the marimba, but several of his recent works for percussion focus extensively on acoustic percussion instruments. These compositions for non-pitched percussion—"star_birth," "apical topography," and "luminous machine"—complement the existing solo multiple-percussion repertoire by expanding the expressive capabilities of the genre. Each piece uses Bartlett's unique graphic notation system that allows expression of varying time relationships via color-coded noteheads, graphic durations of notes, and extended technique symbols. While similar in notation, the works exhibit different musical moods that emerge depending on Bartlett's choice of instrumentation and his compositional aesthetic.

Although the graphic notation system may appear to create rigid, fixed musical ideas, the use of spatially-constructed phrases, notated through this color-coded system, creates a lyrical, gestural model of notation that is both performer-friendly and allows for an interpretation of the music that more closely aligns with Bartlett's intent than traditionally noted music. Musical ideas such as nested polyrhythms, multi-line counterpoint, and *subito* tempo shifts are all written out for the performer spatially, aiding in interpretation and musical integrity. Following is an overview of each of these new works for solo percussion.

"star_birth"

This piece, written in 2012, was Bartlett's first exploration into composing with his graphic notation system. Scored for concert bass drum, pedal bass drum, tom-toms, bongos, cans, temple blocks, brake drums, tam tams (low and high), China cymbal, and sizzle cymbal, "star_birth" is a rich, dense composition that allows the performer to explore and connect long, sustained tones of the concert bass drum, gongs, and cymbals with quick, gestural phrases on bongos, brake drums, and temple blocks.

The most striking aspect of Bartlett's scores is the use of colored noteheads and beams to relay information about note length, placement, and temporal relationship. Dark blue notes, for example, are ametrical, relying purely on spatial position in the score to dictate their point in time, and on the length of the dark blue beam to inform note duration. Green notes are quasi-metrical, in which they retain conventional metric properties but move freely in time, enabling graphic depictions of *accelerandi, rallentandi*, etc. Dark gray noteheads are strictly metrical, and retain all conventional metrical properties.

Bartlett uses several implements to achieve a variety of tonal effects, including tam tam mallets, felt timpani mallets, hard rubber mallets, snare drum sticks, wire beaters, and wire brushes. Although "star_birth" is largely composed of ametrical notes, several passages contain a mixture of all three noteheads in close proximity. "star_birth" is a study in durations, with large sections of the piece comprised of a series of decays from the ringing instruments. It requires a performer comfortable with navigating space, gesture, and large dynamic shifts.

"luminous machine"

Scored for stainless steel bowls, gongs, finger cymbals, "singing" bowl gong, metal sheet, triangles, 6-foot threaded steel rods, claves, and temple blocks, "luminous machine" has a decidedly more shimmering quality than "star_birth" or "apical topography." Musically, the material consists of periods of alternation between metrical phrases in the steel rods and ametrical figures in the claves, woodblocks, and higher-pitched metallics like triangles. Considerable portions of this piece use metrical and ametrical rhythmic figures simultaneously, developing the language used in "star_birth." Here, Bartlett juxtaposes ametrical and metrical notes in similar phrases, creating a "focusing" effect in the primary line. While incorporating more metrical sections, "luminous machine" still retains the meditative, quasi-improvisational feel of "star_birth" while offering a vastly different sonic landscape.

"apical topography"

Scored for concert bass drum, large tom-tom, 2 congas, 2 bongos, threaded steel rods, triangles, crotale, woodblocks, and small gongs, "apical topography" is the most percussive of Bartlett's new compositions for solo multiple percussion, utilizing a strong, galloping rhythmic motive in the drums. Alternating with these motives are sparse, metallic sound ambiances. Musically, this may express Bartlett's most mature work with this notational system, as apical topography combines the shimmering qualities of "luminous machine" and the long decays and ringing lines of "star_birth" with a powerful rhythmic element. The use of motivic cells of source material, which are developed and mutated throughout the piece, holds the work together as it travels through a large expressive palette.

Scores and recordings of "star_birth," "luminous machine," and "apical topography" are available at www.nathanielbartlett.com, where you can find out more information about Bartlett's music.

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