

# Lincoln Center Festival

July 13–31, 2016

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**July 28–30** Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse

## Sō Percussion: Trilogy

**July 28**

Reich, Dessner, Lang

**July 29**

Xenakis, Ergün, Trueman

**July 30**

Cage, Lansky, Mackey

### **Sō Percussion**

**Eric Cha-Beach**

**Josh Quillen**

**Adam Sliwinski**

**Jason Treuting**

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## About Sō Percussion: Trilogy

2016 represents a milestone in Sō Percussion's work: 15 years of commissioning new pieces for percussion. In 2001, we had our first professional season, our first concert in New York City at the Bang on a Can Marathon, and the initiation of our first major commission, David Lang's *the so-called laws of nature*.

Our history with Lincoln Center Festival began in 2007 when we teamed up with the electronica duo Matmos for explorations of the tonal possibilities of uncommon objects. Sō returned in 2010 for *Varèse (R)evolution*, during which we played works by the great experimental composer Edgard Varèse. Our latest Festival concerts represent a particular strand of our DNA: ambitious and lengthy works for chamber percussion. As such, they signify a very focused area of our work. Beyond these pieces, we have commissioned and facilitated commissions of many smaller pieces, developed evening-length theatrical projects of our own music with collaborators like the choreographer Emily Johnson, and participated in hybrid collaborations of original music with groups like Matmos, where we often constitute a band more than a chamber ensemble.

Our original founding mission was to expand the exciting but underdeveloped repertoire for percussion quartet. This in itself is a lifetime's worth of work, because the very nature of percussion is broad and fluid. On any given day, a percussion quartet's palette could consist of only "unpitched" sounds (noises or sounds that are not part of the piano keyboard scheme); a mallet quartet of two marimbas and vibes; four players around a piano; or even a consort of amplified string instruments. What

defines percussion is not the specific nature of instruments and playing expertise, but rather our *willingness* to be flexible and diverse with what we play.

Sō's four festival concerts began with Steve Reich's *Drumming* at Alice Tully Hall on July 16 as part of *Reich/Reverberations*, a three-concert series celebrating Reich's 80th birthday. *Drumming* is the pillar that supports most of the other works.

Happily, it is becoming increasingly challenging to explain to young musicians how unthinkable a full program of percussion music used to be in the western world. Béla Bartók, for all of his fascination with percussion, thought the idea novel and "rather monotonous," a fun but unserious experiment.

Sō Percussion deliberately set out to increase the number and quality of pieces that could follow in the footsteps of *Drumming*. We weren't content with a splash of new ideas on otherwise traditional programs—the goal was to rethink the entire concert program as an expression of contemporary ideas. To that end, our aim was not only to produce a large quantity of new commissions, but to inspire composers to make some of their boldest statements through the percussion quartet.

Each performance opens with a shorter major piece from the tiny but brilliant repertoire of percussion music that existed when we started our group. From there, the three concerts explore six of the most ambitious works that have been written for us.

—Adam Sliwinski

## **Sō Percussion: Trilogy**

**July 28** Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse

**Steve Reich: Music for Pieces of Wood (1973)**

Guest Percussionist **Yumi Tamashiro**

**Bryce Dessner: Music for Wood and Strings (2013)**

Commissioned by Carnegie Hall

*Intermission*

**David Lang: the so-called laws of nature (2002)**

Commissioned by Sō Percussion

part 1

part 2

part 3

Approximate performance time: 1 hour and 35 minutes, with one intermission

## **Sō Percussion: Trilogy**

**July 29** Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse

**Iannis Xenakis: Métaux**, from *Pleiades* (1978)

Guest Percussionists **Ian Antonio & Russell Greenberg** (Yarn/Wire)

**Cenk Ergün: Proximity** (2009)

Commissioned by Sō Percussion

*Intermission*

**Dan Trueman: neither Anvil nor Pulley** (2010)

Commissioned by Sō Percussion

Act I: Another Wallflower (From Long Ago)

Act II: 120bpm (Or, What is your Metronome Thinking?)

Act III: A Cow Call (Please oh Please Come Home!)

Act IV: Feedback (In which a Famous Bach Prelude becomes Ill-Tempered)

Act V: Hang Dog Springar (A Slow Dance)

Approximate performance time: 1 hour and 35 minutes, with one intermission

## **Sō Percussion: Trilogy**

**July 30** Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse

### **John Cage: Third Construction (1941)**

#### **Paul Lansky: Threads (2005)**

Commissioned by Sō Percussion

- I. Prelude
- II. Recitative
- III. Chorus
- IV. Aria
- V. Recitative
- VI. Chorus
- VII. Aria
- VIII. Recitative
- IX. Chorus
- X. Chorale Prelude

*Intermission*

#### **Steven Mackey: It Is Time (2010)**

Commissioned by Carnegie Hall and the Chamber Music America Commissioning Program  
Staging elements and video created by **Mark DeChiazza**

- I. Metronome
- II. Steel Drums
- III. Marimba
- IV. Drums
- V. Epilogue

Approximate performance time: 1 hour and 30 minutes, with one intermission

## About the Programs

### July 28

#### Music for Pieces of Wood

**Steve Reich (b. 1936)**

*Music for Pieces of Wood* grows out of the same roots as *Clapping Music*: a desire to make music with the simplest possible instruments. The claves, or cylindrical pieces of hard wood, used here were selected for their particular pitches (A, B, C-sharp, D-sharp, and D-sharp an octave above), and for their resonant timbre. This piece is one of the loudest I have ever composed, but uses no amplification whatsoever. The rhythmic structure is based entirely on the process of rhythmic “buildups” or the substitution of beats for rests, and is in three sections of decreasing pattern length: 6/4, 4/4, 3/4.

—Steve Reich

Each of our concerts in the Lincoln Center *Trilogy* contains one classic work that opens the concert and launches the two Sō commissions. *Music for Pieces of Wood* is a masterly demonstration of a deceptively simple concept: rhythmic ambiguity. It doesn't ruin anything to explain the process, because the delight is in the perception of its prismatic qualities.

Like *Clapping Music*, with which it shares its opening rhythm, *Music for Pieces of Wood* consists of the same rhythm displaced in different parts. Unlike *Clapping Music*, it uses tuned instruments which create a harmonic tapestry. These displaced rhythms are introduced one note at a time, but in a carefully crafted sequence that masks their identity and suggests many possible ways of hearing where the main pulse and “downbeat” of the music might be.

This seemingly simple conceit actually makes *Music for Pieces of Wood* a consistently challenging piece to play, no matter how many times we've done it. Any musician, no matter how seasoned, must concentrate intensively on the task of keeping a pattern steadily offset. The experience is akin to seeing yourself through a dimensional portal, maybe half a second into the future. That disorientation never goes away, but you develop coping strategies such as the reassuring feel of the physical pattern in your hands and arms.

Reich's original version of *Music for Pieces of Wood* calls for tuned claves. When we first started playing it, we grabbed some of the wooden planks that were lying around our studio for David Lang's *the so-called laws of nature*. Reich first heard us do this version in New York at the Look and Listen Festival. He was enthusiastic about the energy and feel of our performance, and I'll never forget what he said about the planks: “Well, I guess I didn't say you *couldn't* do that, they are pieces of wood!”

—AS

#### Music for Wood and Strings

**Bryce Dessner (b. 1976)**

For several years I have been experimenting with simple chorales in my music that utilize triadic chord inversions that are aligned in complex rhythm patterns to create a kaleidoscopic effect of harmony. These feature heavily in my work for orchestra and two guitars, *St. Carolyn by the Sea* (2011), and the writing for my song cycle, *The Long Count* (2009).

While I have used this technique on guitars and strings, I have not had the opportunity to apply it to percussion instruments. For this new Sō Percussion piece I have been working with instrument builder Aron Sanchez (Blue Man Group, Buke and Gase) to design four dulcimer-like instruments to

be played by the quartet. These are simply designed double-course string instruments which are played like a dulcimer, but which are specifically built and tuned to implement a more evolved hybrid of the chorale hocket. Each instrument is amplified using piezo pickups and will have eight double-course strings tuned to two harmonies. With the use of dulcimer mallets, the quartet players can easily sound either harmony, or play individual strings, melodies, and drone tremolos. There are an alto, two tenors, and a bass instrument which can play fretted chromatic bass lines. With these elements as well as a few pieces of auxiliary percussion—bass drum, wood block—the work is about 30 minutes long.

—**Bryce Dessner**

This work has become one of our most popular concert pieces. It demonstrates an evolving and important part of our group philosophy, which is that “percussion” is a style of engagement and an attitude more than an instrument category. The newly invented instruments (called “chordsticks”) that Dessner created for this piece stretch that premise for us, because they are essentially string instruments.

When we perform it, we usually stick around afterwards to do a “show and tell” with audiences (tonight it will be during the intermission). They are invariably fascinated by the mechanics of the chordsticks, which we play in a manner most similar to a hammered dulcimer or cimbalom. Where many string instruments like guitar or violin are designed with capabilities to play a full spectrum of pitches alone, the chordstick is purely an ensemble instrument. Each register of strings is tuned to a fixed chord for the duration of the piece, and the pitch of those strings can only be altered by an octave with the damper in the middle of the instrument.

Dessner deftly composes each chordstick to have a slightly different tuning, so that more complex melodies can result from the performers trading back and forth in the ancient technique known as “hocket.” In this way, although the chordsticks sound very similar to the electric guitar, the composer actually uses a common percussion performance technique that is especially prominent in music from Africa and Bali. We initially experimented with #2 pencils to strike the strings until a better implement could be found, but that turned out to be just the right tool!

The most unique instrument is the bass chordstick that Josh Quillen plays, which possesses one bass string with frets built into the frame. Dessner composes several important sections of the piece to take advantage of the melodic possibilities of this bass string, which satisfyingly turns the usual melody/accompaniment arrangement of high and low voices upside-down.

One of my favorite aspects of this performance is that we decided to forgo any electronic effects such as distortion or delay, electing instead to explore the percussionist’s toolkit of sound-making. In this way, our pencils could strike with the metal eraser-holding end for a sharp sound, and also be turned around to a soft Moleskine wrapping on the other end for a warm sound. At several points we bow the instrument (this was actually the hardest part to get the hang of), or turn the bows over to play with the *legno* (wooden) side. We found that smaller bows built for children obtain the best sound from the strings.

—**AS**

**the so-called laws of nature**  
**David Lang (b. 1957)**

“The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of

natural phenomena. Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. And in fact both were right and both wrong; though the view of the ancients is clearer insofar as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein,

*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

I went to college to study science. I was expected to become a doctor, or at the very least a medical researcher, and I spent very much of my undergraduate years studying math and chemistry and physics, hanging out with future scientists, going to their parties, sharing their apartments, eavesdropping on their conversations. I remember a particularly heated discussion about a quote from Wittgenstein: "At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanation of natural phenomena." This quote rankled all us future scientists, as it implied that science can't explain the universe but can only offer mere descriptions of things observed. Over the years it occurred to me that this could be rephrased as a musical problem. Because music is made of proportions and numbers and formulas and patterns I always wonder what these numbers actually mean. Do the numbers themselves generate a certain structure, creating the context and the meaning and the form, or are they just the incidental byproducts of other, deeper, more mysterious processes? My piece *the so-called laws of nature* tries to explore the "meaning" of various processes and formulas. The individual parts are virtually identical—the percussionists play identical patterns throughout, playing unison rhythms on subtly different instruments. Most of these instruments the performers are required to build

themselves. Some of the patterns between the players are displaced in time. Some are on instruments which have a kind of incoherence built into their sound. Does the music come out of the patterns or in spite of them? I am not sure which, but I know that this piece is as close to becoming a scientist as I will ever get.

—David Lang

When we were students at Yale, one of our original members received a grant to pursue further educational enrichment. He decided to use it to help Sō commission a new work. We approached David Lang, who said bluntly, "you either have enough money for me to write you a very short work or a very *long* one."

When Lang explained his reasoning, it started to make sense: Most professional new music groups at the time were busy premiering many pieces, and it would be difficult to write the kind of huge work he had in mind unless the ensemble had a crazy work ethic and loads of time to devote to it. As graduate students, we had both.

Lang imagined a new kind of percussion quartet, written in homage to *Drumming*, that would spark the entire category of pieces we are celebrating in this Lincoln Center Festival series. The scale of the work—about 36 minutes long—results partially from the unfolding of "gradual processes" inspired by Reich.

Much of *the so-called laws of nature* depends upon perceiving the four players as reflections of each other. The first movement calls for woodblocks to be crafted and tuned, but not to a scheme of keyboard tones such as A-flat or C. They are tuned relative to each other, such that each player's top three notes are identical to every other player, but as the bottom four blocks get larger with each player,



they also get larger respectively down the line. This means that players one and four will have the same top three notes, but there will be a substantial range of size and pitch between the lower four notes.

The entire first three minutes of the first movement of *the so-called laws of nature* is played in perfect unison. Because of the tuning scheme, many different high and low pitches will be contained in those unisons. About a quarter of the way through the movement, sequences begin to activate where players split off from each other, but always joining or leaving a pattern related to another player. These moments of change can be thought of as behaviors, a kind of musical game of “follow the leader.”

The second movement, for tuned metal pipes and drums, places the performers in permanent stasis, fractions of a second apart using the technique of canon. As the players stand in profile, this heightened version of “Row, row, row your boat” builds in complexity for 12 minutes.

The third movement, for tuned flower pots, teacups, bells, woodblock, and guiro, is unison throughout. Importantly, the tuned flowerpots do alternate pitches among the players, so that a ceaseless chorale animates the entire movement. It might seem strange to compose a quartet as four unison performances of a solo composition, but there is a careful and breathless drama in the fragility of watching the performers navigate such delicate instruments in this way.

Each of the commissioned works in our series comes after *the so-called laws of nature*, which sets a precedent and an identity for these kinds of large scale pieces for percussion quartet.

—AS

## July 29

**Métaux**, from *Pleiades*

**Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001)**

Iannis Xenakis’s work had a seismic impact on the percussion repertoire. He is one of many composers in the 20th century who used percussion as an avenue for a boldly new kind of music, one that frequently explores time and space as scientific variables. For some listeners, that mode of creation was (and still is) jarringly antithetical to the emphasis on personal expression and the imitation of the human voice that dominated 19th century music.

As a Greek, Xenakis aligned himself not only with modern radical impulses, but also with the rich vein of rationalistic thought that stretches back to the ancient Greek philosophers. To him, devoting oneself to understanding the mathematical laws of nature and probability was *exceedingly* humanistic. He theorized extensively in his book *Formalized Music* about how we might understand sound and its underlying patterns both inside and outside of listening in time.

Like most European composers of his generation, Xenakis was deeply affected by his experience during World War II. He suffered a dramatic disfigurement from a British tank shell in 1944 that destroyed his left eye and damaged his face. One of his most arresting descriptions of his own music draws on this experience in a strikingly matter-of-fact way:

Everyone has observed the sonic phenomena of a political crowd of dozens or hundreds of thousands of people. The human river shouts a slogan in a uniform rhythm. Then another slogan springs from the head of the demonstration; it spreads towards the tail, replacing the first. A wave of transition

thus passes from the head to the tail. The clamor fills the city, and the inhibiting force of voice and rhythm reaches a climax. It is an event of great power and beauty in its ferocity. Then the impact between the demonstrators and the enemy occurs. The perfect rhythm of the last slogan breaks up in a huge cluster of chaotic shouts, which also spreads to the tail. Imagine, in addition, the reports of dozens of machine guns and the whistle of bullets adding their punctuations to this total disorder. The crowd is then rapidly dispersed, and after sonic and visual hell follows a detonating calm, full of despair, dust, and death. The statistical laws of these events, separated from their political or moral context, are the same as those of the cicadas or the rain. They are the laws of the passage from complete order to total disorder in a continuous or explosive manner. They are stochastic laws.

— from Xenakis's *Formalized Music*

Xenakis was fascinated by the idea that unpredictable individual elements like a human being or a molecule were still subject to forces that affected the behavior of large groups in predictable ways. Actually his primary training was in engineering and architecture, and he led a consequential career in the *Atelier* of the French architect Le Corbusier while developing his musical theories.

His great percussion sextet *Pleiades* provides a thrilling illumination of these theories. We chose the *Métaux* movement for our Lincoln Center Festival concert because in it Xenakis calls for the construction of an entirely new instrument called *Sixxen* (six players + Xenakis). Many of the works in our *Trilogy* series call for either invented instruments or new combinations of objects. This is one of the primary

ways in which percussion composers distinguish the sound world of their music.

*Sixxen* is made of metal, and its sound closely resembles that of a Balinese Gamelan orchestra. As with the wooden planks in David Lang's *the so-called laws of nature*, the metal keys are tuned to more of a general scheme rather than specific notes. One of the key components is that they are tuned intentionally very close to each other from one player to another, but not exactly the same. These small variations in micro-tuning mirror the molecular changes that ripple throughout the piece.

A listener might notice that many moments of *Métaux* carry a sense of confusion and density, while others seem monolithically unified. This is part of the appeal and impact of Xenakis's music, and from the quote above, it is not hard to see that it is all by design.

—AS

## Proximity

### Cenk Ergün (b. 1978)

proximity of attack to attack  
 proximity of attack to decay  
 proximity of decay to decay  
 proximity of frequency to frequency  
 proximity of reiteration to reiteration  
 proximity of microphone to monitor  
 proximity of microphone to instrument  
 proximity of instrument to monitor  
 proximity of instrument to instrument  
 proximity of instrument to player  
 proximity of player to microphone  
 proximity of player to monitor  
 proximity of player to player  
 proximity of player to listener  
 proximity of listener to instrument  
 proximity of listener to microphone  
 proximity of listener to monitor  
 proximity of listener to listener  
 proximity of proximity to proximity

—Cenk Ergün

All of the works written for us fall somewhere on a spectrum between utilizing very specific sounds and imagining categories of sound. David Lang calls for wooden blocks, but the performers are given enormous leeway in what kind of wood to use, how high or low the pitch is, or how large the spread from one player to another might be. Bryce Dessner, on the other hand, calls for one-of-a-kind instruments. It is literally impossible to perform his piece properly without them.

Cenk Ergün's work *Proximity* veers towards the specific. It is a gorgeous, focused, meditative piece that consists entirely of metals: vibraphones, cymbals, bells, tam-tams, and more. Cenk rummaged through our studio in Brooklyn cataloguing and sampling our exact instruments. As Cenk was born and raised in Turkey, the languorous sonic environment that he conjures up with these is directly related to that upbringing. When listening to *Proximity*, listeners can turn off the part of their brain that seeks argument or resolution from music, and focus instead on the sensual nature of sound.

—AS

**neither Anvil nor Pulley**  
**Dan Trueman (b. 1968)**

Unlike the anvil or the pulley, the computer hides its purpose—to strike or yank will only break. What is this “tool” we call a computer? It is surely not really about computation, and what does it offer us as musical beings? *neither Anvil nor Pulley* is, in short, a wordless musical epic that explores the “man”/machine relationship in the digital age. Are there musical places we can travel to or musical buildings we can construct with this tool that were impossible—even for us to imagine—with its predecessors?

The cast: a turntable spinning vinyl with the fuzzy, crackling remains of some old sounding fiddle tunes; virtual metronomes, clicking relentlessly, but reset by striking raw chunks of wood; re-purposed golf video game controllers (joysticks with pull-strings, or “tethers”); a huge bass drum with speaker drivers attached, performed with hand-held microphones, the resultant feedback tuned via digital filters to the key notes of a well-known Bach Prelude; difficult drum machines; four virtuoso and highly imaginative percussionists.

We begin with the crackle and fuzz of a needle dropping on vinyl, in five acts of varying lengths and natures.

Composing for (I really should say “with”) Sō Percussion is an incredible pleasure. Their collaborative and adventurous spirits (not to mention their sheer musical abilities) are awesome. In the past, I've had the privilege of actually performing my own music with them; I don't join them here on *neither Anvil nor Pulley*, but a dop-pelganger of sorts, in the form of a turntable, sits in.

—Dan Trueman

“Electronic music as such will gradually die and be absorbed into the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments.”

—Steve Reich, 1970

I think the key phrase in this quote from Steve Reich is “as such.” While his assertion is debatable, it has largely come true. In 1970, when he incorporated this aphorism into a series of predictions about the future of music, electronic music was a fixed medium. With the advent of magnetic tape around the time of World War II, composers even started referring to their creations in this field as *concrète*. This was actually one of its benefits! For centuries music could

only be transmitted via oral tradition and notation. In this sense, an indication of how somebody should go about making sound was possible, but the sound itself could never be preserved. With the advent of recordings, sounds could be preserved, but with magnetic tape they could be *manipulated*. This opened up a whole world of possibilities for composition and assembly. Now composers weren't working with symbolic representations of a sound—they were working with the sound itself.

For a composer like Reich, the evident weakness of this fixed medium was that it cut out one of the most fun parts of music making: the people! Making fixed works of electronic music has not died at all, but new technology has enabled fascinating ways for musicians to use and even interact with it.

Dan Trueman embodies this duality in a striking way. On any given day, he is as likely to code the software for a new digital instrument as to snatch his Norwegian Hardangar fiddle off its peg on the wall and compose tunes for it. Ultimately, all of the electronic instruments he creates are subsumed into “the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments,” rather than existing just as a set of instructions for the computer to execute.

Trueman's work *neither Anvil nor Pulley* throws down the digital/human gauntlet in a way that peculiarly suits Sō Percussion's approach. In similar fashion to David Lang's *the so-called laws of nature*, it explores the outer reaches of both mechanical alienation and human intimacy. The computer programs that he developed for both *120bpm* and *Feedback* are strikingly innovative on a technical level, but that aspect is always submerged into an aesthetic purpose.

*120bpm* contains a simple premise that is laden with possibilities: If the percussionist strikes a note that triggers a metronome, that pulse will be rigid and fixed. But if *four* players strike them at different times, each of their fixed pulses will be scattered according to human timing. This creates a considerable musical challenge for the ensemble, because it requires the performers to develop machine-like execution at precisely the same tempo. If the hocketing notes aren't timed correctly, a wonky off-kilter rhythm will result. From the composer's point of view, this is also an opportunity, because it means that the rhythms can be wonky and off-kilter on purpose, creating a stark contrast with the (hopefully) perfectly square notes.

Somehow, Trueman also figured out how to hack into video game joysticks, tethers that snap back into place when released. We use these as dynamic sound controllers towards the end of *120bpm*, a steady chorale over the relentlessly reducing rhythms of the machine.

*Feedback* is a kind of simultaneous homage to Karlheinz Stockhausen, J.S. Bach, and Jimi Hendrix. Our concert bass drum is converted into a noisy amplifier, much in the way that Stockhausen's *Mikrofonie* filtered resonance from a giant tam-tam (this was an intentional reference on Trueman's part). In this case, our laptops actually take the microphone feedback and squish it into cycling harmonies from the C major prelude of book one from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

But “feedback” isn't only a microphone trick: It's a process that can execute on multiple levels. Two drum machines begin cycling rhythms back in on themselves, counting down, over and over again. Jason Treuting is tasked on the drumset with keeping track of these asymmetrical cycles

and playing along with them. In his playing the man and the machine begin to rip each other apart: As the algorithms spin faster and faster, the human tries desperately to keep up. All the while, the bass drum feedback continues to escalate...

After Trueman constructed these two movements, he realized that he had, in a sense, created a monster. Some relief for the listener was needed. He crossed his home studio from the computer console to the stacks of fiddle tunes that he had been compiling and writing for years. These pieces, coming as they do out of unwritten folk traditions, express odd and unusual performance ideas. The neat binary world of computer language would never create something as lopsided as the "springar" Norwegian dance meter, where each beat is a slightly different length than the last. These fiddle tunes can't be quantified; they must be felt. We orchestrated them for our own resources: steel drums, vibraphone, drumset, crotales, and melodica.

Ultimately, our interaction with technology creates both opportunities and perils. The great debate about how machines affect our humanity has now muddled into alerts and notifications that remind us of our constant attachment to them. Artists will continue to probe, articulate, and question that evolving relationship.

—AS

## July 30

### Third Construction

#### John Cage (1912-1992)

Percussion music is a contemporary transition from keyboard-influenced music to the all-sound music of the future. Any sound is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden 'non-musical' field of sound insofar as is manually possible.

—John Cage, 1937

A third concept ... is to eliminate sounds of determined pitch from music. Or, in other words, to write pieces for percussion instruments alone. This idea seems to have been propagated mostly in this country the U.S.A.; in fact, I have seen whole programs made up only of percussion music. However interesting the use of rhythmic and other devices, I think it is nevertheless a rather monotonous experience for the listener to sit through a program made up exclusively of percussion music. This is my feeling despite my high personal interest in the exploitation of percussion instruments in various new ways.

—Béla Bartók, 1943

These conflicting statements by two major composers of the twentieth century highlight one of the great rifts in contemporary discussions about music: What do we do about noise? "Noise" in this case refers not only to sounds that are loud or irritating, but more broadly to any that do not correspond with a tone on the piano keyboard (A, B, etc.). The history of how we arrived at tuning those keyboard tones is fascinating: They are compromised tunings, designed to create a symmetrical and flexible instrument that can modulate to different keys. Since J.S. Bach's time, our musical discourse has revolved almost entirely around how to use them.

The role of the percussionist in Western music has long been to provide punctuation, color, and rhythmic drive. Within certain bounds of taste, composers employed noise to enhance their ambitious works. But it was taken for granted that for any piece of music to have real legitimacy and substance, it must consist of melodies and harmonies derived from the keyboard tones.

When, in the early 20th century, Arnold Schoenberg took the seemingly radical step of systematizing the way the twelve tones were used in modern composition

and breaking away from the traditional harmonic framework, he left this assumption of tone-based thinking completely intact. It was John Cage, a student of his in California, who took the most assertive step towards an all-encompassing world of “organized sound,” an approach to composition that embraced the world’s chaos and stillness altogether.

As happens with most artistic breakthroughs, this idea was already in the air. The Italian Futurists glorified the grinding cacophony of the industrial age decades earlier, and Edgard Varèse imagined music as massive sound objects colliding with each other, attracting and repulsing like celestial bodies. In 1931, Varèse premiered *Ionisation*, an elegantly assembled but raucous collection of sirens, drums, rattles, and bells. This important early work for percussion ensemble articulated a new insight that Bartók casually dismissed: Percussion was not only an extension of colors and exotic flavors that comprised a new niche group of instruments. It represented, as Cage famously claimed, “an artistic revolution.”

Along with my colleagues in Sō Percussion, a quartet that I have performed in since 2002, I teach a course at Princeton University to PhD composition students on writing for percussion. We always begin the semester by examining Cage’s *Third Construction* from 1941, a work written for a fantastic variety of percussion sounds that, in my opinion, is his greatest feat of craftsmanship. We do this because some composers have not yet tried their hand at building a piece of music without using tones as the primary organizing element. Cage’s work is so dazzlingly brilliant that it is hard to deny that he has created something more than a novelty out of purely rhythmic and coloristic elements.

Cage achieves this in an ingenious way: Instead of taking a tiny kernel motive and expanding its possibilities outward (Beethoven’s “duh-duh-duh-duuuuuuh” opening from his Fifth Symphony is an iconic example), he starts composing by deciding upon an outer shell: twenty-four sections of music consisting of twenty-four measures each, which creates a kind of square-root or fractal pattern. By determining this sturdy structure, he can add noise into the composition without each sound needing to justify its own existence as a cause or effect of the other sounds; it can be just sound, and the piece will still hold together.

For instance, a shaker can be composed inside the shell structure to provide a nervous layer of noise for eight measures, pulsating on each bar, without justifying what the purpose of its existence might be for the goal of the piece. The shaker sound takes up time and space, making noise, and that is its justification for being in the scheme. But we can be assured that it will not go on shaking forever, because the larger section will have 16 more measures no matter what. I don’t want to leave the impression that *Third Construction* is static and does not build or climax—it does in the most spectacular way. However it owes its existence more to a carefully planned subdivision of sections and rhythmic ideas than would any tonal piece (which relies on harmonic resolution for structure, not time).

Cage is most famous for his provocative 1952 “silent piece,” most commonly referred to by the duration of the premiere performance: four minutes and thirty-three seconds. His great insight in composing *4’33”* was that the one indispensable element of music was not melody, harmony, or even necessarily rhythm, but duration. Sound must exist during a span of time, and that is all. The duration of the piece is also its

structure, much like the 24x24 measure structure of *Third Construction*.

In 4'33", the performer indicates the beginning of the piece, and then does not make any intentional sound, incorporating only a few more visual gestures (like the opening of a piano lid) to indicate sectional divisions of the work. Of course, no performance space is completely silent, and so diverse combinations of sound permeate the space of the work (audience coughing or snickering, air conditioner vents, outdoor sounds).

*Third Construction* was composed eleven years earlier, so it is not quite as radical (Cage's output seems only to get more daring and abstract over the years). Its noises are more controlled and intentional. Of course, there is still a lot of variation between different interpretations of what rattle or shaker should be used, but at least the noises are composed on paper in measures and beats, which makes them easier to compare to other music from the notated past.

—AS

## Threads

### Paul Lansky (b. 1944)

My first exposure to any of Paul's music was unwitting, as I'm sure it has been for many people: the gnarly, distorted portion of *Mild und Leise* that Jonny Greenwood found in the back of a record shop and pasted into Radiohead's *Idioteque* from *Kid A*. I was astounded to learn years after *Kid A* came out that this loop was actually the tiniest passing chunk of an 18-minute long computer piece from 1973 based on Richard Wagner's "Tristan chord" (and making reference to one of his most famous bits of music).

To talk to Paul about the evolution of computer music is to hear its entire history: When he was working at Princeton and

Bell Labs in the 1960's, the computers were "as big as this room and less powerful than your cell phone," as he told an audience of our Summer Institute students who were sitting in a very large room.

I highly recommend reading Paul's keynote speech from a recent ICMC (International Computer Music Conference). For a younger person or percussionist who only knows Lansky through his acoustic compositions, this speech provides a powerful sense of where he is coming from and his place in the last 50 years of music history.

Paul wrote *Threads* for us in 2005. When Sō searches for composers to write percussion music, we consider many factors, but the most powerful is our desire to find a voice that speaks naturally through percussion instruments. As a result, we sometimes find ourselves off the beaten path of contemporary chamber music. There are many wonderful composers out there, but percussion has a special voice.

We approached him to write for us after a concert of student pieces that Sō performed at Princeton in 2004. He was hesitant at first, saying that he "had never actually written for percussion before." We protested that three decades of computer pieces said otherwise, especially his work *Table's Clear*.

In fact, many of our favorite percussion composers were heavily involved in electronic media (Cage, Reich, Xenakis). We thought that Paul's work with algorithms and computer processing might yield fascinating results. The conversation went something like: "If you write interesting music on four lines, we'll help you figure out what instruments to put it on."

Paul came out to our studio the next year with a series of ten etudes in hand, explor-

ing toys, melodic instruments, and drums. We talked about timbres, limitations, and all of the issues inherent in playing acoustic instruments with human hands. He was a voracious student of the medium. Interestingly, he carried none of the baggage that a life-long percussionist has...to us, sleigh bells meant Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride," while to him they sounded quirky and interesting.

Astonishingly soon after this workshop I travelled down to Princeton to see what he had come up with. I sat mesmerized in his studio as he played a continuous 30-minute, ten movement piece for me. He kept looking up as if to ask "is this any good?" I was spellbound. *Threads* quickly became a staple of our touring repertoire. In my opinion, it stands toe-to-toe with pieces like Cage's *Third Construction* in defining what percussion chamber music can be.

When we coach young ensembles that are playing *Threads*, the first question we always ask is "have you heard any of Paul's computer music?" The answer is almost invariably "no." At which point, we ask the students to hang out for 20 minutes or so while we play excerpts of *Table's Clear*, *NotJustMoreIdleChatter*, or *The Sound of Two Hands*.

Edgard Varèse wrote percussion music partially because he could not yet realize the electronic music he was hearing in his head. Lansky pulls a sort of reverse-Varèse move: What might have been ideal material for synthesized sounds is now converted into bottles, ceramics, and sleigh bells in the fifth movement and throughout.

In that session with Paul, my excitement grew with each passing moment. It was obviously a terrific piece, but as the last movement began, a chill ran up my spine.

There were no exotic rituals or virtuosic displays; just rolling vibraphone harmony and a chorale for glockenspiel and metal pipes.

If you play or listen to *Threads* without encountering Paul's computer music, you will certainly enjoy it, but it's more difficult to appreciate how hard-won those beautiful melodies are. His journey as a young composer began in the studios of Milton Babbitt and George Perle, steeped in the intoxicating complexity of post-tonal music. And yet that journey continues, after numerous achievements, with recitatives for glass bottles and heartfelt arias for metal pipes.

—AS

### **It Is Time**

#### **Steve Mackey (b. 1956)**

*It Is Time* marshals the virtuosity of the individual members of Sō to speed, slow, warp, celebrate and mourn our perceptions of time. Each of the four sections of the piece is a mini concerto for one of the players. First Eric Beach leads the music in a multi percussion set up composed of metronome with delay, pump organ, bells, china cymbal on hi-hat stand and a few other assorted toys. Josh Quillen follows on steel drums, Adam Sliwinski on marimba, and Jason Treuting on drumset.

The piece draws its inspirations from various sources including my admiration for Sō Percussion, the inscrutable grooves of the Latin drummer, Horatio "el Negro" Hernandez, the rhythm of a bouncing ball and ultimately the fact that the last ten years went by much faster than the previous ten and there doesn't seem to be anything I can do to slow that down. Sure there are timeless moments here and there but the decades speed by ... or maybe I'm just more patient than I used to be.

—Steve Mackey



In Sō Percussion, everything is equal. We make artistic decisions by consensus, everybody has the same vote, and we do our best not to present the group as having any hierarchy. A lot of our repertoire features this same dynamic, even to the point where each of us plays identical instruments in layers of complexity (Reich, Lang, Xenakis). *It Is Time* is designed to break the pattern of anonymity within our music, while still setting us all on equal footing.

In order to do this, Steve Mackey sat us down over barbecue and asked a simple question: "What instrument do you want to play?" This is perhaps a question that only composers writing for percussion get to ask in this way. It burrows to the heart of our individual identities as musicians, probing not only what skills we have in common, but also what makes us unique. We each answered differently, and he structured the piece around those preferences. This not only brilliantly provided him with a jumping-off point for the composition, it also ensured that the performers would be maximally invested in the process. The following is an account, by each of us in turn, of our collaboration with Mackey on the making of *It Is Time*.

—AS

### **Movement I: Metronome**

Working with Steve on *It Is Time* was a huge challenge for me, and it really helped that Steve was interested in true collaboration. I didn't have a strong idea going into the project about what specific instrument(s) to play, and I was worried that he wouldn't be inspired to do anything interesting if I didn't already have an idea for him. But the discussion with Steve about what exactly to write for inspired him in a different way than would have been possible otherwise.

I still have the list of instruments that I suggested. For each one I wrote a little description and recorded myself playing it for about a minute. He used almost all of them: glass bottle, china cymbal/hi hat, Estey child's organ, frame drum, metronome, Noah bells, and small bells. I also recorded a little concertina, some other drums, and a stack of poker chips—those three things were the only instruments I sent him that didn't end up in the piece.

**Estey Organ:** This is a bellows reed organ that was made by the Estey Organ company in Brattleboro, Vermont.

**China Cymbal/Hi-Hat:** This is a simple setup of a hi-hat made up of a china cymbal on top and a mute on the bottom—in this case, the mute is actually a smaller cymbal that is wrapped in a few towels.

**Musical Saw:** This is the one complete instrument that Steve asked me to learn how to play from scratch. He toyed with the idea of a theremin as well, but his first inspiration was the saw and I agreed to learn how to play it.

**Frame Drum:** This is a standard frame drum mounted on a snare drum stand so that I can play it with one hand.

**Metronome:** This is an analog Wittner metronome that I amplify with a contact microphone and run through a digital delay pedal.

**Noah Bells:** These are simple copper bells that traditionally come from India or Pakistan.

**Wine Bottle:** This is filled with an amount of water that tunes the bottle to a specific pitch.

**Small Bells:** These are traditional celebration bells from India. —Eric Cha-Beach

## **Movement II: Steel Drums**

What struck me the most about Steve's way of learning the steel drums was his desire to hear me play the way I naturally wanted to play. He was curious about my idiosyncrasies as a player because this was an instrument he had never written for. I often wonder: If he had written this for another steel drummer, would it have turned out completely differently? Maybe it wouldn't be different at all, but once the music starting arriving via email bit by bit, I found that it challenged me like no other music written for the steel drum, while at the same time, somehow, showing clearly how I should make it my own. Steve strove to push me as a player to interpret his music the way I would Calypso music, and it meant a lot that he was being so thoughtful about tradition while writing incredibly difficult music.

Along the way, I expected to have to tell Steve that things needed to be rewritten so they would flow better, but his thoughtful obsession about what he was writing kept me from having to do that. He had diagrams of my instruments at home so he could slowly "play" every note he was writing. If he could play it slow, then in his mind, I could play it fast. Well, it worked!

Writing for the steel drums is difficult, but the two of us broke new ground together, coming across something that I am sure doesn't exist yet elsewhere in the steel drum world. Steve started asking me if I could re-tune metal bowls to have a few of the higher lead pan pitches detuned a bit by a quarter tone (i.e., microtonally detuned). I did mess around with a few of the bowls, but the setup started to get a little unwieldy to deal with, and they just didn't sound as good as the steel drum. It occurred to me that I had an older "Invader" style lead pan. It was really out

of tune and beat up, but on a whim I called the tuner I was using to ask him if he could tune the entire pan back into shape, but just leave the whole thing a quarter tone sharp of A440. His response was, "well, I'll just set the strobe tuner a quarter tone sharp and roll with it." When I got the pan back, it sounded in tune with itself, but as soon as I put it with the newer lead pan (tuned to A440), a whole new world opened up. It doubled the amount of notes Steve could write for between middle C and the F above the treble clef staff.

As a player, collaborating with Steve Mackey on *It is Time* pushed me to augment my already existing skills as a steel drummer in ways I would have never dreamed. He is an endless reservoir of wild ideas that seem to have no filter at first glance, but on second look are masterfully crafted innovations and a thoughtful flushing out of brilliant ideas.

—Josh Quillen

## **Movement III: Marimba**

By the time the first two movements were sketched out, Steve realized that *It is Time* was approaching epic proportions, and its story was turning darker. His meditation on the concept of time had lead him to a more melancholic place, where exhilaration at the thought of controlling and harnessing it also revealed its indifference and inevitability.

I was thrilled that Steve would throw this kind of challenge at himself in a percussion piece. My favorite moments in Sō's work happen when a composer finds these spaces for introspection: sometimes elegiac, often conflicted. Each one seems to take the creator by surprise. I'm thinking especially of the flower pots and teacups in David Lang's *the so-called laws of nature*, the final Chorale Prelude in Paul Lansky's *Threads*, and the second movement of

Steve Reich's *Mallet Quartet*. Some of Jason's music from amid the noise is unbearably melancholic to me, precisely because it isn't exactly.

The third movement of *Is It Time* begins with the simplest gesture: a bouncing ball, releasing its potential energy with a burst of optimism, but always returning to rest. Steve wanted "time"—such as it is here—to come to a screeching halt at the beginning of this section. What had built up into a huge menagerie of instruments and colors is now reduced to the solo marimba: a quiet roll on one note that barely erupts into the first bouncing ball. For a while, this single gesture repeats: winding down, restarting, over and over again. While Steve and I were working together, this was straightforward enough, as learning to control the natural bounce of a stick is one of the first things that a percussionist has to do. But he wanted to take it further. How could we create polyphony, the perception of overlapping wind up and release?

He wondered if notating gestures with general overlap indications would be effective. Not trusting my own ability to be convincing with that, I told him how much I admire the way composers like Xenakis use precise notation to achieve chaotic results. In the end, he decided upon a way of notating the gesture as an accelerating rhythm, so that an overlapping gesture could be placed anywhere, worked out for performance as a complex polyrhythm. Paradoxically, this kind of detailed execution frees the performer from his own tendencies and limitations. Often as an artist you want to celebrate those personal tendencies, but in this case we needed an impersonal, inevitable force.

His final touch took me completely by surprise. While I toil away at my fateful gestures, the other members of the group rise up from their instruments and start walking

around, placing little dinosaur wind-up toys all over the stage. It's chaotic, distracting, and frankly takes a bit of attention away from the soloist. To my mock-dismay, it was also pitch-perfect, exactly what the movement needed. After all, the music that I'm playing is not in any sense about me. Gravity and nature are indifferent to our need for attention, which is why we hold them in awe.

—AS

#### **Movement IV: Drums**

I first heard Steve Mackey play electric guitar on a concert of his music as an undergraduate student at the Eastman School of Music. I was a double major at the time, studying classical percussion and drumset. I checked out Steve's show and didn't quite know what to make of it. It was mostly composed music, but had a feel of discovery and freedom in the moment. So when I met Steve five or so years later at the Yellowbarn Chamber Music Festival, I begged him to improvise with me in the evenings when the long rehearsal days were over. During those sessions, I really got to know him as an electric guitarist and improviser before knowing him as a composer.

I have long been anxious about working drumset into Sō's chamber music, because in my opinion it rarely succeeds in that medium. The drumset is essentially a folk instrument to which each player is expected to have a unique approach. Attempts to codify it through standard notation tend to squash that uniqueness. And when the drumset is used to obliquely reference the popular styles that it has come to define (jazz, blues, R&B, funk, rock, Latin jazz styles, etc.), things can go drastically wrong.

I didn't have these fears with Steve. It didn't cross my mind to shy away from drumset: We knew each other very well as players and he knows the instrument(s)

very well as a composer. In this sense, much of the work was already done. The time needed for a composer and performer to feel each other out and discover what is possible had happened over and over again each time we played together. So, now was the time to feel out which direction to choose from the many we knew were possible. I wasn't quite prepared for the new rhythmic language he would innovate and how fascinating it would be to learn to translate that to the drumset.

In the fourth movement, steady time is bent and warped. In the many improvisations and little pieces Steve and I made together, we often explored the limits of how malleable groove can be, especially in duo situations. But in the case of a quartet, where a larger group is tasked with bending and warping together, a common reference is needed. Steve chose two angles to explore.

The first looks back to the analog metronome that was so central to the first movement. In this last movement, the steadiness of the metronome is warped by physically tilting it on a block. Steve and Eric discovered that if you set the metronome at just the perfect angle, you

can take two steady beats and turn them into a longer and shorter beat and thus warp the groove.

For the second, Steve references common Latin patterns from cowbell and clave playing to serve as warp-worthy grooves. In the drumset music that I play, he composes these patterns and their variations in all four limbs—my left foot alternates between a pedal cowbell and hi-hat—which shift back and forth between warped and “straight” settings.

Many great drummers warp groove and play around with time as an expressive tool in their improvisations. Steve embraces this sensibility, but he mixes it with the craft of a composer who methodically develops musical ideas throughout a piece. When the drum set is incorporated into contemporary chamber and orchestra music, it is usually a more static element for other things to develop against, but in this movement, he gives the drumset the ability to take themes, both rhythmic and melodic, and develop them as the driving force. That is not common and not so easy.

**—Jason Treuting**

## About the Artists

**Sō Percussion**, which has redefined the scope of the modern percussion ensemble, made its Lincoln Center Festival debut in 2007 in two collaborative concerts with the electronic duo Matmos, then returned in 2010 for *Varèse (R)evolution*, a celebration of the music of Edgard Varèse. The ensemble's repertoire ranges from "classics" of the 20th century, by John Cage, Steve Reich, Iannis Xenakis, et al, to commissioning and advocating works by contemporary composers such as David Lang, Steve Mackey, and Paul Lansky, to distinctively modern collaborations with artists who work outside the classical concert hall, including vocalist Shara Worden, the groundbreaking Dan Deacon, legendary drummer Bobby Previte, jam band kings Medeski, Martin, and Wood, Wilco's Glenn Kotche, choreographer Shen Wei, and composer and leader of The National, Bryce Dessner. Sō Percussion also composes and performs its own works, ranging from standard concert pieces to immersive multi-genre programs including *Imaginary City*, *Where (we) Live*, and the newest endeavor, *A Gun Show*. In these concert-length programs, Sō Percussion employs a distinctively 21st century synthesis of original music, artistic collaboration, theatrical production values, and visual art into a powerful exploration of a unique and personal creative experience. Sō Percussion is the Edward T. Cone Ensemble-in-Residence at Princeton University, its members are Co-Directors of the percussion department at the Bard College-Conservatory of Music, and the annual Sō Percussion Summer Institute (SōSI), provides college-age composers and percussionists an immersive exposure to collaboration and project development.

**Yarn/Wire** is a New York-based percussion and piano quartet composed of Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg (percussion) and Laura Barger and Ning Yu (piano). Founded in 2005, the ensemble is admired for the energy and precision it brings to performances of today's most adventurous music, and is dedicated to expanding the repertoire written for its instrumentation, through commissions and collaborative initiatives that aim to build a new and lasting body of work. Influenced by its members' experiences with classical music, avant-garde theater, and rock music, the ensemble champions a varied and probing repertoire. Yarn/Wire has commissioned works from numerous American and international composers, given several U.S. premieres, and enjoys collaborations with genre-bending artists. Yarn/Wire appears nationally at leading festivals and venues including Lincoln Center Festival, where it appeared last year. For more information, visit [YarnWire.org](http://YarnWire.org).

**Yumi Tamashiro** (Percussion) trained as a pianist but was "converted" to percussion by the allure of teaching high school drumline. Her undergraduate 20th century music history class turned her on to contemporary music. A freelance percussionist based in New York City, she has developed a strong interest in performing with electronics and visual media and collaborates with animation artists and dancers. She has performed at the Tennessee Theater, Kennedy Center, The Stone, The Bohemian National Hall, and (Le) Poisson Rouge. She has worked on a range of projects including Big Ears Festival 2014, Carnegie Neighborhood Series, Ecstatic Music Festival, and Make Music New York. Her repertoire includes works by Elliott Carter, Steve Reich, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Daniel Wohl, and Iannis

Xenakis, among many others. She has also performed with groups such as Nexus, EnsembleLPR, and Mivos Quartet. She is Managing Director of Sō Percussion. Her work as an arts administrator includes tour managing, creating travel itineraries, grant writing, and managing logistical aspects for concerts and events.

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Sō Percussion Interns

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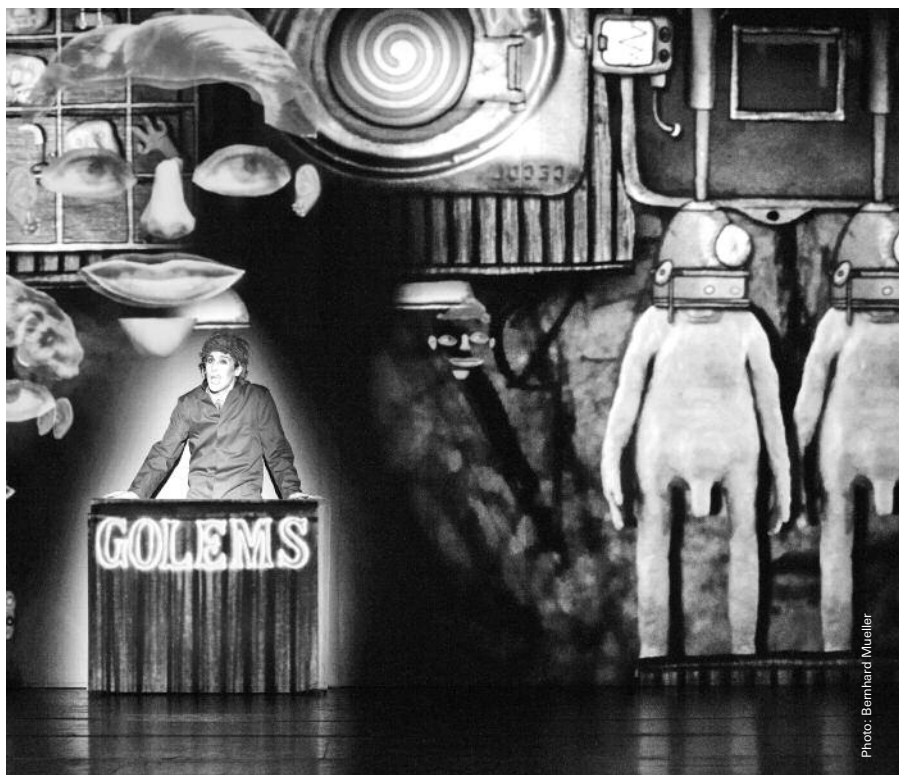
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## Looking Ahead: 1927's *Golem*



From July 26–31, Paul Barritt and Suzanne Andrade's 1927 comes to Lincoln Center Festival with its production of *Golem*, a modern recasting of the 19th century Prague tale of the man-made servant gone askew. In 1927's production, the Golem is a wildly successful product of a tech startup, putting the story into modern context. Things start going awry when one Golem begins making unwelcome (but intriguing) suggestions to its owner. *The Charleston City Paper* calls *Golem* an "eye-ravishing extravaganza," while the *Guardian* (U.K.) claims: "anyone interested in theatre must attend."

**For more information and a complete schedule of Lincoln Center Festival events, visit [LincolnCenterFestival.org](http://LincolnCenterFestival.org).**