

Advancing Percussion Through Composition Interviews with emerging percussionist-composers

By Oliver Molina

On March 18, 2014 Dr. Dave Gerhart posted a blog on drumchattr.com highlighting thoughts of Dr. John Lane from the PASIC 2013 session “Four Manifestos of the Percussive Artist.” Dr. Lane listed five points in his lecture that addressed five problems suppressing the advancement of the percussive artist.

After reading the blog post I pondered the current state of percussion and where it will be in the future. I started to think about today’s composers who are advancing the percussive arts, and I compiled a list of emerging percussionist-composers who I believed are starting to add to the current musical canon. I wanted to pick their brains about their backgrounds, composing, how they have developed as a composer, and where they think the direction of percussion composition is going.

The composers chosen for interview have won the PAS composition contest, started their own publishing house, have their music published through various publishing companies, have been commissioned on numerous occasions, and have had works premiered at PASIC. The composers interviewed were Andy Akiho, Brian Blume, Joe Moore, Brian Nozny, Baljinder Sekhon, and Ivan Trevino.

Andy Akiho is a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton University in New Jersey. Brian Blume is the Instructor of Percussion at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida. Joe Moore is the instructor of percussion at the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. Brian Nozny is on percussion faculty at Troy University in Alabama. Baljinder Sekhon serves on the composition faculty at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Ivan Trevino is a percussionist and rock drummer residing in Austin, Texas.

Oliver Molina: *When and how did you get your start with composing?*

Ivan Trevino: I started songwriting in high school for a punk band I played in. I play a bit of guitar, which at the time was my

principal songwriting instrument. Once I got to Eastman for my undergrad percussion studies, I started transferring my songwriting background to more formal “academic” compositions.

Brian Blume: I first began composing cadences, exercises, short features for marching band shows, etc. for my high school drumline. More substantial composing experience came during college when I began writing for indoor percussion ensembles—my first experience writing for melodic percussion. I got my start writing concert percussion music when I needed a multi-percussion solo for a recital and had trouble finding one I liked. So my teacher said, “Just write one!” And I did!

Baljinder Sekhon: My first composition was a piece for solo snare drum when I was nine years old. I brought it to my private teacher, Myles Overton, during one of my percussion lessons and was very excited about the idea that I could write music down on manuscript. This was followed by numerous etudes for a variety of percussion instruments that I continued to work on throughout middle school. My first “serious” piece wasn’t until I was 15 or 16 when I set some texts by William Blake and wrote my first chamber orchestra piece. Beyond my earliest works for percussion, I did not focus on composing for percussion during the most important stages of my development as a composer. I was more focused on composing for a wide range of instruments and only moved back to serious percussion writing when I felt my creative skills could be applied to the medium in a way that would contribute a unique voice to our field.

Brian Nozny: When I was in high school I wrote some things for the rock band I was in, but I didn’t really start composing seriously until I got to college. The first piece I wrote was a marimba solo called “Away” when I was an undergrad. I had this idea that

I didn’t want to play anything other guys in the studio were playing, so when my teacher suggested some pieces that were already being played, I asked if I could write something myself instead, and he went for it.

Joe Moore: I started composing during my undergraduate studies at the University of Central Florida. As a percussion student I was required to write a short composition for a specified percussion instrument each semester. My sophomore year I was required to compose a short multiple percussion work X-amount of measures long, so I decided to write a multiple percussion duet based on the number 5. I titled the work “Dimension 5” and performed it on my junior recital with percussionist Chris McWilliams. I sent the score and recording to Innovative Percussion Publications on a whim. They published the work, and from that point I decided that if I was going to be serious about composing I should actually study the art of composition.

Andy Akiho: As a percussionist, I have always wanted to create and invent. Because we are constantly asked to find or build instruments, invent sounds, improvise, and conceptualize percussion setups, we are constantly situated in what I think is a compositional mindset. I never knew that was a path towards becoming a real composer, but I am really happy it ended up that way.

Molina: *What is your compositional background?*

Trevino: Composing is something I grew into. I didn’t major in composition in college, so I kind of learned by doing. My songwriting background definitely helped, and it helped that I was immersed in all kinds of music, both classical and non classical, which I think formed my own sound and style. I was also lucky to have John Beck as a percussion teacher at Eastman, who supported my passion for composing and encouraged me to bring my compositions in to our lessons for

A new combination of instruments inspires me to accept the challenge of writing for something unfamiliar.—Andy Akiho



him to listen to and critique. I never thought that composing music would be such a big part of my life, but now I can't imagine a life without creating music. I've written over 30 works for the percussion genre, and some of the performers and groups I've written for include Michael Burritt, Dr. Eric Willie, Philip O'Banion, Eastman School of Music, Tennessee Tech University, Novus Percurtere, and Escape 10 Percussion Duo. I also write for non-percussionists and am one of the principal composers for Break of Reality, a cello rock band out of New York City.

Blume: After getting my start writing for indoor percussion, I began writing for concert percussion—solo and ensemble—while studying with Kevin Bobo, David Schneider, and Aaron Travers during undergraduate and graduate studies at Indiana University. I have composed or arranged over 25 indoor or marching band shows, a variety of concert percussion works, two choral works, a few fixed electronics pieces, and music for television commercials, which have aired on CBS, ESPN, Big Ten Network, and MTV.

Sekhon: My formal composition training came from the Eastman School of Music, where I received a PhD and MM, and I studied with Robert Morris, David Liptak, Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon, Allan Schindler, and Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez. Eastman has a rotating composition studio, and I was fortunate to study with everyone during my time there. My BM in Composition/Theory is from University of South Carolina where my primary teacher was John Fitz Rogers. My time as a composition fellow at Bang On a Can, The Composers Conference at Wellesley College, and the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra also made significant contributions to my growth as a composer. The majority of my formal training was devoted to learning about and developing compositional systems, expanding my musical tastes, and exploring a wide range of genres.

Nozny: I got my BA at Virginia Tech, where I did emphasis in both performance and

composition. There my main composition teacher was Jon Polifrone, though I also studied with Kent Holliday and jazz composition with Chip McNeill. I then went to the University of Miami where I got a Masters in Composition studying with Don Wilson and electro-acoustic composition with Keith Kothman. At the University of North Texas, where I got my masters degree in performance, graduate students are required to have a minor concentration so I studied more electro-acoustic composition with Dave Gedosh, Jon Nelson, and Chapman Welch.

While in college I wrote for just about everything except strings. Now though, I pretty much stick to percussion. I've been commissioned by the Caixa Trio, Omar Carmenates, the Denkyem Percussion Group, the Florida State University Percussion Ensemble, Adam Groh, Scott Herring, the MASS Marimba Band, Nexus, the University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble, the University of North Texas Percussion Ensemble, and the Troy University Percussion Ensemble.

Moore: At UCF I studied composition with Jay Batzner, who now teaches at Central Michigan University. I also studied with Dinos Constantinides and Brett William Dietz at LSU.

I have written works for several different instruments and ensembles. My solo instrument catalogue includes works for flute, oboe, E-flat clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, horn, tuba, piano, electric guitar, banjo, harp, toy piano, hammered dulcimer, soprano (voice), multiple percussion, cowbell, crotales, glockenspiel, marimba, vibraphone, snare drum, timpani, congas, kalimba, tambourine, and waterphone.

As far as ensembles go, my catalogue includes works for orchestra, band, string quartet, woodwind quintet, percussion ensemble, and several mixed chamber ensembles. I have composed works for Hamiruge – the LSU Percussion Group, the Iowa City Percussion Group, the Denkyem Percussion Group, the Rosewind Duo – Scott Herring and Clifford Leaman, Brett William Dietz, Brandon Arvay, Gustavo Miranda and Deborah Sophia (percussion and violin duo), Aaron Railey, Daniel Heagney, Kathryn Irwin and Emily Strachan, Kids' Orchestra of Baton Rouge, the Dauphine Street Duo (Dan Heagney, percussion and Bethany Padgett, flute), the Rio Bravo Percussion Ensemble, the UTB Marimba Quartet, Oliver Molina, Robert Giovanelli and Patrick Chapman (percussion duo), and Holly Brewer (flutist).

Akiho: I am currently working on a Ph.D. in composition at Princeton University, where I have studied with Steven Mackey, Paul Lansky, Dan Trueman, Dmitri Tymoczko, and Donnacha Dennehy. From 2009–11, I studied with David Lang, Martin Bresnick, Christopher Theofanidis, and Ezra Laderman at Yale School of Music. My first official composition teacher was Julia Wolfe, whom I studied with while attending the Manhattan School of Music from 2007–09. I have also worked with Christopher Rouse and Matthias Pintscher at the 2011 Aspen Summer Music Festival. I have written for various instruments and ensemble types, ranging from solo piano to large orchestra; almost every piece that I have written has been for a different combination of instruments.

Sometimes it helps to write entirely away from the instrument at first.
—Brian Blume



Being a composer in the 21st century, I don't have to compose in one specific style.—Joe Moore



Molina: How would you define your compositional style?

Trevino: That's a tough question! I think my music is a culmination of lots of different ideas and styles. Maybe "indie/post rock/percussion"? Is that a genre?

Blume: I recently read an article by musicologist Kyle Gann, in which he uses the term "totalism" to describe a sort of post-minimalist style of music that has some roots in minimalism. His description of totalism seems to pretty well cover much of the music I write—music that "appeals to lay audiences, yet also provides enough underlying complexity to intrigue sophisticated musicians." I find that much of my music is fueled by rhythm, though I sometimes make an effort to write with sound, color, or harmony as the guiding force. While I tend to write in a more "tonal" tradition, I enjoy searching for harmonies that stretch outside of the general notion of consonance or "pretiness."

Sekhon: I would not place my output into any existing category. Depending on the piece, one might find influences from electronic music to pop music to modernism. One thing I loved about being a performer was being constantly involved with a variety of musical styles, whether it was in orchestra, as a soloist, in a rock band, or in a world music ensemble. That experience has transferred into my compositional life, as each new commission provides the opportunity to explore a different style.

Nozzy: I enjoy taking a minimal amount of materials, whether that's thematically, instrumentally, whatever, and seeing how far I can stretch them. I wouldn't call it minimalist, though, since it's not necessarily a process-oriented use of the materials.

Moore: Elements from all of the styles listed are contained in my compositions. That is the beauty of being a composer in the 21st century. I don't have to compose in one specific style; instead, I can use compositional techniques from any style of music

that interests me. This allows me to reinvent myself as a composer and the opportunity to master/practice composing in a different style. Yes, composers practice, too. We work on our craft just as performers do.

Akiho: My style is a culmination of all of my life experiences and musical styles. I enjoy writing music that is appropriate to the specific situations and performers I am writing for. I like to get to know my collaborators if possible, and then write a piece that I feel will best represent and challenge them.

Molina: Who is your role model as a composer?

Trevino: Thom Yorke from Radiohead is one of my favorite songwriters. Yorke can't read music, so he "writes" whatever sounds good. Not a lot of rules going on, which gives him his own unique voice and style. I love that.

Blume: I don't know that I have a single role model as a composer. A few current composers that I occasionally look to for inspiration include John Psathas, Dave Maric, David Reeves, Kevin Bobo, and Gordon Stout. These guys all have a way of creating something easily digestible for me, yet deep and complex enough that I'm peeling back layers of genius to discover such interesting aspects of their work. Other influences on my style include Bartók, Stravinsky, Glass, Debussy, and even some more mainstream pop and jazz artists like Josh Garrels, Muse, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, Gary Burton, Pat Metheny, and the California Guitar Trio, to name a few.

Sekhon: All of my former composition teachers serve as role models for me. Each has contributed significantly to some aspect of who I am and have served as models for who I want to be. Artistically, there are many recent composers and compositions I would consider to be role models for my music, and I look up to some compositions in a similar way. Among my favorite recent works for percussion are "30" by Mark Applebaum and "To The Roaring Wind" by Matt Barber. I consider these pieces to be major additions

to the percussion literature. Of course, the historical greats are included in my list of role models: Iannis Xenakis, Lou Harrison, John Cage, Edgar Varèse, etc.

Nozzy: There are so many for lots of different reasons. I love Samuel Barber for his lyricism and harmonic language. Erik Satie's harmonic language has always resonated with me. Christopher Rouse for his rhythmic ideas and the variety of his sound. Christopher Deane has been a huge mentor to me in helping me look past the obvious answers of composition and see deeper down the rabbit hole of sound. Paul Lansky has such a great command of texture. I also listen to rock and metal more than anything, so bands like Pantera, Tool, and Periphery have had a big influence on me.

Moore: Several composers are on my list, so I will give you an answer that includes both living and dead composers. Living: Paul Lansky, David Lang, John Luther Adams, David Stock, Peter Klatzow, Philip Glass, Dinis Constantinides, and Brett Dietz, to name a few in no particular order. Dead: Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Edgar Varèse, Igor Stravinsky, Warren Benson, Alan Hovhaness, Ludwig van Beethoven, J.S. Bach, Hector Berlioz, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Oliver Messiaen, Benjamin Britten, John Cage, Witold Lutoslawski, Iannis Xenakis, Warren Benson, Claude Debussy, Wilhelm Richard Wagner, and David Stock. I am sure I am leaving many other great composers that influence me off of this list. But these are the ones that come to mind immediately.

To actually answer your question, I guess my role model would have to be Brett William Dietz. He is a percussionist and a composer, as I am. As a mentor, he stressed the importance of studying composition like you would study your primary instrument. I believe this is an important message to any aspiring composer, whether composition is their primary or secondary area of study as a musician.

Akiho: All of my teachers, musical colleagues, and friends have been incredible role models in addition to all of the usual suspects. I like almost everything!

Molina: What is your favorite instrument/idiom/genre to compose for?

Trevino: I enjoy writing for all types of instruments. I like writing large-scale mallet works, and I absolutely love writing for drumset. I also enjoy incorporating spoken word in my pieces, which I've done a handful of times

Blume: I like writing for pretty much all the idioms/genres I've composed for. I really do love composing for indoor percussion ensembles, largely because I enjoy working with the choreographer/drill designer to create an entire production that communicates

a story. The added electronic element in indoor percussion ensemble is a daunting but also really fun and exciting part of that world. I also love writing for the concert hall, especially for keyboards.

Sekhon: Since 2006, I have slowly been working of a series of works for solo instrument plus percussion ensemble, and have so far completed works in this series for cello, viola, saxophone, voice, steel pan, and classical guitar. Next up are such works for piano, oboe, and trumpet. My long-term plan is to eventually complete one of these pieces for each classical instrument. This project has provided me with the opportunity to continue contributing to the percussion repertoire while constantly collaborating with a wide range of instrumentalists and communities. Aside from this series, I enjoy working with soloists in any setting, such as with electronics, alone, or with large and small ensembles. In recent years, I have become very involved in the saxophone community and count saxophone and percussion among my favorite instruments to compose for.

Nozny: I tend to have the most fun writing for small chamber groups. The possibilities that occur when you start putting performers together is something I really enjoy. Chamber music is also the settings where I enjoy performing the most, so I'm sure there's some connection because of that.

Moore: I really enjoy composing for percussion—not because it is my primary instrument, but because of the opportunity to explore a wide spectrum of different sounds.

Akiho: My favorite instrumental ensemble to write for is whatever instrumentation is used for the piece I am currently working on. Each ensemble presents a new challenge, and because almost every piece I have recently written is for a new combination of instruments, it inspires me to accept the challenge of writing for something unfamiliar. My favorite instrument is probably the cello; it is an extremely personal and musically diverse instrument.

Molina: *What is the weirdest instrument you have written for?*

Trevino: Hmm...probably iPhone.

Blume: Not so much an instrument as a collection of instruments. A school I wrote marching band music for had a funny, pieced-together contraption they called the "junk rack" that was actually marched by a student in the battery. It consisted of a couple of mini timbales, cymbal, cowbell, Jamblock, tambourine, triangle, and whatever else they wanted to throw on there.

Sekhon: I have a work for steel drum band and gamelan ensemble called "Mi(2)." This work was composed for and premiered by the Eastman Gamelan Lila Muni along with a steel drum band I put together that included my longtime friend Andy Akiho. That is the most non-standard ensemble I have composed for.

Nozny: That probably would have to be "Thief" for solo marimba and tuned metal pipes. You take all of the pipes from Paul Lansky's piece "Threads," except for the bottom A and C-sharp, and lay them in the spaces between the accidental groups as well as some on the lower notes and upper notes on some egg crates. It seems like a really strange combination, but made for a beautiful soundscape.

Moore: The weirdest instrument I have written for would be the waterphone. Last summer during my "Project Create 2013" I composed a solo waterphone piece for Dan Moore at the University of Iowa. Dan premiered the work and posted a video of his performance on YouTube.

Akiho: A television smashed with a baseball bat.

Molina: *What was the first piece you composed? How has your compositional style evolved since then?*

Trevino: My first composition was "Memento," a marimba solo I composed during my undergraduate studies at Eastman. "Memento" has subtle elements of some of my favorite percussion composers, like Michael Burritt

and Gordon Stout, and also elements of pop/indie rock. Since then, my composing has been influenced by non-percussion stuff, bands like Bon Iver and St. Vincent to name a few.

Blume: Leaving out the marching percussion music I had written to that point, I consider "Psalm 104 for Multiple Percussion" the first real piece I composed (2007). My style has definitely evolved as I've learned more about form, organization, and how to communicate effectively through music. I believe a composer must learn how to organize and wield musical components to say what he or she means to say the same way one must consider how to construct a story with written language.

Sekhon: The first "real" percussion piece I composed is called "We Are The Weapons" for six-player percussion ensemble. While I was already experimenting with an extended use of instruments in this piece—for example, rolling a glass bottle on the vibraphone—I would consider the style of this work to be a fairly mainstream educational work and very different from my current output. I attribute my change to the several years I spent intentionally not writing for percussion instruments. I developed my compositional interests and skills independent of any trends found in the percussion repertoire, while maintaining an awareness of the works being done in percussion composition. I began composing again for percussion with a larger collection of compositional tools based on a wider interest in experimental music and contemporary compositional practices. Since my earliest work, my compositional style has become more diverse and experimental. I have captured the spirit of my interest in the application of compositional systems to percussion writing by non-percussionist composers in my PhD dissertation, "Percussion Composition: Genres and Compositional Techniques."

Nozny: I mentioned "Away" before, but I don't really count that as something in my compositional repertoire at this point. The first piece I wrote where I really felt like I'd figured some things out and it could stand fully on its own was my marimba quartet "Purdy's Maze." As for how my style has evolved, I would say it's become much more streamlined. I've figured out how I work and become more efficient with not only the materials I use and how I use them, but also with my workflow. I'm pretty good at listening to my stuff critically and seeing very quickly whether or not I'm going in a good direction with a piece and then adjusting as needed.

Moore: I wrote my first composition in middle school as a band assignment; it was a snare drum solo. My compositional style has evolved a great deal since then because I

One thing I hope to see is more quality writing for younger or less-experienced groups.
—Brian Nozny



The direction of
percussion will continue
in every direction.
—Baljinder Sekhon



have had the opportunity to study composition. Composing is not easy. For me, the study of the craft was always very important, which is why I sought out every opportunity to study composition while also pursuing my percussion studies in college. I was fortunate that Jay Batzner took me on as a non-major during my undergraduate studies. Jay encouraged me to write music focusing on sound, as I was required to compose both acoustic and electroacoustic music. During my studies at LSU I was fortunate to study with both Brett Dietz and Dinos Constantinides. Brett encouraged me to listen to and to get to know the music of living composers so that I am aware of what other composers, like myself, are doing. Dinos focused my attention on the score study of many of the great composers throughout history.

Akiho: I have many pieces that I call my “first composition” because that depends on what is considered a composition. “Phatamachickenlick” (1997) was a rudimental snare drum duet that I wrote my senior year in high school. I wrote a lot of color pieces in my *Synesthesia Suite* from around 2003–06, such as “Aka” (red) and “Murasaki” (purple), but those weren’t written down on paper/computer until about 2009. My first official “classical” composition was “Subconscious Inconsistency,” a chamber ensemble piece for soprano voice and eight instrumentalists that I wrote when I arrived at Manhattan School in 2007. Naturally, my compositional style has changed throughout the years because I used to only write for ensembles that I was performing in, where I would teach the pieces by rote. Now, I often write for new music chamber groups and orchestras where everyone reads really well and is expecting the notation to be precise. It is a completely different experience, and I enjoy having opportunities to write in both styles.

Molina: *What do you consider your most successful piece and why?*

Trevino: My favorite piece that I’ve written is probably “Hands Up,” which is a large-scale

percussion ensemble work about the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, created to encapsulate the ongoing race issues in the U.S. It features 10 percussionists, including a drumset soloist, mallet players, and four players who recite rhythmic text via amplified megaphones. The piece that is most frequently performed is probably “Catching Shadows,” a marimba duo that was later adapted for percussion sextet.

Blume: Depending on how you define “successful,” I would say “Strands of Time” for marching snare drum and digital audio accompaniment. Regardless of how it was received, it was a success for me simply because I figured out how to do the electronic part of it! But I believe it has also been well received, and it’s been performed around the country and overseas. This piece caters to drum corps/indoor drumline players, and sticks out because there are few pieces quite like it. A few composers told me this piece inspired their composition, too, which is really neat for me to hear.

Sekhon: The works I am most proud of artistically are “Twelve Virtues” for soprano and 12 percussion, and “The Offering,” a concerto for saxophone and orchestra. Oddly, these are probably my least performed works. My percussion works that are performed most often include “SUN” for percussion trio, “Colored Windows, Tempered Rooms” for 8 percussion, “Passageways” for steel pan plus 5–10 percussion, “Gradient 2.0” for sax and 5 percussion, “Compass” for viola and percussion, and “Refuge” for 7 percussion.

Nozny: I would say “successful” in terms of which one I like the best would be “Parallel” for percussion quartet. I think it’s a beautiful piece that doesn’t sound, to me at least, like anything else out there. Maybe this will change as time goes on and I grow more as a composer.

Moore: “Five Pieces for Solo Glockenspiel” recorded by Brett William Dietz on his CD *Nocturne*. To me, these solo glockenspiel pieces are some of the best music I have

written. They represent many of the compositional techniques learned while studying with Dinos Constantinides and Brett William Dietz. I believe I grew the most as a composer while studying with Brett and Dinos, and this work represents that growth. Another “successful” piece of mine is “No wind, no rain, just a subtle mist” for solo vibraphone. “No wind” was written for a consortium organized by Daniel Heagney.

Akiho: My favorite piece is a short work from 2009 titled “Ki Iro” (Yellow), for woodwinds, strings, and percussion. My most successful piece in the classical contemporary world has probably been “LigNEouS 1” for marimba and string quartet.

Molina: *What are some of your current composition projects?*

Trevino: I just completed a piece for snare drum and tape titled “Spur,” which was commissioned by a consortium led by percussionist Korry Friend. I’m currently writing a piece for cello soloist with percussion ensemble for Meta Weiss of Queensland Conservatorium, a piece for percussion duo and Break of Reality that Michael Burritt and I will premiere with the band at Eastman, a piece for spoken word and marimba soloist, and an unaccompanied saxophone solo.

Blume: I am writing a short drumset solo for the *Rhythm! Scene* publication. I’m in the early stages of a marimba solo, probably medium/advanced level, inspired by some of the experiences of becoming a father. And I’ve just been commissioned to compose a couple of works for less experienced players. This includes a multi-percussion quartet and a collection of marimba/vibraphone duets.

Sekhon: I recently completed two commissions I am very excited about. One is a new sonata for saxophone and piano, “Sonata of Puzzles.” This work was commissioned by some of the top saxophonists around the world through the Global Premiere Consortium Commissioning Project. The other is a work called “Passageways” for solo steel drum and percussion ensemble, commissioned by a group of over 40 percussionists led by Dave Gerhart. I am currently finishing a solo marimba piece for Michael Burritt and a consortium of soloists, a concerto for piano and percussion ensemble for the McCormick Percussion Group and soloist Eunmi Ko, and a new work for the Eastman Saxophone Project. Finally, I have been working on a new CD that will feature the Los Angeles Percussion Quartet, line upon line, Michael Burritt, Dave Gerhart, and the McCormick Percussion Group performing some of my most popular works.

Nozny: I just finished up a commission from Keith Aleo for solo performer using only cymbals that will premiere in the spring. There is a marimba duet for two players on

I would love to see instruments like marimba and vibraphone more present in non-academic music groups.
—Ivan Trevino



a single 5.0-octave marimba that I'm almost finished with. That one is for Akiko Goto and will premiere in Japan this summer. Once the duet is done I have a commission from the University of North Texas for a percussion sextet that will premiere this fall.

Moore: Project Create 2015: Duets! Yes, I am way behind on that project. I have a few more works to complete. I am currently brainstorming a percussion, clarinet, and flute trio for Ryan Lewis and his colleagues. I also just completed a new percussion duo for Kathryn Irwin and Emily Strachan, two students at Michigan State University. Some of my upcoming projects include a new band piece for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Wind Symphony as well as a piece for Duo Rodina's Songbook Project.

Akiho: I am currently writing a ballet for choreographer Benjamin Millepied and LA Dance Project; a steel pan concerto for National Symphony Orchestra and steel panist Liam Teague; a ping-pong, percussion, and violin triple concerto for Shanghai Symphony and the Beijing Music Festival, featuring percussionist David Cossin and violinist Elizabeth Zelster; and a percussion quartet for Gwen Burgett, Ayano Kataoko, Ian Rosenbaum, and Svet Stoyanov.

Molina: *Where do you get inspiration to compose music?*

Trevino: Every piece is different. Some compositions are inspired by people or events, and others come from improv sessions. Every time I sit down to practice an instrument, I also leave time to be creative, improvise, and create new ideas.

Blume: Definitely by listening to great music of any kind or genre—a Chopin nocturne, a Stravinsky ballet, a Gary Burton tune, a Trent Reznor song, or other percussion works. I also look for motivation in life experiences; just look at the program notes for most of my pieces. One of my primary aims in composing and performing is to connect with my

audience in a meaningful way, and one way I can do that is by writing about experiences/emotions/ideas that people can identify with.

Sekhon: My ideas for new works begin with one of these three manifestations: 1. Technical Idea: an idea about the way the music will move, unfold, interact, etc., 2. Musical Material: collection of pitches, rhythm, timbre, melody, etc., or 3. Metaphorical Idea: an extramusical idea that a new work will be modeled after. These three are not mutually exclusive, and shortly after my initial idea, all

three play an equal role in my compositional process. In addition, constraints imposed by an instrument's design figure prominently into my initial ideas for a composition and can immediately inform the early stages of the creative process.

Nozzy: Inspiration can come from any number of areas. "Purdy's Maze" came from the mazes my cousin Mike would draw when we were kids. "Thief" came from Omar Carmentes commissioning a piece that needed to encompass ideas about environmentalism. "Sharps" started out because of a man I saw in a restaurant covered in tattoos. "Parallel" was inspired by the atmosphere of the video game *Dear Esther*. So my inspiration comes from a wide variety of places.

Moore: It is hard for me to pinpoint one source of inspiration. With any artist, inspiration comes from things that are happening around you and things that hold some sort of impact in your life. So my inspiration could come from almost anything happening around me on a daily basis. Lately, much of my inspiration has come from nature and space. I have always been interested in astronomy and am easily inspired to write music based on any scientific concept dealing with space.

Akiho: As trite as may sound, I get inspiration from everyday life and travels. The people

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I interact with and my experiences in new environments and situations really inspire my music.

Molina: *Is composing for the instrument you play a benefit or hindrance?*

Trevino: Being a composer who also plays percussion is a big help. I know my way around the instruments and know what is possible as a performer. With that said, I think knowing my way around other non-percussion instruments helps me go beyond just my percussion habits and creates a different way for me to think about music.

Blume: Both! But overall, I feel it's more of a benefit. Hindrance, because sometimes I find myself writing only what feels right on the instrument, and it can be difficult to step outside of what I can already play on any given instrument. Sometimes it helps to write entirely away from the instrument at first, guided only by my mind's ear and software playback. Then I can check things out on an instrument later, as necessary. However, I find it is a great benefit to write for my instrument because I know so many percussion instruments so well that I know most of what they're capable of. It's still fun to explore new possibilities, as there are many, but compared to any other instrument or family of instruments, I know *far* more about percussion, so that certainly helps in my composing.

Sekhon: A bit of both. I have a benefit when writing for percussion because I can hear the colors and imagine the techniques so clearly. In addition, I know the notation for nuances or can develop a clear notation rather easily. On the other hand, my imagination can be limited to my own abilities. However, since I am no longer a regularly performing percussionist, the less I perform, the more creative I seem to become.

Nozny: Both. It's a benefit for me just because I know the colors you can get so well and the idiosyncrasies of the various instruments. I think it becomes a hindrance if I'm actually composing at the instrument. When that happens, it's very easy to just rely on the things that you are personally good at on the instrument, so I rarely write at the instrument any more. I feel like when I do, that the instrument is doing the composing, not me.

Moore: It is a little of both. It is a benefit in knowing the ins and outs of the instrument, but a hindrance because of the urge to pre-determine what is possible based on what "I know" the instrument or the performer can do. So in essence, composing for my own instrument usually causes me to alter my original idea, finding solutions in the writing before any performers have the opportunity to find their own performance solutions.

Akiho: I believe that coming to composition as a percussionist, specializing in steel pan,

has definitely been influential in my compositional voice and output. The intuitive ideas and textures that I come up with while improvising on my instrument are much different than the ideas I come up with conceptually, and in combination with one another, these ideas create a sound world that is unique to my personality.

Molina: *Where do you see the direction of percussion composition heading?*

Trevino: I would love to see percussion instruments like marimba and vibraphone more present in non-academic music groups. Bands like Square Peg Round Hole are already doing this, and I'd love to see it spread.

Blume: I see more and more non-percussionists writing for percussion, which helps with exposure, and it helps add a different voice in the repertoire. I appreciate and encourage the growing use of electronics with percussion music. Maybe it's because I'm in education, but I see more effective use of new percussion works as educational tools, and not strictly in an "etude" sense. I love that, due to the ever-increasing technical abilities of high school and college students, the possibilities of what composers can write for percussion continue to grow! It seems that if someone can imagine it, there's someone or some ensemble out there who can play it.

One thing that frightens me a bit is that my generation and the one coming up in middle and high school can become so consumed only with music that wows an audience—with technical virtuosity, for example—and we can miss out on music that does more than challenge us technically. So as composers, I hope we can keep writing music that caters to those players but that maintains a musical integrity and strives to elevate true artistry, not flashiness alone.

Sekhon: The world of percussion is so full of diverse sounds, styles, approaches, open-minded people, and expanding quickly. The direction of percussion will continue in every direction. There is a recent influx of works for percussion and electronics, concerti, and the emergence of countless freelance professional percussion groups. We are just getting started, and this will continue to proliferate.

Nozny: I think technology will become more and more an everyday part of what is being written, whether it's fixed like playing to a tape part, or more real-time use like triggering sounds or actually manipulating electronic sound through something like Max/MSP.

Popular music has become such an influence now on what is being written, and I don't see that going away. It's too much a part of our everyday culture that it's almost impossible to avoid.

One thing that I hope to see is more qual-

ity writing for younger or less-experienced groups. I think so much of what's written now is geared towards upper-level college and professional ensembles. I hope that composers start to make a point to write for younger ensembles with less equipment demands. That's something that's on my to-do list for sure.

Moore: There seems to be a lot of commissioning going on these days, whether it is an ensemble, soloist, consortium, duo, or whatever. This is very positive for everyone involved with these projects. So to me, composition for percussion is heading in a positive direction, and I see this continuing for the foreseeable future.

Akiho: Up!

Oliver Molina is an Assistant Professor Music and Assistant Director of Bands at Northwestern State University in Louisiana. He is also a doctoral candidate in Percussion Performance and Pedagogy at the University of Iowa. He earned his Master of Music degree from the University of Arkansas and his Bachelor of Music Education degree from the University of Central Florida. **PN**

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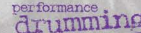
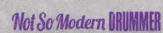


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