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Bringing Down the Stars and Moving Them Around

Office of Arts + Cultural Programming
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Soloelectronic records, musicians including Fred Frith, Alvin Curran, and alongside video artists, dancers, and the American percussion ensemble, CENKERGÜN finished in 1981 at The Oberlin Conservatory of Music by the Oberlin Percussion Group.

Iannis Xenakis is famous for his complex theories and mathematically derived compositional techniques—his monumental percussion sextet Pléiades is a virtuosic display of such skills. But he was also a student revolutionary during World War II, the survivor of a traumatic and disfiguring mortar blast.

Xenakis wrote about the impersonal and beautiful violence of nature. In a remarkable demonstration of artistic will, he converted his own experiences with human violence into a resource for musical expression. Although the following excerpt from his treatise “Formalized Music” doesn’t fully encapsulate Pléiades, it is an inspiring glimpse into Xenakis’ aesthetic world, at once abstract and deeply personal:

“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 slogan and thus passes from the head to the tail. The clamor fills the city, and the inhibiting force of the demonstration; it spreads toward the city, transforming the civic space.”

Although the drum is one of humanity’s most ancient instruments, Europe and America have only recently begun to explore its full potential, aided by explosions of influence and experimentation from around the world. In the 20th century, musical innovators like Édgar Varèse, John Cage, Steve Reich, and Iannis Xenakis brought these instruments out from behind the traditional orchestra and gave them new voice.

It was exciting to see these composers and the sheer fun of playing together that inspired the members of So-ℓo to begin performing together while students at the Yale School of Music. Cage’s Third Construction wave elaborated rhythmic counterpoint using ordinary objects, while Reich’s Drumming harnessed African inspiration to ecstatic effect.

A blind call to David Lang, Pulitzer Prize–winning composer and cofounder of New York’s Bang on a Can Festival, yielded So-ℓo’s first big commissioned piece, the so-called laws of nature, which appeared with Evan Ziporyn’s gamelan romaly Melody Competition on the group’s first album, So-ℓo Percussion. In the following years, the thrill of working with amazing composers would yield new pieces by Paul Lansky, Dino Trushevm, Steve Reich, Steve Mackey, Fred Frith, and many others.

For its next disc, So-ℓo tackled Drumming—one of the first and few percussion pieces of symphonic scope (well over an hour long). A landmark-American work, Drumming fuses African aesthetics, Western philosophical concepts, and technologically inspired processes in a minimalist masterpiece.

In 2010, So-ℓo presented the US premiere of Reich’s new Mahler Quartet, written for the group and several other renowned percussion ensembles.

So-ℓo’s third album, Amid the Noise, heralded a new direction: original music, written by member Jason Treuting. Eager to expand their palette, the members experimented with glockenspiel, toy piano, vibraphone, bowed marimba, melodica, tuned and prepared pipes, metal duct, a wayward ethernet port, and all kinds of sound programming. The resulting idiosyncratic tone explorations were synchronized to Jennifer Treuting’s haunting films of street scenes in Brooklyn and Kyoto. This ongoing work has resulted in exciting new projects such as the site-specific Music for Trains in southern Vermont and Imaginary City, a sonic meditation on urban soundscapes commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s 2009 Next Wave Festival in consortium with five other venues.

For the past several years, So-ℓo has been joining the electronic duo Mamos for shows around the country and in Europe, exploring the sonic and theatrical possibilities of beer cans, hair clippers, ceramic bowls, and dry ice. This collaboration culminated in Treasure State, released on Cantaloupe Music in 2010.

So-ℓo Percussion is becoming increasingly involved in mentoring young artists. Starting in the fall of 2011, its members will be codirectors of a new percussion department at the Bard College Conservatory of Music. This top-flight undergraduate program will enroll each student in a double degree (bachelor of music and bachelor of arts) course in the Conservatory and Bard College and will expose them to both traditional Western conservatory training and a variety of world traditions. The summer of 2009 saw the creation of the annual So-ℓo Percussion Summer Institute on the campus of Princeton University. The Institute is an intensive two-week chamber music workshop for college-age percussionists. For their latest festival, the four members of So-ℓo served as faculty in rehearsal, performance, and discussion of contemporary music to 36 students from around the world.

So-ℓo Percussion has performed this unusual and exciting music all over the United States, with concerts at the Lincoln Center Festival, Carnegie Hall, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Stanford Lively Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and many other venues. In addition, recent tours to Russia, Australia, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the Ukraine have brought the group international acclaim. So-ℓo won second prize overall and the Concerto Prize at the 2005 Luxembourg International Percussion Quartet Competition.

With an audience comprised of “both kinds of blue hair...elderly matron here, arty punk there” (as the Boston Globe described it), So-ℓo Percussion makes a rare and wonderful breed of music that both compels instantly and offers vast rewards for engaged listening. Edgy (at least in the sense that little other music sounds like this) and avantgarde (in that people have been hitting objects for eons), perhaps it doesn’t need to be defined after all.

So-ℓo would like to thank Pearl/Adams Instruments, Zildjian cymbals, Vic Firth drumsticks, Remo drumheads, and Estey organs for their sponsorship.

Peak Performances @ Montclair presents:

Sō Percussion

Bringing Down the Stars and Moving Them Around

featuring

Eric Beach
Josh Quillen
Adam Sliwinski
Jason Treuting

and guest artists

Meehan/Perkins Duo

Sound Engineer Lawson White

Program:

Proximity

~~ Pause ~~

Pléïades

Métaux
Claviers
Peaux
Mélanges

Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001)

PROGRAM

Duration: 1 hour and 20 minutes, no intermission.

In consideration of both audience and performers, please turn off all electronic devices. The taking of photographs or videos and the use of recording equipment are not permitted. No food or drink is permitted inside the theater.

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TOWN AND COUNTRY:

Music of European Royalty and Aristocracy

November 7, 2010 • 3:00pm
Alexander Kasser Theater
Montclair State University

Upcoming

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