

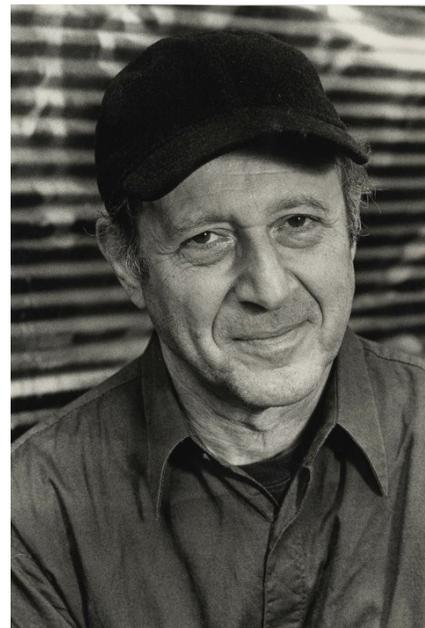
# 2x2 Percussion

Mel Mobley · Gregory Lyons · Oliver Molina · Joe W. Moore

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Percussion has represented, in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a largely untapped medium for composers looking to expand their timbral palettes. Although percussion instruments have been part of the western classical tradition from its beginning, they had often been relegated to keeping pulse or accenting climatic moments prior to the twentieth century. Thanks, however, to composers like Edgard Varèse, Percy Grainger, John Cage, and many others, percussion instruments have gained greater significance in orchestral textures as well as an exciting solo and chamber repertoire of their own. Paul Lansky, whose quartet piece *Threads* closes our program this evening, has described percussionists as “one of the most interesting and lively groups of musicians working today.” Further, regarding their interest in new music, Lansky has claimed that, “it’s axiomatic that part of their job description is to generate literature, which they do with evangelical zeal and fervor.” Percussionists have not hesitated to explore, even to create new music, for they are well aware that their repertoire is still in its formative stages and they are eager to contribute.

The music of American minimalist **Steve Reich (born 1936)** opens our program this evening. Specifically, we hear *Part I* of his piece *Drumming*, a landmark work of Reich’s early career. *Drumming* was composed between 1970 and 1971, following five weeks of studying West African drumming at the University of Ghana. For Reich, these studies confirmed a natural inclination toward percussion instruments, which had begun when he became a drummer at the age of fourteen, and also encouraged him to see the expressive possibilities of acoustic instruments. Previously, Reich had defined his aesthetic through electronic media, developing his concept of “phasing” after hearing two tapes containing identical material gradually lose sync with each other. The first works to apply phasing, *It’s Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* from the mid-1960s, were also electronic and, although his next works use acoustic instruments, their underlying processes are equally as rigid. *Drumming* shows a new flexibility; Paul Griffiths calls it not only “a summation” but also “a move to music of breadth and sensuousness.” Its *Part I*, a



Steve Reich

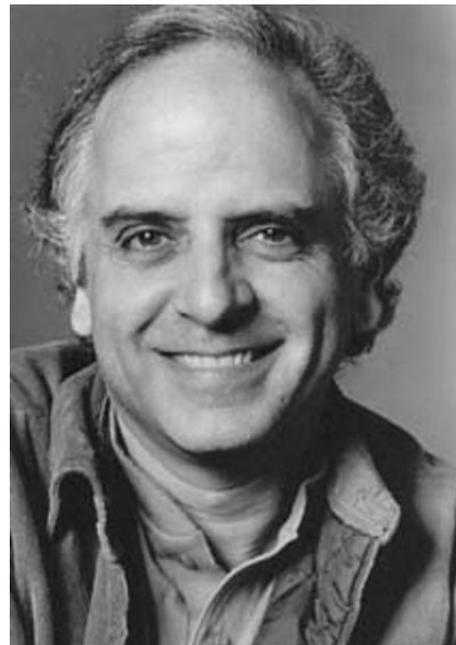


John Cage

monumental twenty minutes itself, is scored for four percussionists on pairs of tuned bongos whose initial pattern is allowed to slip out of sync, so that the resultant rhythms are diversified through their phasing.

The music of American composer **John Cage (1912-1992)** has remained as controversial as it is experimental. His numerous innovations include the creation of the prepared piano, a reevaluation of silence, an emphasis on chance elements, and a calling into question of the composition act itself. He was also a pioneer of electronic music, brought considerable attention to percussion instruments, and, with his partner Merce Cunningham, redefined the relationship between music and dance. *Living Room Music*, written in 1940, is an early work by Cage, although no less experimental in its orientation than the works which were to follow. As its name implies, it is scored for everyday objects that can be found in the average living room. Specifically, these include magazines, newspapers, cardboard boxes, a coffee table or other furniture, and the like. The first and last of the four movements ask that these objects be played percussively as instruments. The second movement, meanwhile, is a spoken chanting of text from *The World is Round*, a children’s book by Gertrude Stein. The third movement, which remains optional, is for a solo melody instrument, presumably one which could also be found in said living room.

The final piece we hear this evening is the half-hour percussion quartet, *Threads*, by American composer **Paul Lansky (born 1944)**. Lansky has had a varied career as a composer and music theorist, engaging with serialism, computer music, and more recently a renewed appreciation for instrumental music. Studies at Queens College with George Perle and at Princeton University with Milton Babbitt in the 1960s and early 1970s encouraged Lansky to explore serialism, developing in conjunction with Perle an approach they described as “twelve-tone tonality.” As this term implies, the rigor and precision of the twelve-tone method has been maintained in their works with a new sense of tonal rootedness which had previously been foreign to serialism. This trait followed Lansky into his computer music, a medium which he explored almost exclusively from 1978 to the early 2000s. In electronic works like *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion*, *Idle Chatter*, and *Things She Carried*, Lansky has investigated creating music from the sonic properties of the recorded voice. In his return to instrumental music, Lansky has transplanted his interest in timbre and insistence on precision to the acoustic medium.



**Paul Lansky**

Composed in 2005 for the ensemble Sō Percussion, *Threads* was one of Lansky's first ventures into instrumental writing since his years devoted to computer music. About this sudden shift, Lansky has commented, “it's been interesting to start something new as a 'senior citizen'... I had no idea that I would spend the best of part of thirty-five years banging my head against the machine and then, when I just about had it figured out, I'd change my major and basically become a newbie again.” Nevertheless, the rich timbral variety available through percussion instruments has made this a familiar experience for Lansky, except that now there is an element of unpredictability in that each percussionist will necessarily interpret his music differently and that the instruments themselves can vary in shape and size. Lansky enjoys this added freedom that comes with live performance.

*Threads* is in ten brief movements which flow continuously, one into another. Lansky originally drafted a set of ten studies, read by Sō Percussion, and in these found himself exploring different collections of percussion instruments. There were three types among these, Lansky discovered, including the lyrical, pitched sounds of metal instruments like the vibraphone and glockenspiel; various noise makers like bottles, flower pots, and crotales; and also loud drumming. These three categories of sounds became the “threads” which Lansky wove into the larger piece. Soon, he had likened this music to the three types of pieces in a chorale-cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach. For the lyrical metals, his music became arias. Meanwhile, the Cagean noise-makers were given recitatives. And, the drumming episodes became his choruses, their volume appropriately louder than either the “solo” arias or recitatives. These types of movements are interwoven so as to complete three cycles of aria-recitative-chorus, with a final fourth aria concluding the work and bringing a sense of circularity.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer is a graduate student pursuing his master's degree in musicology at the University of Louisville where, in April 2017, he was awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, Louisiana following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” From 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria, and since that time has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He recently shared this research in March 2018 at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting

in Asheville, North Carolina. Also a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into compositions which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His compositions have been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at [www.JacksonHarmeyer.com](http://www.JacksonHarmeyer.com).