



CARTE BLANCHE CONCERT I:  
Percussion Complexities:  
Christopher Froh, Ayano Kataoka,  
and Ian Rosenbaum

JULY 20

Saturday, July 20, 8:00 p.m., The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Carte Blanche series begins with an unprecedented complement to the season's offerings of wind, string, and keyboard repertoire. Portrayed through an array of percussion instruments, the vitality of the Baroque master's legacy in the twentieth century is brilliantly apparent through works such as Tōru Takemitsu's evocative *Rain Tree* and Steve Reich's seminal masterpiece, *Drumming*, evoking primitive sensations and visceral excitement in rhythmic energy.

This program is underwritten by Michael Jacobson and Trine Sorensen through their gift to the Tenth-Anniversary Campaign.

SPECIAL THANKS

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Michael Jacobson and Trine Sorensen with gratitude for their generous support.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Selections from Violin Partita no. 3, BWV 1006 (ca. 1720) (trans. Ayano Kataoka)

ALEJANDRO VIÑAO (b. 1951)

Selections from *Book of Grooves* (2011)

*Colours of a Groove*  
*Dance Groove Drifting*

MAURICIO KAGEL (1931–2008)

*Railroad Drama* from *Rrrrrr* (1982)

CONLON NANCARROW (1912–1997)

*Piece for Tape* (arr. Dominic Murcott) (1955)

THIERRY DE MEY (b. 1956)

*Table Music* (1998)

INTERMISSION

TŌRU TAKEMITSU (1930–1996)

*Rain Tree* (1982)

MAURICIO KAGEL

*Rim Shot* from *Rrrrrr* (1982)

NEBOJSA ZIVKOVIC (b. 1962)

*Trio per uno* for Percussion Trio (1995)

JOHN CAGE (1912–1992)

*In a Landscape* (1948)

STEVE REICH (b. 1936)

Selection from *Drumming* (1970–1971)

Christopher Froh, Ayano Kataoka, Ian Rosenbaum, *percussion*

CARTE BLANCHE CONCERTS

# Program Notes: Percussion Complexities

## A Conversation with Christopher Froh, Ayano Kataoka, and Ian Rosenbaum

**CHRISTOPHER FROH, IAN ROSENBAUM:** This is a concert that will likely introduce many in the audience to percussion as a concert instrument. Putting together a “prix fixe” with a broad selection of repertoire across the aesthetic spectrum bound together by a sensibility strongly anchored in **counterpoint** was a primary goal. The idea of this program is to present a lot of different percussion works from different styles and time periods to give audiences an idea of what percussion is capable of doing in one concert.

**IR:** Percussion instruments are millennia old—however, classical music for percussion is fairly new, especially repertoire for solo percussion and chamber ensemble, and there is really very limited repertoire. If we want to play a piece by some of the great composers—Bach, Beethoven, Mozart—unless we transcribe it for another instrument, the only chance we get to play is maybe in an orchestral timpani part. Bach’s music, in particular, transcends the instrument you’re playing it on. It can work on countless instruments, and particularly for us, a transcription of Bach is the best music there is. Any chance we get to live with that music, even for a moment, is really worth it.

**CF:** It really is just about impossible to overstate Bach’s influence on Western art music. He codified conventional harmonic motion and **contrapuntal** techniques that all composers learn as the basis for their craft. But beyond the theoretical side of things, realizing Bach’s music requires a vulnerability on the part of the performer unparalleled by any other composer. If you make too much of a phrase, you can easily suffocate it. I think that playing Bach is a lesson in learning to inform a composition with your musical ideas without getting in its way.

### JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

**Violin Partita no. 3, BWV 1006**

**AYANO KATAOKA:** I am starting the program with a selection from Partita no. 3, arranged for marimba. The range and resonance of the cello and the marimba are quite similar, so the suites appropriately fit on a marimba. In transcribing Bach’s music for marimba, I try to imagine what it would be like if Bach knew the marimba during his time: how would he write music for it, especially aware of the instrument’s rich, resonant sound in the low registers?

### ALEJANDRO VIÑAO

**Selections from *Book of Grooves***

**IR:** *Book of Grooves*, scored for two marimbas, is by the Argentinean Alejandro Viñao, who has contributed a lot to the percussion repertoire. In this recently composed work, he poses the question of what a “groove” actually is. To him, it is any kind of repeated rhythmic phrase that makes you want to move your body or tap your feet. He starts each movement by introducing a groove, and throughout the course of the movement, he transforms it slightly by adding or removing a few notes, slowly manipulating this groove into something entirely new. Following the Bach, this makes a lot of sense, as we take Bach’s idea of counterpoint—of manipulating a **theme**—and take it to this extreme twenty-first-century conclusion, where Viñao is minutely adding an eighth note, removing a sixteenth note, and doing it with a com-

pletely twenty-first-century language. By the time we get to the end, the music we finish with is completely different from what we started with. If he’s done his job well, and we do our job well, the audience members won’t stop tapping their feet and will be able to *groove* the whole way through.

### MAURICIO KAGEL

**Selections from *Rrrrr***

**AK, IR:** Mauricio Kagel, a staple composer for the percussion repertoire, wrote a lot of “theatrical music.” Kagel writes dramatic actions in the score, such as “Walk onstage like *this*” or “Pick *this* thing up” or “Do *this* thing with your face.” Not only is this very complicated to play, but there are all of these actions that you have to do. His idea was to create a composite experience for the audience between what they see and what they hear, and together that makes a different kind of chamber music experience. This piece, entitled *Rrrrr*, contains six very funny and interesting episodes, of which we will play two. Each movement name starts with the letter “r,” which is where the title comes from.

### CONLON NANCARROW

**Piece for *Tape***

**CF:** This piece was originally a piece for recorded tape that Conlon Nancarrow worked on in the early 1950s. Nancarrow’s music is often described as impossible—he punched player-piano rolls for the bulk of his compositions because he wasn’t able to find performers who were willing or able to realize his incredibly virtuosic music. In the past twenty years or so, a lot of transcriptions and arrangements of his pieces have emerged and he is very rightfully claiming his place in the modern **canon**. This piece was never completed and was Nancarrow’s only detour into tape music. The fantastic Nancarrow scholar and British composer Dominic Murcott transcribed the original, re-barréd it into a more manageable **meter**, and used Nancarrow’s notes to compose an ending. Like much of Nancarrow’s music, this piece is constructed of many lines of varying lengths superimposed on one another. If you find yourself drawn to one of these regular rhythms, chances are that your ear will soon be pulled to another one. It’s a brilliant transcription/arrangement of a fantastic piece that really pushes the performer to the edge of what is technically possible. And the dense counterpoint is right up Bach’s alley.

### THIERRY DE MEY

**Table Music**

**IR:** Thierry de Mey refers to his *Table Music* as a ballet for three sets of hands. It’s another theatrical piece, where three of us are sitting at a table doing all sorts of different visual motions with our hands on the table. It is a visual experience as much as it is an aural experience. The tough thing about learning this piece is that he had to come up with a notation system to show us with visual symbols what he wants us to do. At the beginning of the score there are twelve pages of symbols, each referencing a visual motion we make. A circle in the score might mean we are to play with our fists, a diamond, to play with the backs of our hands, a triangle, to clap our hands, etc. Before you even begin to learn the piece, you have to learn this

language; it's like reading in a new clef. It was originally written in 1987 with Wim Vandekeybus's *Ultima Vez* dance group in mind.

**AK:** Traditional training does not always prepare us for pieces such as *Table Music*, but we find our own way of figuring it out. It's a wonderful process for us, as percussionists, and I learn a lot. It makes me think about how the audience sees us and how we should interpret so that *they* understand. The visual aspect really adds a lot to the audience's interpretation.

**CF:** As percussionists, we really have to get used to the idea that every piece we play will teach us something new about the instrument, notation, or even the role of theatrical or dramatic action. There's a lot of discovery in what we get to do, so diving into elements outside of our training is in a sense a primary component of our identity as percussionists.

## TÔRU TAKEMITSU

### *Rain Tree*

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**AK, IR:** Takemitsu's *Rain Tree* is a gorgeous piece for vibraphone and two marimbas, inspired by this tree in Japan. When it rains, the thousands of branches and leaves of the tree catch the water, and over the course of the next day or so, they let the water fall to the ground drop by drop. Based on the writing of novelist Ôe Kenzaburô, a prestigious Nobel Prize winner, the piece evokes these raindrops by beginning with antique cymbals, followed by a vibraphone solo, which is where the atmospheric and imaginal aura comes from. These little sorts of droplet sounds build into music.

## NEBOJSA ZIVKOVIC

### *Trio per uno*

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**IR:** Serbian composer Nebojsa Zivkovic is a percussionist and a pretty well-known percussion composer. The first movement of this piece, *Trio per uno*, begins with all three percussionists standing around a big bass drum, playing on the rim. We each have a pair of bongos and a gong on the side, and all three people play the same music but at slightly different times. The composite rhythm of all three players creates this amazing and fun drum solo. Each part individually would probably not be very interesting, but the combination of all three creates this exciting, loud ruckus. The result is a combined sound of only one percussionist, hence the title, translated "Trio for One."

## JOHN CAGE

### *In a Landscape*

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**IR:** The year 2012 was the centennial year of the birth of John Cage, who broke down the barriers of what it means to play music. He said that any sound or action could be music, and anyone can play music. You don't have to be trained in a conservatory; you can play music with your chair, your table, or your instrument. A lot of people forget that aside from his often culture-shocking compositions, Cage wrote beautiful music: plain classical music that is absolutely gorgeous. We are playing one of those pieces of his called *In a Landscape*, a transcription for marimba, originally written for piano. Intended for a dancer, the piece is a lullaby based on choreography that was written before the music. He alternates between two different melodic **modes**. On the piano, Cage writes to hold down the sustain and soft pedal at the same time, which gives you an idea of the atmosphere we then have to create on the marimba.

**CF:** More than anything, I think that Cage articulated that, as percussionists, what we do is fundamentally different from other musicians. In

Cage's early works, he literally pulled his instruments out of the trash—tin cans, brake drums, homemade rattles, and the like. Ayano, Ian, and I were trained at the conservatory, but there is a very different sensibility that you bring to your playing when your instrument was made by Pontiac and Chef Boyardee rather than Guarneri and Stradivarius. Cage really encouraged this approach and expected that percussionists would be the most open to trying new things and the least encumbered by the constraints and expectations of tradition. After all, it's hard to be driven by tradition too much when the bulk of your solo repertoire was written in the last sixty years! Cage's music is enhanced by refined playing, but it also requires the visceral, organic, human quality of sound of a beginner who is thrilled to unlock any sound at all, curious and open to what emerges.

## STEVE REICH

### *Selection from Drumming*

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**CF:** Like Cage, Steve Reich is another amazingly important American composer for percussionists. Reich's early music in particular has a starkness and simplicity that I find absolutely mesmerizing. *Drumming* is a process piece in the most complete sense; there's so much room for each listener to have a unique impression of what is being played. I actually find the same to be true with Bach, especially in the simple, elegant realizations of his music that I tend to favor. The music unfolds on its own, larger harmonic rhythms take their time, and the listener is left to put the pieces together.

**IR:** *Drumming*, in its entire form, is over an hour long, and we will be performing the first movement, originally for four percussionists. It is played on four sets of bongos (each bongo with two drums on it), and each drum is tuned to a certain pitch. He uses a few iconic "Steve Reich" techniques in this piece, the first of which is called phasing. Phasing, in short, means that you have two people (or, in some of his pieces, one person and a tape recording) playing exactly the same rhythm on exactly the same instrument, and very slowly—almost imperceptibly—one person speeds up ever so slightly. The audience hears the rhythm gradually stretching apart from itself until the player is exactly one eighth note ahead. Depending on the piece, the player will either stay there, regress back, or continue to phase ahead another eighth note. Reich conceived this idea with two tape players, each playing at slightly different speeds.

Another "Reich" technique he uses is substituting rests for beats. At the very beginning of the piece, you will see one of us walk up to the bongos and play only a single note. After we play that single note a few times, it will become two notes and then three notes, and over the course of a few minutes it splits out into the rhythms the piece is based on. He had that rhythm in mind from the beginning of the piece, but from the beginning he gradually takes away rests and adds in a note. Halfway through the piece, he does the exact opposite; we have the full rhythm, and he begins to substitute rests for notes, until the very end when there is a single note again—a surprisingly Bachian thing. Again, it's all about counterpoint, and I think Reich would be the first to say that Bach is where he got these ideas. Some of the most successful composers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taken ideas that have worked before and just reimagined them at another level. This sort of thinking wasn't yet possible in Bach's time—it wasn't where music was at—but now that we have had Bach's music for a few hundred years, now we are taking those genius ideas and pushing them to their extremes.