



Different Drums

Seattle's "Drums Along the Pacific" festival pays tribute to three American originals



JOHN CAGE REHEARSING
A PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE,
EARLY 1940S.

Third in an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's

AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:
CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The current March–April calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on the opposite page. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

In December of 1938, Seattle's Cornish School of the Arts hosted an epochal musical event: America's first percussion concert. The performance was the brainchild of John Cage, then on Cornish's faculty, and Lou Harrison, who taught summer sessions there.

The original players weren't all professional musicians; the group also included dancers and eurhythmic instructors. (Cornish has a rich modern-dance tradition; it was there that Cage met his lifelong companion, Merce Cunningham.) The instruments ranged from Asian gongs to automobile brake drums. It was an altogether unusual undertaking, indicative of Cornish's status as a hotbed of the avant-garde.

Cage and Harrison had sent out a call to fellow composers for new percussion scores—most notably to their onetime teacher Henry Cowell, then in jail on a trumped-up morals charge, who responded with two percussion scores, along with the finale for a Cornish production of a Cocteau play. ("Why is it more reprehensible to write for four percussion instruments than for two violins, viola and 'cello?" wrote Cowell in 1940.) The next year, the ensemble widened its influence by going on tour. Titled "Drums Along the Pacific," the tour visited universities throughout the Pacific Northwest.

When Paul Taub heard about the NEA's *American Masters: Chamber Music* program, his mind immediately jumped to the Drums Along the Pacific movement. Taub, flutist on the faculty of what is now known as Cornish College of the Arts, hit upon the idea of a festival paying tribute to the two key figures of the original tour—Cage and Harrison—along with their mentor Cowell. “This project almost seemed to have an ‘American Masters’ stamp on it,” Taub says.

Taking place March 26–29, the 2009 “Drums Along the Pacific” festival, seeded by NEA funds, evokes a crucial moment not just in Cornish’s history, but also in American music. The event includes four concerts, including a two-part “John Cage marathon” and a closing performance by a Javanese gamelan, along with lectures and reminiscences about the three composers. The plan is to take the festival on the road, replicating the route of the original Drums Along the Pacific tour.

The latest Drums Along the Pacific endeavor differs from the original in some important aspects. While composers like Ray Green and Gerald Strang contributed to the original concerts, the current incarnation concentrates exclusively on the works of Cage, Cowell, and Harrison. It includes not just their work of the late 1930s and early ’40s, but also music from throughout their careers. The percussionists are all professionals, and this time around they’re joined by other instrumentalists, including the Seattle Chamber Players. (Taub is a founding member.)

Despite these differences, percussion instruments are still at the center of the events—a circumstance that has presented a daunting challenge to the organizers, since most of the original instruments no longer exist. “We’ve done a lot of exploring in trying to find the instruments,” says Matthew Kocmierski, co-artistic director of the festival, and a member of the participating Pacific Rims Percussion Quartet. Brake drums, for example, changed forever

American Masterpieces Chamber Music

Performances in
March and April

2009

MARCH 2

PRESENTER: Cantus **PROGRAM:** *Lux Aurumque*, Eric Whitacre; *Shall I Compare Thee*, Stephen Paulus; *A Sound Like This* (a new commission), Edie Hill; *The Turning* (a new commission), Maura Bosch; *There Is Sweet Music*, Daniel Gawthrop; *Oolichan – Sliammon* chant arr., Stephen Hatfield; *Deep River* African Spiritual arranged, Harry T. Burleigh; *Witness* an African Spiritual arranged, Moses Hogaan **PERFORMERS:** Cantus www.cantusonline.org

Variations; Michael Daugherty, *Sinatra Shag* **PERFORMERS** (Cube Ensemble): Lawrence Axelrod, keyboards/conductor; Caroline Pittman, flute; Douglas Brush, percussion; Dane Richeson, percussion; Christie Miller, clarinets; Janice Misurell-Mitchell, flute/voice; Patricia Morehead, oboe/English horn; Phil Morehead, keyboards/conductor www.cubeensemble.com

MARCH 11 St. Paul, MN

PRESENTER: Zeitgeist **PROGRAM:** Terry Riley, John Cage, and Frederic Rzewski **PERFORMERS:** Zeitgeist ensemble: Heather Barringer, percussion; Patti Cudd, woodwinds; Pat O’Keefe; percussion Shannon Wettstein, piano www.zeitgeist.org

MARCH 29 Cedar Falls/Waterloo, IA
PRESENTER: University of Northern Iowa **PERFORMER:** Cantus See March 2

MARCH 14 Seattle, WA

PRESENTER: Music of Remembrance **PROGRAM:** *Ghetto Songs* (MOR Commission), Paul Schoenfield **PERFORMERS:** Morgan Smith, baritone; Angela Niederloh, mezzo-soprano; David Klein, narrator; Mikhail Shmidt, violin; Laurie DeLuca, clarinet; Walter Gray, cello; Jonathan Green, double bass; Mark Salman, piano www.musicofremembrance.org

APRIL 2 New York, NY

PRESENTER: Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center **PROGRAM:** *Verge*, Sebastian Currier; *Necronomicon*, John Zorn **PERFORMERS:** Inon Barnatan, piano; Erin Keefe, Yoon Kwon, Arnaud Sussmann, violins; Richard O’Neill, viola; Fred Sherry, cello; Tara Helen O’Connor, flute; Jose Franch-Ballester, clarinet www.chambermusicsociety.org/calendar/179/2008-09_chron_season

MARCH 16 St. Paul, MN

PRESENTER: Zeitgeist St. Paul, MN **PROGRAM:** Pieces written for Zeitgeist by John Cage, Terry Riley, and Frederic Rzewski **PERFORMERS:** Zeitgeist (Heather Barringer, percussion; Patti Cudd, woodwinds; Pat O’Keefe; percussion; Shannon Wettstein, piano) www.spiritofthetimes.org

APRIL 2 & 5 Milwaukee, WI

PRESENTER: University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee **PROGRAM:** American Sounds Project: “Unruly Music”—a residency featuring compositions by sfSound members and UWM composition students. **PERFORMERS:** sfSound (core group: Kyle Bruckmann, oboe; ma++ ingalls, clarinet; John Ingle, saxophone; Christopher Jones, piano, bassoon, conductor; Monica Scott, cello; Erik Ulman, violin)

MARCH 25 New York, NY

PRESENTER: Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center **PROGRAM:** Guarneri String Quartet and Johannes Quartet **PROGRAM:** *Passing Through* (NY premiere), Derek Bermel; *Octet: Double Quartet* (NY premiere), William Bolcom **PERFORMERS:** Guarneri String Quartet (Arnold Steinhardt, John Dalley, violins; Michael Tree, viola; Peter Wiley, cello); Johannes String Quartet (Soovin Kim, violin; Jessica Lee, violin; Choong-Jin “C.J.” Chang, viola; Peter Stumpf, cello) www.chambermusicsociety.org/calendar/179/2008-09_chron_season

APRIL 17 & 19 New York NY

PRESENTER: Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center **PROGRAM:** *Knickknacks* and Piano Quartet No. 3, by George Tsontakis **PERFORMERS:** Opus One Piano Quartet (Anne-Marie McDermott, piano; Ida Kavafian, violin; Steven Tenenbom, viola; Peter Wiley, cellist) www.chambermusic.org/calendar/179/2008-09_chron_season

MARCH 26–29 Seattle, WA

PRESENTER: Cornish College of the Arts **PROGRAM:** “Drums Along the Pacific”: an homage to the legendary percussion concerts organized by Cage and Harrison in the Pacific Northwest in the 1940s. **PERFORMERS:** Pacific Rims Percussion Quartet, pianist Steven Drury, tenor John Duykers, the Seattle Chamber Players, and Gamelan Pacifica. <http://arts.cornish.edu/calendar>

APRIL 18 Santa Fe, NM

Steiren Hall; Santa Fe Opera **PRESENTER:** Santa Fe New Music **PROGRAM:** Paul Moravec: *The Time Gallery*; *Useful Knowledge (A Franklin Fantasy)* **PERFORMERS:** David Felberg, violin; Cherokee Randolph, viola; Sally Guenther, cello; Carol Redman, flute; Melissa Pena, oboe; James Shields, clarinet; David Tolen, percussion; Lydia Brown, piano; John Boehr, baritone

APRIL 18 Seattle, WA

PRESENTER: Music of Remembrance **PROGRAM:** Steve Reich, *Different Trains*; Daniel Asia, *Breath in a Ram’s Horn* **PERFORMERS:** Ross Hauck, tenor; Mina Miller, piano www.musicofremembrance.org

MARCH 29 Chicago, IL

Gottlieb Hall, Merit School of Music **PRESENTER:** Cube Contemporary Chamber Ensemble **PROGRAM:** Henry Cowell, *Quartet* for flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord; Joan Tower, *Petroushkates*; Bruce Saylor, new work for violin, viola, clarinet, cello and piano; Laurel Firant, *Dance* for violin and piano; George Crumb, *Gnomic*

APRIL 25 Danbury, CT

PRESENTER: Western Connecticut State University **PROGRAM:** Amy Beach, *Quintet for Flute*; Laura Kaminsky (premiere); Joan Tower, *String Quartet No. 3* **PERFORMERS:** Manhattan String Quartet (Eric Lewis, violin; Calvin Wiersma, violin; John Dexter, viola; Chris Finckel, cello)

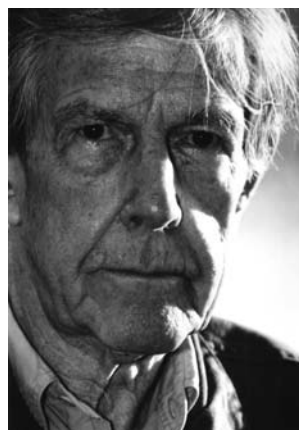
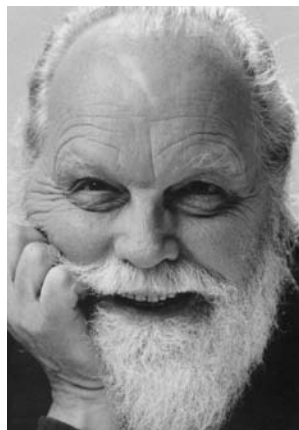
when World War II depleted the supply of high-quality steel; the originals, Kocmierski says, “sound like church bells when you hit them on the side.” The organizers combed junk shops, flea markets and garage sales finding pre-World War II Chinese gongs in antique shops and tam-tams that belonged to retired drummers.

The scores themselves present their own archival difficulties. Some of the original Drums Along the Pacific pieces were published; others essentially vanished after their original performances. “As Lou Harrison explained to me,” Kocmierski says, “they wrote a lot of these pieces quickly, for particular concerts and dance performances. They were not of a mind that they’d be used again. This movement happened, then a few years later, it just went away, while these composers continued to move on and evolve.” Kocmierski knew both Cage and Harrison; conversations with them yielded some scores (“As I talked to Lou, he’d remember another piece”), while others have been found in the archives of the New York Public Library.

For the festival organizers, the resultant music more than justifies the effort. “To listen to these pieces today, there’s a lot of rhythmic complexity,” says Kocmierski. “Some of it has to do with the theories of rhythm and pitch and the different intonational systems put out there by people like Cowell. There’s a sense of playfulness and joy. And the music tends to be strictly rhythmic, rather than droning, because they were associated with modern dance.”

Cowell’s *Pulse*, written for Cornish in 1939, illustrates the principle. The one-movement, eight-minute piece sticks to a fixed, rapid 7/8 meter. *Pulse* calls for six players—five at instruments, the sixth as an assistant who moves from player to player helping out with fourhanded tasks, such as damping an instrument. The piece will be performed on the festival’s opening-night Cowell program.

The collectivist nature of the original Drums Along the Pacific movement is best



Lou Harrison and John Cage

illustrated by *Double Music*—a Cage and Harrison collaboration, written for percussion quartet. The composers agreed on certain ground rules—the length, the rhythmic structure—then both went off to compose independently, Cage for players one and three, Harrison for players two and four. “It’s close to the way John worked a lot in his life,” says Kocmierski. “He and Merce would never collaborate on a piece in a pantomime fashion. They’d agree on a length, then John would do the music and Merce would do the dance.”

During the Drums Along the Pacific period, both composers were heavily influenced by Cowell’s teaching, as well as by each other. In subsequent years, their styles became more distinct. Cage sought out resources other than percussion—prepared piano, voice, traditional classical instruments, even (famously) silence. His late work *Ryoanji* (1983–5) was inspired by a Zen rock garden in Kyoto. Cage composed the twenty-minute work using rocks that he’d found in Washington during a Cornish visit; he took them back to New York and outlined their shapes on a microtonal clef. A single percussionist, playing a series of pulses without discernible pattern, is the garden’s “sand”; a bamboo flute, trombone, and voice are the “rocks.” The piece can be performed with

any of its solo parts added or subtracted, even multiplied through recordings. (The festival’s March 28 performance will feature all three soloists.)

“Like a lot of John’s work,” Kocmierski says, “it has a very strong sensibility and flavor, even though a lot of chance was used in creating it. It’s a very luxurious piece to listen to.”

Harrison, meanwhile, continued to write for percussion, but his style evolved. “He became a much more melodic composer,” Kocmierski says. Case in point: his *Concerto in slendro* (1961; revised 1972), featuring a violin soloist, a celeste, two tack pianos and two percussionists. “The violin solo is very sensuous,” says Kocmierski. “Even though it uses a little bit different intonational system, I don’t think the audience will be aware of it.” To replicate Harrison’s adjusted-intonation celeste for the March 27 all-Harrison concert, Kocmierski has had a set of bars made for his own instrument, allowing the piece to be performed in its original intonation.

The Drums Along the Pacific festival, if nothing else, promises to restore the over-used word “maverick” to its real meaning. Cowell, Cage and Harrison never bowed to orthodoxy or opinion; all three of them followed their own instincts and passions throughout their careers. “They all had an independent streak, a fearlessness, even a little anarchy,” says Kocmierski. “There’s a bit of wanting the whole world, and the freedom to reach for it. All of that is most definitely American—they’re some of the most strongly American composers who ever lived.”

For photographs of the American Masterpieces concert at CMA’s National Conference, see pages 34–35.