



CARLOS CHÁVEZ AND HIS WORLD

August 7–9 and 13–16, 2015

CARLOS CHÁVEZ AND HIS WORLD A

BARDSUMMERSCAPE

PROGRAM SIX

East and West

Sosnoff Theater

Friday, August 14

7:30 p.m. Preconcert Talk: Kyle Gann

8 p.m. Performance

John Cage (1912–92)/Lou Harrison (1917–2003)

Double Music (1941)

*Eric Cha-Beach, Joshua Quillen, Adam Sliwinski,
David Degge, Jonathan Collazo '18, Petra Elek '16,
and Christopher Gunnell '17, percussion*

Colin McPhee (1900–64)

Balinese Ceremonial Music (transcr. 1934)

Pemoengkah
Gambangan
Taboeh Teloe
Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung, pianos

Lou Harrison

Main Bersama-sama (Playing Together) (1978)

*Zohar Schondorf, horn
Catskill Mountain Gamelan*

John Cage

Construction No. 3 (1939–41)

Carlos Chávez (1899–1978)

Toccata for Percussion (1942)

Allegro
Largo
Allegro un poco marziale
*Eric Cha-Beach, Joshua Quillen, Adam Sliwinski,
David Degge, Jonathan Collazo '18, Petra Elek '16,
and Christopher Gunnell '17, percussion*

INTERMISSION

Henry Cowell (1897–1965)

Ostinato Pianissimo (1934)

*Eric Cha-Beach, Joshua Quillen, Adam Sliwinski,
David Degge, Jonathan Collazo '18, Petra Elek '16,
and Christopher Gunnell '17, percussion
Bard Festival Percussion Ensemble
Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung, pianos*

Amadeo Roldán (1900–39)

Ritmica 5 (1930)

Ritmica 6 (1930)

*Eric Cha-Beach, Joshua Quillen, Adam Sliwinski,
David Degge, Jonathan Collazo '18, Petra Elek '16,
and Christopher Gunnell '17, percussion
Bard Festival Percussion Ensemble*

Lou Harrison

Threnody for Carlos Chávez (1979)

Jessica Thompson, viola

Catskill Mountain Gamelan

Edgard Varèse (1883–1965)

Ionisation (1929–31)

Eric Cha-Beach, Joshua Quillen, Adam Sliwinski,
David Degge, Jonathan Collazo '18, Petra Elek '16,
and Christopher Gunnell '17, percussion

Bard Festival Percussion Ensemble

Simon Ghraichy, piano

Zachary Schwartzman, conductor

PROGRAM SIX NOTES

The percussion ensemble works of the 1930s and '40s on the program tonight provide ample evidence of an era of playful technical innovations and self-conscious explorations of rhythm and timbre. In them, one can find qualities both ancient and modern, quantifiable and mystical, cosmopolitan and parochial, programmatic and abstract. Percussion instruments, with their enormous variety of materials and sound production methods, must have seemed to modern composers a vast uncharted territory of new possibilities. In the works featured in this concert, such instruments hold the power to evoke machine-age technological mastery or archaic, primal urges—and sometimes bring to mind both. Certainly, the use of so-called primitive materials to invoke tangible remnants of prehistory (especially as such remnants were recognized among living populations) made both modernity and modernization more visible.

As groundbreaking as the early percussion ensemble works seemed, however, they were not without precedent. Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* (1913) evoked prehistoric ritual by transforming the orchestra into an impulsive, largely percussive organism. Audiences in the Americas had to wait close to a decade after the Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* to hear the work in its orchestral form; a lucky few got to know it through the two-piano reduction. The piece's elevation of timbre and rhythm reverberated throughout the Americas. Cuban author Alejo Carpentier noted that "those who already knew the score of *The Rite*—the great revolutionary banner of the day—began to notice that in Regla, on the other side of the bay, were rhythms just as complex and interesting as those created by Stravinsky to evoke the primitive rituals of pagan Russia." In spite of the work's association with a specific time and place, elements of its musical style could be extrapolated and its instrumentation adapted to express other times and places, other tribes or nations. Stravinsky's masterpiece gave composers everywhere the impetus to mine the cultural materials of their ancient pasts to create their own versions of international modernism.

On his role as a Cuban composer, Amadeo Roldán wrote in 1933: "My aim is first of all to attain a production thoroughly American . . . an art that we can call ours, continental, worthy of being universally accepted not on account of its exotic qualities. . . . The sound of a banjo must not always bring jazz to our mind, nor should the rhythm of our güiro always recall a rumba." *Rítmicas 5* and *6* are studies on the Cuban *son* and *rumba*, respectively. Roldán transformed the timbres and rhythms of Afro-Cuban music, creating playfully disorienting syncopations and deconstructing the 3-2 clave—the most popular rhythm in Cuban music. The result was a modernist Cuban music that resonated far beyond the island republic.

Though he was a recently naturalized American citizen, a discouraged Edgard Varèse left New York City and decamped to his native France in 1928. His response to both the reigning French

neoclassicism and the Cuban music that was surging through Paris—Cuban singer Rita Montaner’s “El manisero” (the peanut vendor) was enormously popular—was *Ionisation*, an ambitious work for percussion instruments composed between 1929 and 1931.

The essence of *Ionisation* is firmly rooted in a cosmopolitan urban atmosphere in all its cultural diversity. The piece represents a mixture of cultures, evident from the short repeating cells of traditional Latin music and the Chinese cymbals and gongs that mark important structural moments, the European and American marching traditions in the snare drums, and the sirens of the urban soundscape. In a letter to his friend Carlos Salzedo, Varèse quoted from astrophysicist Arthur Stanley Eddington’s 1927 book *Stars and Atoms*, which Varèse said explained *Ionisation*’s title and organization. Cryptically, he concluded, “*Ionisation* represents . . . the mystery of the skies of America.” Mystery, Americanness, and primitivism are qualities of Varèse’s works sometimes overlooked because of his dedication to abstract music after 1945. His projects during his time in Montparnasse, however, reveal his enthusiasm for primitivist evocations.

While Varèse was in France he left his colleague Henry Cowell back in New York in charge of the newly formed Pan-American Association of Composers, of which both Cowell and Carlos Chávez were founding members. From October through December 1931, Cowell traveled to Berlin with the objective of finding a unifying theory for all music, “whether Oriental, Occidental, Classic or Modern.” Cowell would not apply this new understanding of classic principles to his own compositions, however, until fall 1933, when he began teaching world music at The New School for Social Research in New York City. These classes introduced world music to the young John Cage, among others. Cowell most likely began composing his first work for percussion ensemble at the same time. The piece, completed in 1934 and titled *Ostinato Pianissimo*, represents his attempt to synthesize and distill world music elements to find new possibilities for modern music.

Like Varèse in *Ionisation*, Cowell borrowed percussion instruments from different world music. Most immediately apparent are the textural similarities of *Ostinato Pianissimo* to that of Indonesian gamelan music. The instruments are roughly ordered from high to low, with low-pitched instruments moving at a slower tempo than higher-pitched ones. The “ostinato” of the title indicates that each instrument repeats its own pattern, in varying lengths, throughout the work. Although these ostinatos occasionally align, they do not do so at structural moments as in an Indonesian gong cycle. Cowell’s intent was to compose a work based on universal musical principles. At the very least, he would have acknowledged that repetition is the simplest and most ubiquitous structural principle in music of any culture.

In a 1948 review of his friend Colin McPhee’s work, Cowell noted the Canadian composer’s “knowing use of Balinese modes” and the characteristic melodic contours of Balinese gamelan music, which he said were important elements for the music’s authenticity. The insistent, driving ostinatos of gamelan music proved an especially fruitful source of inspiration for the new percussion composers, and one that reverberated through the final decades of the 20th century. Moments in McPhee’s *Balinese Ceremonial Music* will remind some listeners of later minimalist composers, especially Philip Glass’s early compositions.

In Mexico, a series of well-documented nation-building projects following the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 initiated a tidal wave of government-sponsored archaeological research on pre-Columbian cultures and artifacts. One result in the area of music was Daniel Castañeda and Vicente Mendoza’s exhaustive work on pre-Hispanic musical instruments, *Instrumental precortesiano* (Pre-Cortesian Instruments, 1933), a volume that included hundreds of photographs, detailed drawings,



John Cage, 1967, Hervé Gloaguen

and explanations of the origins of Mexico's percussion instruments, including the *teponaztli*, *huéhuetl*, and *timbal*. Between 1931 and 1934 Chávez held a series of composition seminars, which included Mendoza and Silvestre Revueltas. A goal of these workshops was to explore ways to incorporate indigenous Mexican percussion into orchestral music, but none of the seminarians composed for an all-percussion ensemble. Chávez would not do so until 1942, when he wrote his *Toccata* at the behest of Cage. Though Chávez acknowledged the work was written as an experiment in mostly nonpitched percussion instruments, the first and last movements follow a sonata form.

Cage was a young Californian composer working at the Cornish School in Seattle when he commissioned works for his percussion concerts, with which he toured the West Coast of the United States. Introduced by Cowell, Cage and Lou Harrison collaboratively composed *Double Music* for percussion quartet in 1941; they both contributed half of the score and wrote independently of each other. Also composed and premiered that year, *Construction No. 3* shows some of the fruits of Cage's study of serialism with Arnold Schoenberg at USC and at UCLA. Cage employs a rhythmic and phrase structure in which each player follows a proportion series that is a rotation of another player's series.

Harrison's attention to the timbres, tuning, and idioms of the gamelan beginning in 1975 led to highly successful combinations of Asian and Western musical elements in several pieces. One of his earliest compositions for Western instruments and gamelan, *Main Bersama-sama* (1978) was intended for performance on a set of Sundanese *degung* instruments from West Java and French horn. Harrison wrote that the "playing together" of the piece's title is meant to carry a sense of transcultural warmth and understanding, an equitable cultural diversity. *Threnody for Carlos Chávez*, composed the following year as a response to Chávez's death, similarly positions a gamelan as the backup orchestra for a Western solo instrument—the viola. Harrison said in an interview shortly after Chávez's death: "He was an enormous influence on me. . . . In the long run he will prove in some aspects to be more germinal, more important than Stravinsky in many ways."

—Stephanie N. Stallings