

## **Restless—Endless—Tactless**

The radical changes of Western music in the twentieth century took many forms. While tonality was recast in the 1920s, it was in the 1930s that a pivotal step in the “liberation of sound” occurred, with composers experimenting with percussion instruments as if they were a new discovery. A genre was born—the percussion ensemble—that by its nature was a pliable idiom, clear and free for exploration.

While a handful of composers may have explored this earlier, Edgard Varèse is generally credited with the first major composition for percussion ensemble, his *Ionisation* of 1931. Heralding a new music, *Ionisation* demanded new ways of listening: its rhythmic themes moved among “unpitched” instruments as a new form of melody, while pitched percussion was used secondarily as a kind of cadential texture. *Ionisation* also went beyond the sound world and limitations of Western orchestral percussion instruments by integrating them with the exotica of non-Western percussion, as well as sirens, whose gradual glissandi made a strong case for noise as an integral musical idea.

And so the floodgates were open. After the premiere of *Ionisation* in New York in 1933 on a program that included William Russell’s elegant *Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments* (which showed that the “primitive” could function in a traditional musical form), the “percussion orchestra” became the new avant-garde. Percussion was seen as not only the last frontier of traditional instrumentation, but also as expressive of the machine age and the rhythm of modern life. American composers saw it as especially their own: a music of American energy and experimentation, as well as a revolution in music not derived from European ideas.

This historic recording finally presents some of the most overlooked efforts from the early period of percussion music (only Johanna Beyer’s *IV* and Henry Cowell’s *Return* are known to have been previously recorded). All from the 1930s, these works are connected through the activity of Cowell. As a leader of the American avant-garde in the 1930s, Cowell was an early champion of percussion, at one point writing in a letter to John Cage, “I honestly believe and formally predict that the immediate future of music lies in the bringing of percussion on the one hand, and sliding tones on the other, to as great a state of perfection in construction of composition and flexibility of handling on instruments as older elements are now.”<sup>1</sup>

Cowell taught courses in music at New York’s New School for Social Research, focusing on new ideas and world music. A number of early percussion pieces are known to have directly grown out of these classes. Since 1927, Cowell had also published a journal of new American scores, the *New Music Quarterly* (and later the *New Music Orchestra Series*), and in 1936 he released the audacious edition #18, consisting of six works for percussion: *IV* of Beyer, *Auto Accident* by Harold Davidson, *Three Inventories of Casey Jones* by Ray Green, *Dance Rhythms* by the choreographer Doris Humphrey, *Three Dance Movements* by William Russell, and *Percussion Music* by Gerald Strang (all are included on this recording except the Russell, which is previously available).

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Cowell to Cage, March 23, 1937, Cowell Collection, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, Research Division.

The *New Music Orchestra Series* edition spotlights the surprisingly different directions composers took in this new idiom. Some works are overtly programmatic and even satiric (Davidson, Green, and Russell), yet they experiment with unconventional playing techniques, found objects as instruments, and the playful contortion of traditional musical forms. The inclusion of the Humphrey exhibits the beginning of a long relationship between modern dance and percussion, which became furthered in the work of John Cage after he became acquainted with these pieces. But perhaps most striking in the collection was the work *IV* by one J.M. Beyer, whose conceptual and process-based aesthetic presaged the most daring American experimental music for years to come.

Johanna Magdalena Beyer was a German-American composer whose music remained mostly obscure after her death in 1944, until it began to receive further notice in 1988 after being revived for performances celebrating her centenary. Beyer settled permanently in New York in 1923 and was involved in the avant-garde music scene centering around Cowell, as well as the Composers' Forum and WPA music program of the 1930s. Correspondence shows that she maintained a close friendship with Cowell, serving as his informal secretary between 1936 and 1940. She inscribed her works and correspondence to conductors as "J.M. Beyer," no doubt to mask her gender.

Beyer composed six works for percussion ensemble between 1933 and 1939, all of which are featured on this recording. Like her compositions in other idioms, her percussion works have a strong formal sensibility and focus on development. They are especially distinctive in their abstraction, exploration of percussion at soft volumes, and attention to orchestration and color. In Beyer's work, percussion is not only celebrated for its pure tactile quality, but also as a vehicle for her development of a proto-minimalist style based on ostinato and musical space.

Even in these first forays into a new genre by Beyer and her colleagues presented on this CD, there is a lot going on. While these works have sometimes been regarded as minor curiosities—several of them perhaps more interesting socially than musically—they also show the musical and aesthetic development that took place toward codifying the vocabularies of percussion and experimental modernism itself. Together, they tell a story of an emerging new music.

### **Johanna Beyer—*IV***

Beyer's daring *IV* of 1935 is composed for nine parts with unspecified instruments (the title of the work is an enigma). The fifth, or middle part, is simply repeated eighth notes in 7/8 meter. Three other parts enter fugally, but grouping their eighth notes through accents in groups of two, three, and five, displacing emphasis away from the downbeat (which is always supplied in the ninth part). Other parts provide rhythmic subject and cross-rhythms which increase in complexity with each repetition. Yet something else happens in *IV* that was, at the time, a possible first: the entire work is in a constant state of tempo and dynamic change. In each of its six 8-measure groups, tempo gradually accelerates and volume increases to a local maximum near the center, and then decelerates and decrescendos to the next phrase (although the last phrase crescendos to the end). *IV* is a composition in constant flux, and is also possibly the first work for unspecified instrumentation.

### **Gerald Strang—*Percussion Music***

Gerald Strang may have been the most academically trained composer of this group. He was a graduate student in composition at UC Berkeley when he composed his *Percussion Music* for three players specifically at Cowell's request for scores for the *New Music Orchestra Series* edition. The three-movement work is perhaps more structurally polished—if less imaginative—than other pieces on this CD. His preface declares: “The aim in composing the *Percussion Music* has been to write pieces possessing a musical value in their own right, yet suitable for dancing. . . . Players should try to use their instruments as expressively as possible.” Strang's work is notable for his facile fashioning of multi-percussion set-ups for the players, polyrhythmic groupings across barlines, and for close attention to the note durations of percussive attacks on different instruments.

### **Johanna Beyer—*Percussion, opus 14***

Dated August 1939, and composed for a large ensemble with 11 parts, *Percussion, opus 14* revisits the tempo and volume oscillations of *IV*, without strict adherence to process. In 3/4, a single timpano provides a driving ostinato rhythm, almost evoking a Bruckner or Mahler scherzo and Beyer's Germanic roots. The other parts develop a gradually formed rhythmic dialogue, led by the dragon's mouths (temple blocks), with rhythms and dynamics cascading in waves.

### **John J. Becker—*Vigilante 1938 (A Dance)***

Regarded as one of the “American Five” group of modernist composers with Cowell, Charles Ives, Wallingford Riegger, and Carl Ruggles, John J. Becker was a crusader for the new “ultra-modern music,” but as a resident of the Midwest, he was less well known than the other four composers. In 1933, Becker composed an earlier percussion work, *The Abongo* (previously recorded on New World Records), but it suffers from its naïve pictorial interpretation of African culture and music. Invited in 1938 by choreographer Diana Huebert of the Carleton Dance Group in Northfield, Minnesota, to compose music for a dance, Becker titled this piece *A Dance* until the title of the dance itself was determined as *Vigilante 1938*. The theme of Huebert's program was rebellion, and this work “abstractly reflected her concern for the Spanish Civil War.”<sup>2</sup> Becker composed the work for five players with piano, and adapted some of the rhythms and phrase lengths to Huebert's choreography.<sup>3</sup>

In three martial sections with two pastoral interludes, the work is centered around the piano part (which is “to be played as a percussion instrument except in the interludes”), with the other percussion secondary. Becker is known for compositions utilizing chord clusters and chromaticism, and in *Vigilante 1938* this is allied with Huebert's vision using percussion as partner to the contrasting marcato and legato character of the dance.

### **Johanna Beyer—*March***

Beyer's *March* is dated July 1939, and is subtitled “for 30 Percussion Instruments” (though sets of instruments are intended to be played by one player, and the piece might be played by as few as seven players). As in William Russell's *Three Dance Movements* of 1933, in which the “March” is in 3/4 time, Beyer skews the march form with a meter she calls 4½/4 (nine eighth notes per

---

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Gann, “The Percussion Music of John J. Becker,” *Percussive Notes Research Edition*, March, 1984, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

measure). The opening tells us this is no ordinary march, as an initial pianissimo downbeat is followed by silence until the final eighth note of the second measure. This hiccupped theme is gradually filled in both rhythmically and by a groaning lion's roar, with bursts of forte contrasting with the baseline soft volume. Beyer creates a beautiful orchestration for softly played percussion, contrasting resonant and short sounds in different registers.

### **Harold G. Davidson—*Auto Accident***

Harold Davidson was an Ohio composer who Cowell knew only through correspondence after Davidson had sent him a work for pitched percussion entitled *HELL'S BELLS*. Cowell invited Davidson to write a new work for the *New Music Edition*, and Davidson produced *Auto Accident*, which he referred to as an “American Tragedy.” Davidson hoped that the work was not too flippant, and in a letter to Cowell, joked about the “accidentals” in the *Accident*.<sup>4</sup> A large ensemble including musical tumblers (tuned glasses), siren, and glass plates (with instructions for breaking at the moment of the accident) is required for this pictorial and tongue-in-cheek work. Like the other works heard here utilizing piano (by Becker, Green, and Strang), at first glance it would seem that the work's reliance on melodic idea is to the detriment of the development of percussive ideas. Nonetheless, Davidson finds ways to use percussion and timpani in complementary and highly chromatic ways.

### **Ray Green—*Three Inventories of Casey Jones***

Ray Green, originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, studied with Bloch and Milhaud, worked with Martha Graham, and ran New York's American Music Center for twelve years. He lived a full musical life, and his compositions often focused on Americana and the vernacular. *Three Inventories of Casey Jones* (he indicated “inventory” to mean “taking stock of—see what's in the tune”<sup>5</sup>), for piano and four percussionists, juxtaposes jaunty piano excursions with a creative percussion orchestration that includes five “pop bottles” (graduated) and a large bottle filled with several marbles.

### **Johanna Beyer—*Three Movements for Percussion* *Restless—Endless—Tactless***

Composed in 1939, Beyer's *Three Movements* bears a dedication to John Cage, and assumes a daring and experimental structure. The first movement, “Restless,” is in 3/4 and opens with the minimalist three-measure subject of fortissimo downbeats in the gong. Quarter notes are articulated beginning in measure four, yet development is halted on two occasions by fermatas on barlines. Finally, the restless energy of these simple themes evolves toward a climax in the center of the work in the middle of the three-measure subject in the gong. In fact, the 114-measure work is a palindrome (each measure however still played forward on the retrograde, rather than backwards). Some imperfections and variations exist, including an occasional arbitrary inversion of high and low notes (and measure nine is excluded in the mirror image, whether by intent or mistake). Beyer enhances the mirror aspect of the structure in the rhythmic detail, with themes of alteration in the timpani, woodblock/triangle, and polyrhythms of three against four, which in the second half of the movement are energized through *accelerando*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Davidson to Cowell, August 22, 1935, New Music Collection, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, Research Division.

<sup>5</sup> Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925–1936* (UMI Research Press, 1981), p. 338.

The middle movement, “Endless,” is an austere and early study in minimalism and extended duration. Lasting about ten minutes, “Endless” uses as subject the steady tick of the woodblock playing quarter notes in 4/4, rising and falling in two-measure phrases, to be arrested in pause every eight measures. At each successive pause, the woodblock plays a kind of rhythmic addition at its arrival downbeat, from quarter notes to sixteenths. A spare hushed accompaniment of bass drum, suspended cymbal, and lion’s roar behaves with false regularity, with slight variations in each grouping. Beginning with the sixth passage, the hypnotic phrase length and evolution becomes irregular and interrupted. Beyer resolves this disturbance by repeating the entire piece, with a coda of the original theme after the second time through.

The final movement, “Tactless,” continues the hypnotic quality of the previous movements with a dialogue of recurring motives. In 5/4 time, “Tactless” features a quarter-note ostinato in the tom-tom, with a rest on beat three, creating a sense of metrical illusion. The bass drum augments this illusion (literally) with a recurring theme of 4 over 5. At points of intensity near the beginning and end, measures of 1/4 interrupt as sforzando crashes in the cymbals, with the fifth and final time a tutti sforzando. Added to the texture is the appearance of pitched percussion, an E-flat chime whose persistent ring assumes a significant, almost psychological presence in the otherwise “unpitched” landscape.

### **Doris Humphrey—*Dance Rhythms***

The inclusion by Cowell of Doris Humphrey as a “composer” in the *New Music Edition* collection demonstrates Cowell’s appreciation of the relationship of dance and music, and how the vocabulary being developed in modern dance around rhythmic experimentation paralleled that of the new percussion music. Humphrey was a noted dancer and choreographer, and a pioneer in the development of modern dance. The score for *Dance Rhythms* notes that Humphrey developed the rhythms with fellow dancer Charles Weidman, and that it was notated by composer Wallingford Riegger.

Several repeated rhythmic groupings comprise the score for two players, which in both pattern and weight reflect Humphrey’s choreographic emphasis on gravity, breath, and sequence. While the score indicates that the patterns and instruments may be improvised, in this first recording the performers chose to realize the score as notated.

### **Johanna Beyer—*Waltz***

The final work of the four percussion pieces she composed in 1939, Beyer’s *Waltz* further explores techniques previously used in other works. A quarter-note ostinato in the tom-tom prevails, tempo oscillates, and soft volumes rise and cascade. While in 3/4 time, the *Waltz* perpetuates rhythmic tension with the cross rhythm of four against three. The work features “rolled” downbeats through the ensemble in several instruments from low to high, creating a lovely arrhythmic wash of color underneath the interplay.

### **Johanna Beyer—*Percussion Suite***

Beyer’s *Percussion Suite* in three movements is her first work for percussion, dating from 1933, and one of the earliest works in the genre itself. It is not known if she was present at the concert that year where *Ionisation* and Russell’s *Fugue* were premiered. Though less formally defined than her later works for percussion, we can hear in this piece the origins of Beyer’s style, and her unique

approach to using percussion in understated and highly sensitive ways. The first movement opens with its primary voice, a bass drum muted at pianissimo. Chinese blocks, triangle, tambourine, and cymbal carry on a sparse interplay on top of the bass drum, with tempi fluctuations and phrase variation. It may be the first time a composer has marked percussion “sotto voce.” The second movement features xylophone (replacing the Chinese blocks in the orchestration), which plays a chromatic scale (and variants) with a timbrally idiomatic rhythmic quirkiness. The final movement recasts some of the material of the first movement in a new metric design with the instrumentation changed to Chinese blocks, rattle, triangle, castanets, and tam-tam. Again, a delicate interplay develops in phrase groups that successively expand, then retreat, and then repeat the process.

Beyer’s accomplishment in the *Suite* is that in her first work in the genre, she immediately explored the less obvious musical parameters possible with percussion—favoring subtlety over thunder, and broadness of space and time over dense rhythm.

### **Henry Cowell—*Return***

Cowell himself made his own significant contributions to the percussion genre, first with his *Ostinato Pianissimo* of 1934. From 1936 to 1940, Cowell was imprisoned in San Quentin on a morals charge, but was able to compose more than sixty compositions and lead the prison’s music programs. In 1939, he composed two percussion works, the widely-performed *Pulse* and the more obscure *Return*. *Return* is for six players and features a rhythmic motive which moves about an elegant Asian-infused orchestration that includes cup gongs. The work also calls for a bowed pane of glass, which produces an eerie sound, as well as, at the end, a “human wail,” which he instructs to be preferably female and of a wailing rather than a singing character. It is not known if Cowell viewed the work as a metaphor for his prison experience and return to society. Nevertheless, as musical expression, *Return* is charged with quiet intensity and makes a resonant, powerful statement.

—John Kennedy

*Composer and conductor John Kennedy is Resident Conductor of Spoleto Festival USA and Artistic Director of Santa Fe New Music. With New York’s Essential Music, he led the revival and premiere of many early percussion classics, including Beyer’s work in 1988 as well as the music of William Russell in 1990.*

Since its founding in 2006, the **Meehan/Perkins Duo (Todd Meehan and Doug Perkins)** has redefined the American percussion duo through its diverse commissions and engaging performances. Dedicated to creating a new body of work for the percussion duo genre, the Duo has collaborated with composers David Lang, Paul Lansky, Nathan Davis, Matt McBane, Jonathan Leshnoff, and John Supko to expand the repertoire and produce eclectic new acoustic and electro-acoustic works for percussion. The Duo has shared this music with audiences throughout the country and abroad, including performances at Weill Recital Hall, the Ojai Music Festival, the International Festival-Institute at Round Top, Monadnock Music, the Yellow Barn Music Festival, the Stone, the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, and at universities and conservatories. The Meehan/Perkins Duo uses Vic Firth sticks and mallets, Pearl/Adams drums and keyboards, and Black Swamp Percussion accessories. For more information visit [www.mpduo.com](http://www.mpduo.com)

**The Baylor Percussion Group** is the primary performing ensemble of the Baylor University percussion department and is devoted to the artistic presentation of the most significant percussion works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A central focus of the ensemble is to foster relationships between composers and performers through musical collaborations and commissions. The group presents regional and world premieres of works by both emerging and established composers in each of its concerts. The BPG has performed at the International Festival-Institute at Round Top, Baylor University's Distinguished Artist Series, and at the Texas Music Educators Association Convention.

### **Baylor Percussion Group**

Austin Aeschbacher, Steve Dailey, Logan Dean, Bobby Fajardo, Aaron Krouse, Robert McCullagh, Daniel Medina, Michal Nelson, Tyson Voigt, Daniel Webbon  
Brian Marks (Becker and Green), and Margaret Crites (Davidson), piano  
Soon Cho, vocalist (Cowell)  
Matthew McClung, additional percussionist (Strang)

### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

#### **Johanna Beyer**

*Dissonant Counterpoint*. Sarah Cahill, piano. New Albion NA 114.

*Have Faith!* Beth Griffith, soprano; Margaret Lancaster, flute. New World Records 80665-2.

*Music of the Spheres*. Included on *Women in Electronic Music—1977*. New World Records 80653-2.

*Sticky Melodies*. Astra Chamber Music Society, John McCaughey, musical director. New World Records 80678-2 (2 CDs).

Suite for Violin and Piano. Miwako Abe, violin; Michael Kieran Harvey, piano. New World Records 80641-2.

#### **John J. Becker**

*The Abongo*. New World Records 80285-2.

#### **Henry Cowell**

*Mosaic*. Colorado String Quartet, Musicians' Accord. Mode Records 72.

*Persian Set*. Manhattan Chamber Orchestra, Richard Auldson Clark conducting. Koch International Classics 7220.

Piano Works. Chris Brown, Sarah Cahill, Sorrel Hays, Joseph Kubera, piano. New Albion NA 103.

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1945). Miwako Abe, violin; Michael Kieran Harvey, piano. New World Records 80641-2.

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cowell, Henry. *American Composers on American Music*. 2nd edition. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1962.

Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Schirmer, 1997.

———. "The Percussion Music of John J. Becker," *Percussive Notes Research Edition*, March, 1984.

Kennedy, John, and Larry Polansky. "Total Eclipse: The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer."

*Musical Quarterly* 20 (1996): 719–78.

Mead, Rita. *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925–1936*. UMI Research Press, 1981.

Nicholls, David., ed. *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*. Amsterdam: OPA, 1997.

Oja, Carol. *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Producers: Doug Perkins, John Kennedy

Engineer: Rick Carpenter

Mix and Post-production: Joel Gordon

Mix assistant: David Corcoran

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

*Auto Accident* and *March* were recorded December 14, 2009. *Three Movements for Percussion*, *Waltz*, and *Percussion, opus 14* were recorded December 15, 2009. *IV* and *Percussion Music* were recorded February 9, 2010. *Dance Rhythms*, *Vigilante 1938 (A Dance)*, and *Return* were recorded February 10, 2010. *Suite* was recorded April 15, 2010. All works were recorded in Jones Concert Hall, Glennis McCrary Music Building, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Design: Jim Fox

*Waltz*, *Percussion, opus 14*, *Three Movements for Percussion*, *Percussion Suite*, and *March* published by Frog Peak Music.

*IV*, *Dance Rhythms*, *Three Inventories of Casey Jones*, *Auto Accident*, and *Percussion Music* published by New Music Orchestra Series (out of print).

*Return* and *Vigilante 1938 (A Dance)* are unpublished.

**This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.**

We would like to extend special thanks to John Kennedy, Rick Carpenter, Matthew McClung, Brian Marks, Soon Cho, Margaret Crites, Jim Culley, Alan Zimmerman, Jim Grady, Molly Sheridan, Larry Polansky, Mark Wessels, and Kevin Butler.

FOR NEW WORLD RECORDS:

Herman E. Krawitz, President; Lisa Kahlden, Vice-President; Paul M. Tai, Director of Artists and Repertory; Mojisola Oké, Bookkeeper; Angelica Sanchez, Production Associate.

ANTHOLOGY OF RECORDED MUSIC, INC., BOARD OF TRUSTEES:

Milton Babbitt; Amy Beal; Thomas Teige Carroll; Robert Clarida; Emanuel Gerard; David Hamilton; Rita Hauser; Lisa Kahlden; Herman E. Krawitz; Fred Lerdahl; Robert Marx; Elizabeth Ostrow; Cynthia Parker; Larry Polansky; Don Roberts; Patrick Smith; Paul M. Tai; Blair Weille.

Francis Goelet (1926–1998), Chairman

For a complete catalog, including liner notes, visit our Web site: [www.newworldrecords.org](http://www.newworldrecords.org).

New World Records, 20 Jay Street, Suite 1001, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (212) 290-1685

E-mail: [info@newworldrecords.org](mailto:info@newworldrecords.org)

*RESTLESS, ENDLESS, TACTLESS*  
*JOHANNA BEYER AND THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN PERCUSSION MUSIC*

Meehan/Perkins Duo & the Baylor Percussion Group

80711-2

1. Johanna Beyer (1888–1944)

*IV* (1935) 2:01

Gerald Strang (1908–1983)

*Percussion Music* (1936)

2. I. Alla Marcia 2:39

3. II. Moderato 2:47

4. III. Rondino 1:44

Johanna Beyer

5. *Percussion, opus 14* (1939) 3:17

John J. Becker (1886–1961)

6. *Vigilante 1938 (A Dance)* (1938) 5:21

Johanna Beyer

7. *March* (1939) 3:14

Harold G. Davidson (1893–1959)

8. *Auto Accident* (1935) 2:45

Ray Green (1909–1997)

*Three Inventories of Casey Jones* (1936)

9. One :51

10. Two 3:38

11. Three :49

Johanna Beyer

*Three Movements for Percussion* (1939)

12. Restless 3:05

13. Endless 10:08

14. Tactless 4:31

Doris Humphrey (1895–1958)

15. *Dance Rhythms* (1935) 3:12

Johanna Beyer  
16. *Waltz* (1939) 3:18

*Percussion Suite* (1933)

17. I 5:06

18. II 2:31

19. III 5:44

Henry Cowell (1897–1965)

20. *Return* (1939) 5:12

TT: 72:48

P & © 2011 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

**NO PART OF THIS RECORDING MAY BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED  
WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION OF A.R.M., INC.**