

## Robyn Schulkowsky's Worlds of Percussion

The composer of *Armadillo* is best known as a leading percussionist in new-music circles, who has worked closely with composers like Stockhausen, Cage, Feldman, and Kurtág. Less well-known sides of her work include teaching and organizing percussion activities in alternative situations, throughout the world—India, Brazil, Greece, Mexico (a recent project involved Metro workers in Mexico City), among many other places. As composer she has done considerable work with theater (including Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Antigone*), film, and an opera for performance for young people. And she has made large-scale, stand-alone pieces like *Armadillo* for solo or smaller ensembles. Two of these have titles drawn from Frederick Hölderlin's hymn fragment *Vom Abgrund nemlich . . .* ("so, from the abyss")—*Meine Stimme /wird/ umgehen/ wie ein Hund* ("my voice/ will/ walk/ like a dog") and *Der Wüste Lichttrunken* ("the desert's drunk with light"). As with many of Xenakis's titles, seemingly abstract musical material is associated with matter outside of music as such, evoking poetry and other cultures (especially archaic Greece in Xenakis' case). The title *Armadillo* is the name of a dance referred to in the great ancient Mayan epic book *Popul Vuh*, an account of the creation and history of gods and, eventually, human beings<sup>1</sup>. Edgard Varèse had, in 1932–34, set a hymn from this book in his *Ecuatorial* for bass singer and an ensemble including six percussionists, the score of which he prefaces with the statement "I conceived the music as having something of the same elemental rude intensity" as pre-Columbian sculpture.<sup>2</sup>

The use of percussion, either by itself or as an intrinsic part of an instrumental ensemble, is, in Western classical music, an innovation of the twentieth century. It involves both a new sound resource and a new way of imagining music, in which sonority, "Klang," rather than pitch, is central. The primary element is sound, extended in time (rhythm), rather than pitch-organized continuities (as in harmony and counterpoint). With percussion (apart from the specifically pitched instruments like marimba or xylophone), pitch is not so much a matter of abstracted, fixed note collections, as it is of sonic continuities, in a variety of registers from highest to lowest, which rise, fall or stay level. And the instruments—say, drums—do not have mechanisms for producing pitch, like, for example, the keys of a flute, but produce pitches more directly in the physical process of producing their sound, more like the process of singing, or playing the violin.

Varèse is the great pioneer, starting in the early 1920s, to be followed, in the later 1930s, notably by Cage, and then from the 1960s by, above all, Xenakis. Varèse's music was moved by a feeling for the energy and sound of urban life, by a kind of mythology of science and by a vision of the technological transformation of sound production<sup>3</sup>. At first his musical means involved percussion, exclusively in *Ionisation*, but more usually with winds and brass. The music, somewhat paradoxically, could also evoke the exotic and archaic, a world far removed from the urban, scientifically oriented West and its classical and romantic musical traditions. The first appearance of an ensemble made up entirely of percussion instruments (including unconventional ones such as sirens and slabs of wood struck with a hammer) is in Darius Milhaud's music for an ancient Greek tragic drama, Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* (*Les Choéphores*), written in 1916.<sup>4</sup> Outside the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Popul Vuh*, translated by Dennis Tedlock, Touchstone, New York, revised edition, 1996, pp. 132–3.

<sup>2</sup> Edgard Varèse, *Ecuatorial*, G. Ricordi & Co., New York, 1961, prefatory text.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Griffiths in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Macmillan, London, New York, 1986, vol. 4, p. 448.

<sup>4</sup> See C. Wolff, "Crossings of Experimental Music and Greek Tragedy," in Brown and Ograjensek,

Western classical music tradition there have of course been various musical traditions in which percussion plays a major role, notably in Africa and in musics in the Americas brought over from Africa. Schulkowsky has spent time in Ghana and performed with a master drummer there. Steve Reich went to Ghana to study drumming in 1970 and on his return produced his magnum opus, *Drumming*.<sup>5</sup> The two musicians who play with Schulkowsky here, Fredy Studer and Joey Baron, are both well-known drummers from jazz and improvisation scenes.

A version of *Armadillo* was first worked out and performed in the early 1990s. The composer has been slow and deliberate in letting the composition be finished; the music has been undergoing continual modification, adjustments and refinement. This process is both in the composition and its performance. There is no detailed, fully notated conventional score, but the composer lays down the conditions and materials of performing explicitly and clearly. There are fixed structural determinations, rhythmic patterning, instrumentation and dynamics. The music, of which this recording represents a final crystallization, is the result of a performance intensively practiced and rehearsed. At the same time it is in the nature of this music and its performers that the process of performance is an active, dynamic one. There is a feeling of continuous flexibilities in the details of the performance, giving the music its aliveness, and a sense that new possibilities always hover over it. The performers in this recording have all been involved in the piece's evolution. Schulkowsky worked on it as a duo with Fredy Studer ten years ago (they have worked and recorded together on a number of projects over many years). Joey Baron was then asked to join, making up the present trio. Baron and Schulkowsky have since also often performed and recorded together, and all three players now regularly perform and record as a trio.

*Armadillo* is one large-scale piece in four sections, the first of which, at around forty-two minutes, is about three times the duration of the other three combined (these are more or less the same duration, five-plus minutes each). That's the overarching structure, asymmetrical, and yet because of the clarity of its shape, somehow balanced. One might think of the image of a Mayan temple, with a large broad base rising pyramidically to smaller structures at the top.<sup>6</sup> The music's title points to Mayan associations (though we need to be tipped off). The armadillo is one of a collection of Mayan heraldic animals (like the jaguar), and it gives its name to a dance. The pre-history of percussion music must have involved association with dance, whether the dance be part of religious ritual or secular entertainment (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive). *Armadillo* is not so much dance-like as it is involved with a sense of continuous movement. It doesn't have the repetitive structural units one expects of dance music. Rather, the music suggests an evolving pattern marking larger cycles. The composer alludes to the Mayan Venus calendar based on the periodicities of that planet.<sup>7</sup> She uses the numbers associated with that calendar, or rather the visual representations of those numbers (in the form of dots—each dot is one unit, and lines—

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*Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, Oxford, 2010, pp. 285–304.

<sup>5</sup> One could say this work is as much about abstract patterning of pitched sounds as about the expression of rhythmic and sonic energy. It uses marimbas, glockenspiels, and voices along with tuned drums. It also has a kind of didactic quality, a demonstration of how to generate from just one simple rhythmic phrase a 90-minute piece. In performance *Drumming* has been said to have both a hyper-controlled and a quasi (non-referential) ritual feeling. All these features mark differences from *Armadillo*.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see M.D. Coe, *The Maya*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 8th edition, 2011, pp. 34–5, 39.

<sup>7</sup> The Mayan calendars (there are a number of them), are elaborate and complex, while their system of numeration is elegantly simple. For a brief account see Coe (note 6), pp. 62–66, 231–235. For an illustration of a calendar page see Tedlock's introduction to the *Popol Vuh* (note 1), p. 24.

each line represents the number 5; a shell-like image stands for zero, so, for example, two lines, with three dots = 13) as suggestions, freely adapted, of rhythmic units, patterns and their changing sequences. In the same way, the image of larger calendar cycles is not literally represented in the music. It allows one to imagine larger cyclical processes, though these (as I hear the music) do not so much indicate very long-term, repetitive processes; they are felt rather as an ongoing process that, because of its long duration, seems more like a progress, a moving along (forward) in time.<sup>8</sup>

Almost all of the music's sound is from drums, in a full range from high to very low. The trio's playing is virtuosic, precise and finely modulated in color (modes and location of striking, types of sticks) and dynamics. It proceeds, within each larger section, continuously, with steady energy and momentum, lightly punctuated, not broken, by short pauses, and with shifting textures, some—as at the opening, for instance—complex overlays of different rhythms, with a resulting overall, internally intricate sonority, a complex, knotted sound. Then there are stretches of one line, then two, then three, making an increasingly complex weave that still maintains transparency. There are shifts in intensity, degrees of loudness, and gradual movements from loud to soft (or, less often, the other way around); rhythmically there are shifts in movement over an underlying feeling of rapid movement, and there are shifts in degrees of complexity. The feeling of movement and speed is often determined by rhythmic layering, as different rhythms interlock more tightly or with more internal space. A single clear pulse is only intermittently expressed, though a feeling of continuous movement is always there.

This is a music at once variously complex and unified or “simplified” by the prevailing sonority of the drums. What gives the music its complexity and richness, what makes it distinctively engaging, is not just the stretches of intricate, overlaid patterning—there are a number of moments when textures thin out and simplify—but the continuous structural shifts, the unpredictable but somehow right moves from one kind of texture and procedure to another. (One may imagine that this sense of rightness, of structural timing, is somehow affected by the ordered cycles, charted by the Mayans, of the planet Venus.)

One doesn't need to detail exhaustively the adventure of listening to this music. It will in any case be different on different hearings and for different listeners. Overall, for orientation, there is the change from the long, sustained and continually varying first section of the piece to the relatively much shorter last three sections which each have their own individual focus, most noticeably the third (track 3), which consists almost only of sustained sounds made with metal, picking up and making an extended episode out of the very few occasional metal sounds in the first section. The fourth and last section (track 4) is also marked by new sound colors, of snare drum and wire brush, with occasional punctuation by higher pitched metal, and then a brief concluding return to the sustained metal sounds of section 3. The music's shifts, its progress, move forward to the end. It is a mysterious music, at once highly disciplined and controlled and at the same time full of energy and movement. It is the result of an intense and controlled focus in its composition and performance, a focus that because of its very intensity somehow allows the release of a sense of freedom.

—*Christian Wolff*

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<sup>8</sup> There are occasional back references, as, for instance the use of sustained metal sounds just at the end of the fourth section (track 4), which recalls the overall sound of the third section (track 3). But these are occasional and don't dominate the structural feel of the music.

### **Composer's note**

I was commissioned in 1989 by Peter Oswald to compose a work for percussion ensemble. Thanks to my lucky collaboration with the German visual artist Gunther Uecker, I started looking for inspiration outside of the music world I was so involved with/immersed in at the time. It was on a trip to East Berlin, to visit a friend as the wall was crumbling away that I found a book with beautiful prints of the Dresden Codex. The Venus pages started me on this journey. Lévi-Strauss admits that his writings describe a lived experience: “. . . my work gets thought in me unbeknown to me. . . .” (*Myth and Meaning*, 1977). I love stories, myths. This codex that I could not read became my private myth, my way of communicating with the music unbeknown to me. I referred to it often for various commissions that followed, but it was not until the magical combination of Fredy Studer + Joey Baron that I was able to compose *Armadillo*. The magic reincarnation of myth, the even more magic reality of sound in space. I am profoundly grateful to Fredy and Joey for persisting. Their energy and dedication are what made this documentation possible. Thank you for opening the ear.

Born and raised in South Dakota, percussionist **Robyn Schulkowsky** (born 1953) has been an innovator and collaborator throughout her life. From her studies in Iowa and Germany to her solo tours around the world, Schulkowsky has dedicated herself to revealing the wonders of percussion to people everywhere. An active musician on five continents, Schulkowsky moved to Germany during a heyday of experimental and adventurous classical composition. She has premiered and recorded some of the most important works in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, working with such composers as Sofia Gubaidulina, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, John Cage, Morton Feldman and Iannis Xenakis, presenting their works in tours over most of the planet. Schulkowsky's virtuosity has been captured on more than twenty recordings, including CDs with violist Kim Kashkashian and trumpeters Reinhold Friedrich and Nils Petter Molvaer, and seminal recordings of compositions by Christian Wolff and Morton Feldman. Her commissioned chamber opera *The Child of the Sea Otter* was premiered in 2008 in Mannheim, Germany. Along with her percussion band, Glorious Percussion, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel she helped celebrate Sofia Gubaidulina turning eighty with the American premiere of her concerto *Glorious Percussion*, written for the group that carries the name. In addition to her usual solo recitals around Europe, the annual Drums Summit in Bonn, Germany, improvisation projects and concerts around the world, Schulkowsky is also the subject of a film by Brussels-based artist Manon De Boer, released in February 2011. Her talents have been recognized by numerous music awards in Germany, and the multifaceted composer and performer is also sought after as chamber music coach.

**Joey Baron**, born in 1955 in Richmond, Virginia, started playing at age nine. Largely self-taught, a leader in his own right, Mr. Baron has over the years developed a unique approach to making music with the drum set. Presently, his activities include solo concerts, workshops, master classes, and drum music collaborations with percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky (*Dinosaur Dances*), as well as ongoing projects with Jim Hall, John Zorn, Steve Kuhn, Ron Carter, Bill Frisell, Lee Konitz, John Abercrombie, Joe Lovano, and Dave Douglas.

**Fredy Studer** was born in 1948 in Lucerne, Switzerland, where he still lives today. He is an autodidact. His music performances since the early seventies have been as eclectic as his freelance activities with musicians ranging from John Abercrombie to John Zorn. For the past forty years, he has performed at festivals, given concerts and workshops, and recorded for radio and television, as well as music for dance productions and radio plays, and theater and film music around the world. He has been honored with numerous prizes and awards. Mr. Studer was one of the first drummers to incorporate open improvisation and grooves into his musical style. His works and collaborations have been documented on more than eighty recordings.

[www.fredystuder.ch](http://www.fredystuder.ch)

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Dinosaur Dances*. Joey Baron, drums and percussion; Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion. L-M 30619.

*Duos 1 and 2*. Fredy Studer, drums and percussion; Robyn Schulkowsky, drums and percussion. For 4 Ears 926.

*Hastening Westward*. Robyn Schulkowsky, drums, gong, plate bell, crotales, cymbals, bronze bells; Nils Petter Molvær, trumpet. ECM New Series 1564.

*In Concert and Studio*. Derek Bailey, electric guitar; Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion. Incus Sideline Store 4.

Morton Feldman. *Crippled Symmetry*. Markus Hinterhäuser, piano, celesta; Robyn Schulkowsky, glockenspiel, vibraphone; Dietmar Wiesner, flute. Col Legno 31874.

Christian Wolff. *10 Exercises*. Natacha Diels, flute; Garrett List, trombone; Larry Polansky, electric guitar; Michael Riessler, bass clarinet; Frederic Rzewski, piano; Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion; Chiyoko Szlavnic, soprano saxophone; Christian Wolff, melodica, percussion, piano. New World Records 80658-2.

Christian Wolff. *Percussionist Songs*. Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion. Matchless Recordings MRCD 59.

Christian Wolff. *Duos with Percussion*. Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion; with Frederic Rzewski, piano; Rohan de Saram, cello; Kim Kashkashian, viola; Reinhold Friedrich, trumpet; Joey Baron, percussion; Christian Wolff, melodica. New World Records 80734-2 (2 CDs, forthcoming).

Produced by Robyn Schulkowsky, Fredy Studer, and Joey Baron

Edited and recorded by Adrian von Ripka, and Andy Neresheimer (Part I)

Mixed by Adrian von Ripka

Mastered by Adrian von Ripka

Recorded in Poggiolo, Italy and Zürich, Switzerland in 2006 and 2009

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

Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

All music composed by Robyn Schulkowsky (1990–2007) GEMA.

Thanks to Peter Bürli, Zürich, Switzerland, and Andrea Menghini and friends, Poggiolo, Italy.

Fredy Studer plays Gretsch drums, Paiste cymbals and uses Vic Firth sticks and DW hardware and pedals.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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ROBYN SCHULKOWSKY (b. 1953)

*ARMADILLO*

80739-2

*Armadillo* (1990–2007)

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|-------------|-------|
| 1. Part I   | 42:33 |
| 2. Part II  | 5:05  |
| 3. Part III | 5:29  |
| 4. Part IV  | 5:12  |

Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion

Fredy Studer, drums

Joey Baron, drums

TT: 58:28

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