

steven schick
drumming in the dark

Six Japanese Gardens

(1995) Kaija Saariaho

Tenju-an Garden of Nanzen-ji Temple 3:08

Many Pleasures (Garden of the Kinkaku-ji) 1:16

Dry Mountain Stream 3:06

Rock Garden of Garden of Ryoan-ji 2:17

Moss Garden of the Saiho-ji 1:33

Stone Bridges 2:55

Rebonds

(1989) Iannis Xenakis 11:11

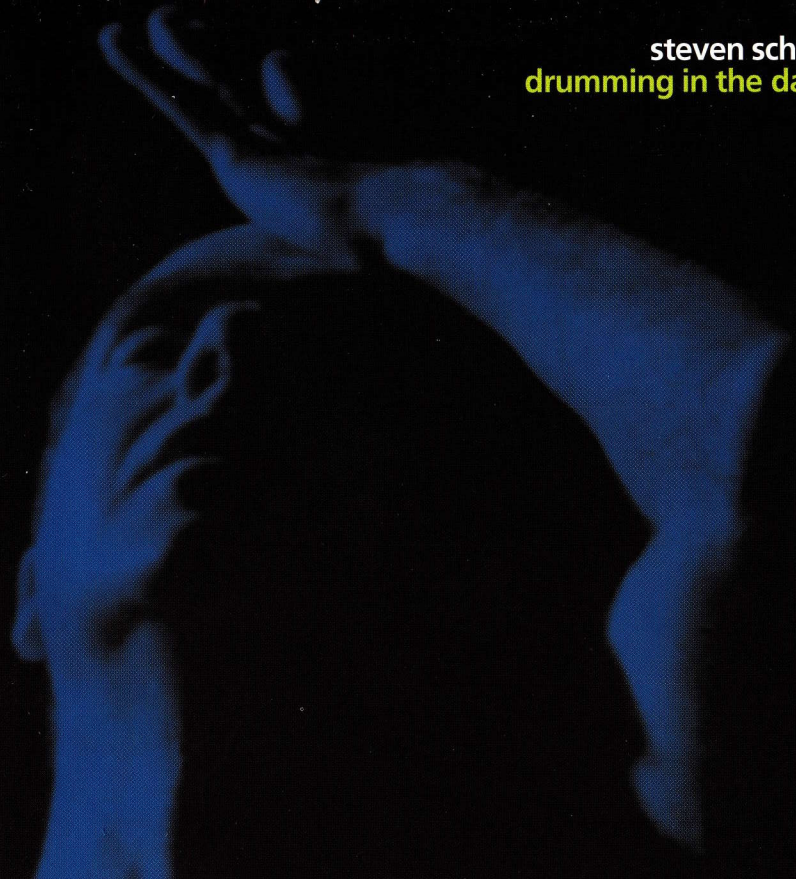
Bone Alphabet

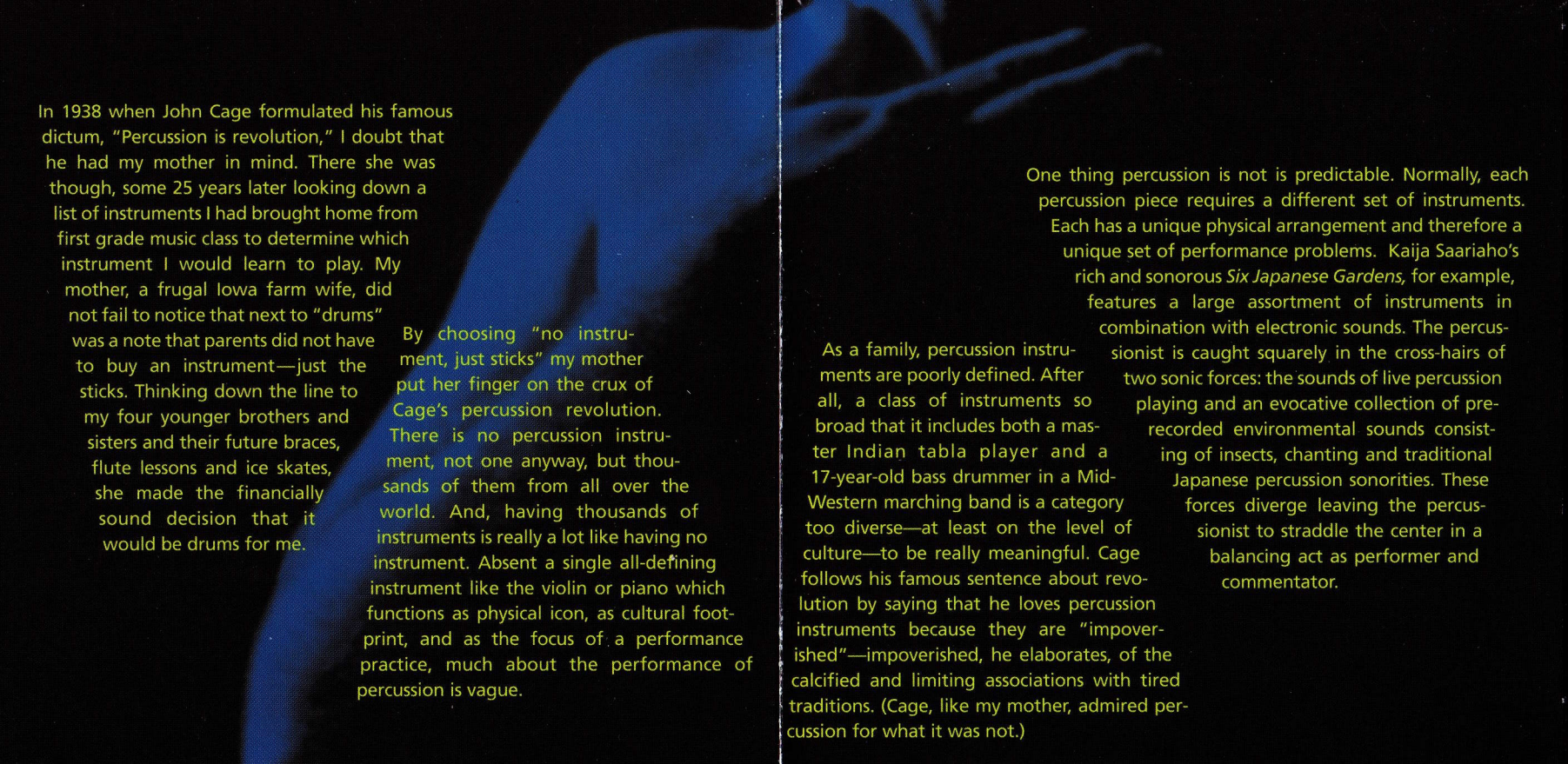
(1992) Brian Ferneyhough 10:17

Watershed I

(1995) Roger Reynolds 28:01

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In 1938 when John Cage formulated his famous dictum, "Percussion is revolution," I doubt that he had my mother in mind. There she was though, some 25 years later looking down a list of instruments I had brought home from first grade music class to determine which instrument I would learn to play. My mother, a frugal Iowa farm wife, did not fail to notice that next to "drums"


was a note that parents did not have to buy an instrument—just the sticks. Thinking down the line to my four younger brothers and sisters and their future braces, flute lessons and ice skates, she made the financially sound decision that it would be drums for me.

By choosing "no instrument, just sticks" my mother put her finger on the crux of Cage's percussion revolution. There is no percussion instrument, not one anyway, but thousands of them from all over the world. And, having thousands of instruments is really a lot like having no instrument. Absent a single all-defining instrument like the violin or piano which functions as physical icon, as cultural footprint, and as the focus of a performance practice, much about the performance of percussion is vague.

One thing percussion is not is predictable. Normally, each percussion piece requires a different set of instruments. Each has a unique physical arrangement and therefore a unique set of performance problems. Kaija Saariaho's rich and sonorous *Six Japanese Gardens*, for example, features a large assortment of instruments in combination with electronic sounds. The percussionist is caught squarely in the cross-hairs of

As a family, percussion instruments are poorly defined. After all, a class of instruments so broad that it includes both a master Indian tabla player and a 17-year-old bass drummer in a Mid-Western marching band is a category too diverse—at least on the level of culture—to be really meaningful. Cage follows his famous sentence about revolution by saying that he loves percussion instruments because they are "impoverished"—impoverished, he elaborates, of the calcified and limiting associations with tired traditions. (Cage, like my mother, admired percussion for what it was not.)

two sonic forces: the sounds of live percussion playing and an evocative collection of pre-recorded environmental sounds consisting of insects, chanting and traditional Japanese percussion sonorities. These forces diverge leaving the percussionist to straddle the center in a balancing act as performer and commentator.

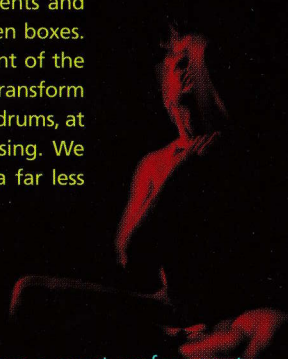


Iannis Xenakis' *Rebonds* is scored for a small array of drums and wood blocks. The resulting uniformity of color suggests a linear music sketched in black and white. Color is defined narrowly as texture; rhythm as a spring-loaded trigger for the intense physical engagement of performance. *Rebonds* is a work in two movements, A and B, to be played in either order. The performance on this recording is B/A.

One of my favorite photographs of myself playing was taken in the mid-1970's of a performance I did of Karlheinz Stockhausen's classic work *Zyklus*. Every summer my wife Wendy taught in a program for deaf and hearing-impaired children at the University of Iowa, and every summer for reasons which now elude me I thought it was a good idea to present a concert of contemporary percussion music for the children. The photo shows me wound up to deliver a fierce backhand gong stroke. I am coiled like a discus thrower with my weight on one leg, mallets a blur of motion and hair flying — it's going to be really loud. In the foreground of the photo there is deaf child with his fingers in his ears protecting himself against a sound he will never hear.

In percussion music, physicality is a powerful force and a central agent of expression.

Physicality abounds in Brian Ferneyhough's demanding *Bone Alphabet*. Difficult rhythms and, by extension, athletic performance skills are not



Early in the learning process of Roger Reynolds' *Watershed*, I identified (and identified with) the tight spiral of drums as the central force of the piece. The drums are confident, learned and focussed. Soon enough they begin to listen to the other instruments: first to the volatile circle of metallic instruments and then to the incessant carplings of four wooden boxes. Approaching the critical "watershed" moment of the work, these forces challenge and begin to transform the drums with steady insistent pressure. The drums, at first dark and laconic, soften and begin to sing. We move seamlessly from order and logic into a far less rational world of impulse and intuition.

Nearly ten years ago I was a guest performer at a poetry reading sponsored by the Fresno Poets Association. Poet Chuck Moulton introduced me by saying that poets and percussionists were fatally linked as wanderers — groping their uncertain way, unsure of the boundaries of their craft or even where art stopped and they themselves began. We were all drumming in the dark, he said.

NOTES BY STEVEN SCHICK

very interesting by themselves though. However, complexity can be interesting and vital if it can be humanized through gestures that are human-sized. *Bone Alphabet's* considerable voltage — the hot wattage of rhythmic and interpretive difficulty — runs its course through the relative frailties of human circuitry. Even the errors that inevitably result are, I think, worth making.

On the cover and above, Steven Schick in a performance of Vinko Globokar's "Corporel" for amplified body percussion.



BIOGRAPHICAL FIELDS

These things are true: I grew up in a farming family in northern Iowa. Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper crashed on my uncle's farm. My father was a handsome man who thought big and worked hard every day of his life. My mother was patient and taught me to sail and didn't mind when I practiced the drums in the living room. Once when I was sailing I was almost caught in a tornado. My brother Ed and I used to work with my father on the farm on very hot summer days, which was more or less when I decided to become a musician. Now I live in La Jolla, California. I still sail and play the drums and I often think of Iowa although I will probably never live there again.

Steven Schick is a professor at the University of California, San Diego and a lecturer at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. He is Artistic Director of the Centre International de Percussion in Geneva. For 12 years he codirected the percussion course at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, Germany with James Wood. Schick is percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars and collaborates frequently with pianist James Avery, the percussion group 'red fish blue fish' and cellist Maya Beiser in the Maya Beiser/Steven Schick Project.