

FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE: Electronic Percussion

A Question Concerning Electronic Percussion -Norman Weinberg

As the newly appointed Electronic Percussion editor, I would like to thank the Percussive Arts Society for giving me the opportunity to organize the sharing of information between the members of the organization. The key words in the last sentence are "sharing" and "members".

I look forward to sharing your views, your thoughts, your ideas, your information, and your dreams as well as your nightmares about this fast growing and constantly changing facet of our art. In an effort to spark a little interest and controversy, please allow me to ask a question. How do you feel about electronic percussion instruments?

Do you view electronic instruments as a threat to our profession? Do you envision a future when the "real-drummer" is made an obsolete relic of the past like the blacksmith or the justice of the peace? If so, do these feelings bother you? What are you actively doing to prevent this situation from happening?

Or, do you view the new technology as a tool which can be used to complement or improve your current situation? Do you see a future where acoustic and electronic percussion instruments are melded together into the general musical landscape? If so, do these feelings excite you? What are you actively doing to encourage your particular vision of the future?

Personally, I am both excited and worried about the future of percussion. I am exhilarated about the potential that the technology has to offer, but at the same time, I'm afraid that percussionists aren't going to embrace the newest developments in technology. And, as a result, the manufacturers aren't going to produce the products needed to move forward into the next century.

There is no doubt that electronic percussion instruments are in a critical stage of their development. In today's musical instrument industry, supply is created whenever there is a demand. Without demand for a particular technology, there will be no supply.

For better or worse, the knowledge and skills required to manufacture a good sampler, mallet controller, electronic kit, or drum machine are more complex and multi-faceted than those required for manufacturing a good tambourine. Designing and marketing the next generation of electronic percussion instruments is going to be costly in terms of human and financial resources. This means that electronic percussion instruments will most likely come from the larger corporations rather than the small home-factory.

By their very nature, large corporations are in the business of turning a profit. Why should a company drop thousands of dollars into the development of a new electronic drumkit if only a handful of people will buy it? Even if the company should decide to go through with the production of this kit, the suggested retail price would have to be sky-high to offset the cost of bringing the product to market.

It bothers me that the Simmons company has stopped producing the Silicon Mallet. It bothers me that a Yamaha drum machine owner can't find the same type of supporting computer software as keyboard players who own Yamaha synthesizers. It bothers me that only five companies produce an electronic drumkit.

Keyboard players and guitarists have been demanding more expressive controllers, more expressive

synthesis techniques, and more expressive means to manipulate their electronic data. Their demands are being met by the manufacturers because these musicians have shown a strong support for the medium. Percussionists, on the other hand, are still complaining about the "feel" of the pads, the complexity of programming, or the price.

My biggest fear concerning electronic percussion instruments is that we will hide our heads in the sand until the people who build and sell the instruments can't see us anymore. At that point, those musicians who have nurtured the new technology will be creating the percussion parts from their keyboards, and percussionists will find themselves synthesized right out of the market.

I'm not saying that acoustic percussion is a dinosaur. There will always be the great players. Talents like Jack DeJohnette, Vinnie Colaiuta, Dave Weckle, Peter Erskine, Gordon Stout, Keiko Abe, Bob Becker, Cloyd Duff, Fred Hinger, Roland Kohloff, Karen Ervin or Richard Weiner (this is by no means an exhaustive listing), are not going to lose too many gigs to a synthesizer and a computer. Their individual creativity is too strong. But, for a dog food commercial, a TV soundtrack, a filmscore, and even a Las Vegas floorshow, it's becoming painfully obvious that electronics will do just fine.

Perhaps today's young percussionist might be programming the dog food commercials of the 90's. Maybe others could be designing the percussion sounds used in *Rocky XII*, writing the next generation of sequencing software, designing the "perfect" percussion controller, or even using the new technology to improve their own performance ability so that they may become the next Buddy Rich.

The bottom line is that electronic instruments don't have to take work away from percussionists if we don't want them to. Instead, they can serve to amplify and expand potential job opportunities and create a wide variety of new careers. The medium of electronic percussion is less than a decade old, and we—the players, the creators, and the consumers—can shape their impact on our profession.

Just yesterday, I was talking to a prominent timpanist and composer who said that he just wasn't interested in electronic percussion. "You know, we spent so much time developing our control of touch on the instruments. The different sounds you can get from a suspended cymbal hit with a drumstick, a brush, or a soft mallet. Electronics just can't be that expressive." I have to agree. Right now—today—they're not. But the technology is still very young. Perhaps if percussionists support the medium, the future will bring new percussion controllers that are even more expressive than their acoustic counterparts. How do *you* feel about electronic percussion instruments? Stay in touch.

You can send your views, thoughts, ideas, information, dreams, and nightmares to: Norman Weinberg, 4617 Sheffield, Corpus Christi, Texas, 78411.