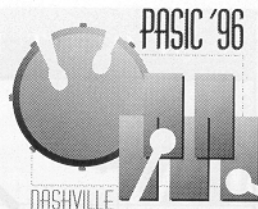


MARIO DECIUTIIS

Validating Electronic Percussion

By Norm Weinberg



DURING THE LATE '70S, MARIO DECIUTIIS WAS ripping his fingers apart trying to play vibes in funk bands. "The desire to play that style of music drew me to electronics," he says. "I needed more volume and was trying everything I could find to get the instrument to sound contemporary. Back in those days I was using Oliver pickups (for the old Musser vibes) and Electro-Harmonics devices such as ring modulators, phase shifters and envelope followers."

Today, DeCiutiis is Principal Percussionist at Radio City Music Hall, a position he has held since 1979. He is also the President of Alternate Mode, Inc., the company that now manufactures the DrumKAT, MalletKAT and TrapKAT instruments. At PASIC '96, Mario's musical companion will be Andy Wasserman—a composer, percussionist, pianist, educator and multimedia developer.

DeCiutiis wanted to perform with Wasserman during his clinic because, "We want to show that playing electronic instruments doesn't exclude playing with another human being. Some people think that when you play electronic percussion, you're playing with drum machines and it becomes very mechanical. A lot of the music that we're going to be playing has spaces for improvisation. There will be plenty of spontaneity and human interaction. This type of music works just as well on electronic instruments as on acoustic instruments. We're not going to discuss all this techno stuff. We want to make an emotional presentation by playing music that is close to our hearts."

That music exhibits a wide variety of performance styles and world influences. "We'll be playing some Koto music using two DrumKATs set to generate Koto scales and sounds. Another features different bell sounds tuned to Balinese scales. We plan to play a textural drumming tune in which I'll simultaneously be playing a bass line, drum line, chords and melody on the DrumKAT. We'll also have a composition written in a textural style for two DrumKATs.

"We will also approach electronic percussion performance in a 'normal' way. If I were playing in a club-date band, how would I approach playing hand percussion such as congas and bongos? In another situation I'll be the bass player, or perhaps the bass player and the vibes player at the same time. We would like to show

examples of program music written for a film or new age production.

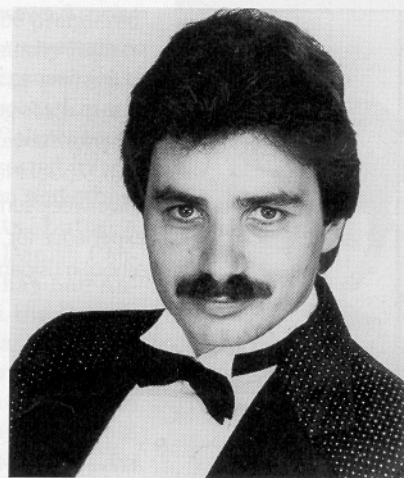
"If we can demonstrate a real musical performance rather than just give a sterile presentation of the technology, listeners should accept electronic-percussion performance as a legitimate art form. That's the goal, to validate electronic percussion."

While DeCiutiis feels that electronic and acoustic instruments should coexist, he contends that electronic percussion offers at least one advantage. "Electronics give the musician the ability to explore new sounds and timbres. Those sonorities basically change the way you approach an instrument. For example, with guitar sounds, close voices don't work well, so you change your technique to adapt to the sound. If you're playing a flute sound, you need to learn how to phrase differently. Normally on vibraphone, if you want a line to sound lyrical, you hold the sustain pedal down. But that doesn't sound like a flute because you're hearing two notes simultaneously. So it becomes an interesting experience to grow with the sounds."

As Vice-President of KAT from 1986 to 1995, DeCiutiis was able to influence the development of the technology he was using. "I was in this unique position where I was able to go up to Bill Katoski and say, 'As a vibes player, if I want to sound like a flute, we have to create some kind of software that will enable me to do that.' We also developed software that made it possible to simultaneously play melody, rhythm and chords on the DrumKAT. The joy was being involved in the creative process of developing software that enables percussionists to do things that can't be done in real life.

"The music growth process is a spiral of learning different things, which gives you more vocabulary. The better you can articulate how you feel, the more expressive your music becomes. That's what all this is about, getting a new vocabulary." **PN**

Norm Weinberg is a Contributing Editor of Percussive Notes and Chair of the PAS World Percussion Network committee.



Mario DeCiutiis' electronic percussion clinic is scheduled for 3 P.M. Thursday, November 21.