

## A Manifesto of the Percussive Artist

By John Lane

### **The Current State of the Percussive Arts**

#### Art vs. Craft

What most percussionists do is essentially craft, not art. A division exists in our profession between the artist and the craftsperson. This is not a negative. That is to say, they are not oppositional, rather different sides of the same coin. Both art and craft require materials and techniques, are virtuosic, and demand skills that develop over time and through devoted practice.

In our field, the orchestral musician is the highest example of a craftsperson, someone who preserves a known repertoire, who continually refines his/her technique in order to replicate something already learned. A craftsperson clearly pictures the end product at the beginning of a task and has respect for tradition and performance practice.

The artist, by contrast, does not know the result of his/her work prior to creation. Like the craftsperson, the artist must acquire a great amount of skill. Artists must have an original virtuosity and cultivate their voice through the choices they make.

#### The Five Problems Suppressing the Advancement of the Percussive Artist

Problem No. 1: Percussionists Enslaved by Technique:

*Zen master D. T. Suzuki once wrote, "If one wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough."*

Today's percussionist is more technically advanced than ever before, with a technical proficiency that, in many cases, surpasses basic musicianship, creativity, individualism, and (dare I say it?) good taste. It is technique that is rooted in excessive or rigid control, based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century model of virtuosity (which is amusing, but outdated).

We should learn to develop "organic" technique, in which we pay attention to anatomy and physics to arrive at the most relaxed and natural grip and stroke, degrees of "looseness," in which we let the instrument teach us how to move.

Technique is not something that we impose on the instrument; it is simply a means to an end.

Technique alone is imitation, which generates only craft. Technique plus receptivity and invention gives rise to art.

Technique Practice as Mind Training – Progress is Doing:

Eugene Herrigel, the author of *Zen in the Art of Archery*, was surprised to learn that Japanese Zen students practicing archery were not at all concerned with hitting the target. We should use our musical practice in the same way: not simply to achieve goals, but to train our minds.

Zen master Shunryu Suzuki wrote, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” We should cultivate the boundless possibility of a beginner’s mind. Goals are not inherently bad. More often than not, however, goals are merely technical benchmarks, which can actually encumber development. Even so, the problem is actually not with the goals, but with our mind.

We should focus on process rather than product. The process *is* the product and *progress* is doing, not completing.

## Problem No. 2: The Cultivation of an Artistic Voice

*Basarab Nicolescu asks in the Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity asks, “How is it that we know more about what we do, and less about who we are?”*

Without creativity and invention an instrument is merely a machine and its player an operator. Musicianship, our art, is intimately connected and grounded to our aural and physical experience, our voice and language, and our humanity. Our musicianship is a combination of our body, thoughts/ideas, constantly changing preferences, and the sounds we choose and create.

Aside from the technical study and appreciation of our greatest craftspeople, I’m not so interested in what other percussionists do. At the end of the day, I draw inspiration from composers, writers, poets, filmmakers, actors, painters, sculptors, dancers, my Zen teachers, my wife, my cats... from the smell of wet earth and stones after a heavy rain... from well-cooked brown rice and chopping vegetables with a sharp Japanese blade... from meditation practice, and the wisdom attained from sitting with things just as they are.

If people are going to want to hear you (or *listen* to you), you must cultivate your own voice. You must express, rather than duplicate. The ones who achieve this have far more artistic and resonant offerings.

## Problem No. 3: The Tribe Mentality

There is great value in finding, identifying with, and celebrating our tribe of percussionists (it is, in fact, what we are doing right now), but ultimately your artistic voice is not to be found in your instrument alone. We spend a lot of time encouraging young percussionists to identify with the tribe first, but that’s not where we find music. That’s not where we find art. We should instead seek out the wider world of creativity.

There is no stamp of approval for music. But there is a percussion subculture that accepts the notion that the accumulation of a particular repertoire—largely composed by other percussionists and focused on idiomatic technical difficulties—is the best measure of achievement. This satisfies and impresses those who buy into that ideal, but it has the effect of withdrawing percussion from the rest of the musical world. Accumulating repertoire is not essential. Repertoire is not a status symbol, nor a rite of passage. In this point in my life, I am more interested in personal relationships. I am not likely to play music by someone with whom I have not spoken, but if I do, it will be music that has retained a sense of invention and originality over time, music that has resisted the decay of

history. As a percussionist/composer myself, I approach composition following Herbert Brün's ideal: only if I can say something that, without me, would not be said.

#### Problem No. 4: The Cult of Celebrity:

There is a troubling new breed of performer, one who has an overwhelming urge to please a crowd, but who are often empty inside and artistically lost. They chase a hunger for "recognition over ability." (Gidon Kremer). I prefer personal relationships to fame and notoriety. I do not revere the words of music critics or journalists, nor covet their (or the public's) affection.

Today's climate of commercialism and consumerism has produced the idea that pop culture status and fame are effective measurements of success, and that the most desirable use of musical talent is for commercial employment. Some teachers promote this notion and the marketplace rewards it.

Many musicians (including composers) apply their energy and imagination to sell their virtuosity at the expense of inventing and creating. We must artistically evolve to a point where technical virtuosity is not mistaken for art. As any reality television program will demonstrate, talent, good taste and confidence do not always go together. It is also rare that business sense and artistic talent are united and symbiotic.

A better measure of success is communication. After all, music at its most elemental *is* communication—a dialogue. Music can create awareness of social, political, environmental, and cultural issues that demand our attention and/or action. It fills a need in my local community for cultural education and expression. By collaborating across disciplines, I tell stories, make things, and bring about new conceptions of performance. In other words I try to be relevant, using my talents to serve something other than my own ego.

#### Problem No. 5: Trouble in the Academy – (the credential factory)

Every year the academy produces more advanced degree holders in music, but the degree has not caught up to the times. Many curriculums continue to reside in the 1970s. Professors may recruit doctoral students because they are easier to teach, they maintain the program (both through their teaching and playing), and they hope they will be able to say that their students are getting those continuously shrinking (yet) prestigious academic jobs, thus, adding to their own prestige.

I want to make this perfectly clear: I do not think we should discourage students from getting music degrees, even advanced ones. What we should strive for in the academy is creating individuals who, though they may not end up working in music, are at the top of the field in their chosen (likely more lucrative) secondary career path. The skills developed by musical training will help them be successful and creative.

My concern is that college teaching is devolving into what Kyle Gann calls a "credential factory, in which we entertain young people for four years and then declare them qualified for a job without having changed their lives..."

Academics *must* be in the business of training minds. University teaching allows me the freedom to pursue art that is meaningful to me, freedom to communicate and collaborate across disciplines. The work itself need not hinge upon or be influenced by a need for commercial success. I am free to be contributive in a way that only exists in higher education, defining and embodying values that I pass along to students by active example.

*We* are artist citizens. As artist citizens, we have a responsibility to find and transmit meaning to our students, transform their sense of who they are, and to help *them* learn what it means to be contributive, what it means to be human.

### Closing Thoughts

*Do-ing* and *Be-ing* are ways of experiencing our lives more deeply. In our musical practice we have to “do” (practice, think about our instrument, study, perform), but we also have to “be” (experience life – our humanity: *be* sad, *be* happy, *feel* deeply, but also learn to bake bread, take a long walk at night, delight in the crunch of an apple, cultivate your collection of experiences and preferences...). If you open your awareness and take the time to experience those kinds of things AND you are learning and practicing an organic technique, then you can put any piece of music in front of you and the extra-musical experiences will profoundly shape your performance. In other words, I believe you have to be an interesting person to be an interesting musician.

We must not let music and creative work become simply our job or occupation. It must be our way of *being* in this world.

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