University of Delaware Percussion Ensemble
Dr. Gene Koshinski and Dr. Tim Broscious, co-directors

April 22, 2023
3pm Puglisi Hall

*The (Mis)Remembered Geography of My Percussive Motherland* (2022-23)  David M. Gordon (b. 1976)

Pta-Vichíg-Fta (after EV and DCI)

J’Táku Gthumá-a (after JC, LH, and HC)

Quómixik Íbix (after FZ, EC, and OM)

Mnémnian (after KA, AH, and SR)

Tik-Twiktkwa (after GL and GHG)

*world premiere*

Personnel

Dan Albertson, graduate student  Emerson Forbes, junior
Bryce Cotton, graduate student  Liz Kern, junior
Jake Grimsley, graduate student  Graeme Leighton, junior
Ben Hausman, graduate student  Tim Bonaventure, sophomore
Bensen Kwan, graduate student  Aidan Dworkin, freshman
Gabe Labell, graduate student  Jacob Fisher, freshman
Haolin Li, graduate student  Alison Janes, freshman
Zach Odom, graduate student  Julia Mescallado, freshman
Mackenzie Wiseman, graduate student  Jonathan Rowe, freshman
Yiming Zhong, graduate student  Kelvin Ventura, freshman
Natalie DiTommaso, senior
Program Notes

The (Mis)Remembered Geography of My Percussive Motherland

It was through percussion that I first entered the world of music. Though I didn’t have a particularly strong interest in listening to music as a child, I was determined to play percussion just like my father had. This was likely due to the fact that I grew up hearing stories of his sundry musical exploits. It was difficult to separate fact from fiction whenever my father recounted his past musical achievements, but I’m reasonably certain that he studied privately with one of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s percussionists and occasionally performed with that eminent group when an extra player or substitute was needed. Whether or not he’d been a member of the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps or played triangle on The Rite of Spring while Stravinsky himself conducted the CSO is far less clear.

I began formally studying percussion in fifth grade, and it was soon after that I made my initial attempts at composition. My first private percussion teacher, a colorful fellow named Bill Hansen, introduced me to an abundance of fascinating music and fostered many of my earliest creative efforts, all of which were for percussion instruments. By the time I reached high school, I’d developed a ravenous appetite for percussion music of all kinds. I was especially taken with mid-twentieth-century percussion ensemble repertoire, drum corps music, and Balinese gamelan.

I continued playing percussion throughout my undergraduate years, though I focused increasingly on composition during that period. The fact that I hated practicing, found it ever more difficult to keep up with my more dedicated peers in the percussion studio, and had developed a crippling case of stage fright after a freshman-year meltdown in a percussion studio class, only hastened that shift in emphasis. By the time I reached graduate school, I’d essentially given up performing (a decision that I now regret), was writing music for a wide array of instruments and ensembles, and had cultivated far more diverse listening habits. Nevertheless, I continued to draw heavily on my background in percussion. Indeed, over twenty years later, I still draw heavily on that background, and I’ve come to recognize—for better or worse—that my early years studying, playing, and writing percussion music did more to shape my compositional outlook than any of the musical experiences that followed.

The (Mis)Remembered Geography of My Percussive Motherland is a collection of five works for percussion ensembles of varying sizes. It’s a large-scale homage to some of the percussion pieces, composers, and styles that played decisive roles in the formation of my musical language. All five compositions in the collection are self-contained, and they can be performed in any order and number. Each one is a tribute to a particular group of musical influences. Of course, those influences must now be filtered through years of intensive study, listening, writing, and teaching, not to mention my ever-diminishing memory and constantly varying aesthetic tastes. What I recall, value, and draw from those earlier inspirations has changed dramatically over time. The landscape of my former percussive world is radically different than it once was, or so it seems.

The peculiar and often difficult to pronounce names of the five pieces are purely fanciful. They have no actual meanings, but were chosen based on their sound qualities, visual appeal, and perceived weirdness. Think of them as locations on a map of places that no longer exist, or perhaps never existed to begin with.

All five works were composed for, and are gratefully dedicated to, Tim Broscious, Gene Koshinski, and the University of Delaware Percussion Ensembles.
Pta-Vichig-Fta (after EV and DCI)

Two of my first musical loves were drum corps and Edgard Varèse’s 1931 masterpiece *Ionisation*, for 13 percussionists. One of my earliest memories is of watching the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps practice at a local football field. Though I don’t recall any of the music they played, I found the power and intricacy of massed, high-precision drumming exhilarating. *Ionisation* was a much later discovery, but its dark, clangorous, and often violent sonic landscape, reverberating with the sounds of sirens, anvils, whips, lion roars, giant tam-tams, and thunderous tone clusters hammered on the bottom end of the piano, exploded my musical imagination. Though in many ways *Ionisation* felt to me like it had emerged from an alternate dimension, some of its rhythmic and coloristic features didn’t seem all that far removed from the characteristically complex, multilayered textures of North American drum corps. Granted, *Ionisation* is much more rhythmically dissonant and timbrally diverse than typical drumline fare, but its extensive use of snare drums, bass drums, and cymbals, along with rapid, grace-note-heavy figures, propulsive, yet slightly off-kilter rhythmic patterns, dramatic rhythmic unisons, and densely-packed, multi-player drumrolls, at least places it in the same zip code as Drum Corps International.

*Pta-Vichig-Fta (after EV and DCI)*, for 10 percussionists, fuses the sound worlds of *Ionisation* and drum corps into a curious hybrid. Many of its musical gestures are drawn directly from—or are at least highly reminiscent of—*Ionisation’s* central themes. *Pta*’s general pacing, ordering of ideas, dramatic trajectory, and form also closely follow those of *Ionisation*. That said, the newer piece is no mere arrangement of the older; it’s a reimagining, a full-fledged re-composition.

Where the two compositions differ most dramatically is in their treatment of rhythmic counterpoint. *Ionisation* is chock full of conflicting rhythms, such as five against four, four against three, five against three, and so forth. *Pta*, on the other hand, has been completely stripped of all such clashes. Although the speed of its rhythmic divisions is constantly changing, from triplets to quintuplets to quadruplets and so on, its individual parts always align with one other. Assuming that *Pta* is played with drumline-like precision, its various rhythmic strands always lock together into tight, clean composites.

*Pta*’s instrumentation is also somewhat different than that of *Ionisation*. Both works call for multiple snare drums, bass drums, and tam-tams, as well as an assortment of other common unpitched instruments, such as bongos, tambourine, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, castanets, and claves. *Pta*, however, features a more diverse collection of snare drums, including a traditional rope-tensioned field drum and a piccolo snare drum. In fact, this piece marks my long overdue reconciliation with the concert snare drum, an instrument that I steadfastly avoided for over 30 years. Some of *Ionisation*’s most distinctive colors, such as hand-cranked sirens, lion’s roar, Chinese wood blocks, and maracas, as well as its surprising introduction of chimes, celesta, and piano during its final section, have been replaced or removed altogether in *Pta*. As compensation, the latter piece adds a few new novelties to the mix, including ribbon crasher, spring drum, piccolo timpano, donkey’s jawbone, and two Brazilian surdos.
Of all the composers I discovered during my early years as a percussionist, the one that had the most dramatic and enduring impact was John Cage. Nowadays, most people associate his name with performance art, indeterminacy, and the infamous “silent” work 4’33”. What many don’t realize, though, is that Cage also composed some of the most important works in the percussion ensemble repertory. Before he turned his attention to Zen Buddhism, chance procedures, and graphic notation, Cage wrote several rhythmically sophisticated works for exotic and unconventional percussion instruments. It was in those works that I first experienced the intriguing sounds of water gongs, automobile brake drums, graduated tin cans, thunder sheets, oxen bells, Conch shell horns, cricket callers, and countless other idiosyncratic sound objects. This fueled my nascent interest in tone color, which has since blossomed into one of my main compositional concerns.

Two of Cage’s contemporaries—Lou Harrison and Henry Cowell—also composed extensively for percussion, and their music for that medium was similarly pivotal in my compositional development. The realization that all three composers drew inspiration from non-Western musical traditions prompted me to explore Balinese and Javanese gamelan music. That music—in turn—opened my ears to the world of alternate tuning systems and solidified my preoccupations with rhythm, timbre, and texture.

J’Táku Gthumá (after JC, LH, and HC), for five percussionists, pays tribute to Cage, Harrison, and Cowell, while simultaneously evoking the metallic shimmer of Indonesian gamelan. At the heart of the ensemble are two microtonally-tuned, 18-note instruments: a collection of porcelain rice bowls and a set of tuned metal pipes. Those two parts, which carry most of J’Táku’s melodic material, are surrounded by intricate textural scaffolding comprised of tuned fish-bowl vases, wine glasses, vibra-tones, bell plates dipped in water, diatonic harmonicas, various kinds of gongs, and an unusual device with two water chambers and a circular metal rail called a Galaxy. In J’Táku’s central portion, a new, warmer array of colors, including djembe, bamboo devil chasers (which Cage previously referred to as cricket callers), and log drum, comes to the fore. This corresponds with an increase in volume and rhythmic activity, ultimately leading to a reverberant climax. Following that peak in intensity is a varied, reverse recapitulation, a circular return to the work’s opening. One element that remains relatively consistent throughout large swaths of the piece—and which is decidedly unlike what one generally finds in the music of Cage, Harrison, Cowell, Bali, or Java—is a convoluted metric pattern made up of eight unequal beats in a long-short-short-long-long-short-long-short arrangement. This oddity finds its origin in the wildly irregular meters of Balkan folk music, which I discovered independently of my percussion studies.
**Quómixik Íbix (after FZ, EC, and OM)**

*Quómixik Íbix (after FZ, EC, and OM)*, for percussion quartet, is the shortest and most difficult of the pieces in *The (Mis)Remembered Geography*. It takes as its point of departure Frank Zappa’s notorious composition *The Black Page #1*, for drum set, xylophone, synthesizer, and various accompanying instruments. As an undergraduate, I occasionally heard mention of that piece, which had taken on the aura of an urban legend. Descriptions of it tended to be hyperbolic and strangely reverential, as though *The Black Page* represented the apex of rhythmic and technical virtuosity, surmountable by only a select few freaks of nature who had been endowed with preternatural musical gifts. Although these dubious reports piqued my curiosity, I was too lazy at the time to actually track down a recording of *The Black Page #1*, which is found in its canonical form on Zappa’s 1977 release *Zappa in New York*. When I finally heard the piece two decades later, I was surprised to find that its fabled rhythms weren’t nearly as demanding as I’d imagined. They’re certainly no walk in the park, but by today’s standards, they’d probably qualify as advanced undergraduate-level material. It seems to me that *The Black Page*’s most formidable challenge is that its quirky rhythms need to be executed by multiple players in unison.

The glassy, angular tune of *The Black Page #1* put me in mind of another rhythmically dense, chromatic melody played by multiple instruments in lock-step: the famed “Dance of Fury” from Olivier Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*. *Quómixik Íbix* alludes to both of these works by requiring its four players to navigate endlessly winding, temporally irregular melodies in strict rhythmic synchronization. As in *The Black Page*, its melodic timbres are sharp and metallic, played on various non-sustaining mallet instruments with hard implements. All four of the percussionists in *Quómixik* must also double on various pedal-activated instruments, a not-very-subtle evocation of the drum set. Perhaps less obvious is the fact that its incorporation of brake drums and cast-iron skillets references *The Black Page #1*’s direct precursor, *The Black Page Drum Solo*, for drum set and overdubbed junkyard percussion.

The rhythms of *Quómixik Íbix* share features in common with those of both Messiaen and Zappa. At times they’re metrically irregular and additive, and at others they’re overlaid on a steady beat, yet packed full of so-called “tuplets,” such as quintuplets, sextuplets, 9-tuplets, and the like. One critical wrinkle that’s not characteristic of the music of Zappa or Messiaen is *Quómixik*’s extensive use of metric modulations—systematic and often disorienting changes of tempo that require players and listeners to reinterpret the relationships between various rhythms and the underlying beat. Metric modulations are strongly associated with the music of Elliot Carter, whose timpani solos I played in both high school and college. Though I’ve never considered myself a devotee of Carter’s music, I’ve been exploiting his rhythmic ideas religiously for virtually my entire compositional career.

P.S. Just for the record, *Quómixik Íbix* is considerably harder than *The Black Page*. 
My relationship with the marimba is complicated. Though I love the sound of the instrument, I always disliked playing it, in no small part because I struggled with 4-mallet technique. Perhaps more importantly, I’ve never been a fan of the solo marimba repertory, which is comprised of myriad pieces by marimbists for marimbists. Many of those works feel to me—or maybe I should say felt to me, since I haven’t listened to much solo marimba music in recent years—like thinly veiled technical etudes. No doubt most of them are well suited to the instrument, gratifying to play, and valuable as pedagogical tools, but I rarely found them compelling from a listening standpoint. There were, of course, various exceptions, and Mnémniang (after KA, AH, and SR), for seven percussionists with an indeterminate number of other players, quotes directly from two of them.

The first is Michi, by the celebrated Japanese marimbist Keiko Abe. I initially heard that piece as a college freshman, and I was struck by the simple beauty of its modal, rhythmically free opening and closing sections. The second piece is Steve Reich’s marimba duet Nagoya Marimbas, a short, hypnotic study in perpetual motion that I discovered just a few years after Michi.

Mnémniang, which features two lead marimbas, interweaves various passages from Michi and Nagoya Marimbas, probing their commonalities. One vital trait that the quoted excerpts share is their exclusive use of “white” notes. Mnémniang thus does the same, steadfastly avoiding sharps and flats for the entirety of its duration. Also notable is the fact that Michi and Nagoya Marimbas both have connections to Japan. The former work was created by a Japanese composer, while the second was written for two Japanese marimbists to mark the opening of the Nagoya Conservatory’s new Shirakawa Hall in 1994. This unanticipated link brought to mind another piece that I’d admired as a young percussionist: Alan Hovhaness’ xylophone concerto Fantasy on Japanese Wood Prints, which was written for Japanese xylophonist Yoichi Hiraoka. Xylophone is obviously a different instrument from the marimba, with a separate—and much smaller—body of literature. As it so happens, however, Fantasy on Japanese Wood Prints is frequently performed on marimba. Also, its solo part occasionally restricts itself to white notes, and so the excerpts from it that I introduce near the end of Mnémniang are a natural complement to the quotations already in play.

Marimba isn’t the entire story of Mnémniang. It also includes two vibraphones, chimes, 14 almglocken, crotales, glockenspiel, and an assortment of unpitched instruments, including a prominent waterphone and groups of suspended cymbals, tuned wine glasses, and wind chimes spread antiphonally throughout the hall. The pitched instruments generally carry melodies from Mnémniang’s source material, while the unpitched ones conjure an ethereal, otherworldly environment or generate rhythmic momentum.
**Tik-Twiktikwa (after GL and GHG)**

One of the rites of passage that I resentfully endured as an undergraduate percussionist was the yearly performance of one or more xylophone rags by George Hamilton Green. I won’t mince words here: I utterly despised those pieces. Their glib, old-timey, inanely happy-go-lucky sound felt best suited to the kind of second-rate historical re-creations of early twentieth-century urban America that I associated with theme parks and novelty restaurants. I could easily imagine Green’s xylophone rags being “played” by animatronic bears in pinstriped golf knickers and newsboy caps. Even more disturbing was Green’s penchant for using tacky alliterations in his already grievously cheesy titles. *Rainbow Ripples, Dotty Dimples, Jovial Jasper, Cross Corners, Ragtime Robin*—the linguistic assault was truly diabolical!

Not surprisingly, my animosity toward those pieces has abated over time. Though I wouldn’t say that I’m especially fond of them, I no longer loathe them, and I’m finally able to appreciate them in their proper historical context. The fact that Green was a professional cartoonist and served on the sound music crew for Walt Disney’s earliest animations helped put his music in perspective.

Seemingly on the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum are the works of Hungarian avant-garde composer György Ligeti, one of my musical heroes. The sound of his music is difficult to describe, but one of its more unusual characteristics is its intermittently cartoonish quality. This trait is especially pronounced in Ligeti’s later works and reached its pinnacle in his 2000 song cycle for mezzo-soprano and percussion quartet *With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles*. Listening to that wonderfully surreal work, I realized that Ligeti and George Hamilton Green aren’t as far removed from each other as I’d originally imagined, and it’s that surprising association that informed my compositional approach to *Tik-Twiktikwa (after GL and GHG)*, for eight percussionists.

*Tik* is a maniacal, though dark, Looney-Tunes-esque romp fronted by a wildly virtuosic xylophone line. It cycles heedlessly through several short themes, continuously transforming and recombining them into new shapes. While it’s not a rag, and certainly couldn’t be performed by animatronic characters, *Tik* does retain some of the blithe goofiness that I associate with Green’s xylophone compositions. It’s also a grand celebration of what I always loved most about being a percussionist: the opportunity to play so many strange and colorful instruments. I was—and still am—deeply fascinated by all the so-called “toys” that percussionists get to work with, and *Tik* incorporates quite a few of them. Among the many instruments that it calls for are seven glass bottles, two toy pianos, four bike horns, a boxing bell, two cuckoo calls, a deer grunter, a nightingale call, three duck calls, a spring coil, six metal measuring cups, a starter pistol, a siren whistle, a pair of two-tone whistles, a metal vibraphone, two slapsticks, a slide whistle, a flex-a-tone, a tri-tone samba whistle, a string drum, a hand-cranked siren, and a vuvuzela. It even features a dramatic pop-gun solo near the end!

*Tik* is loud, propulsive, rhythmically convoluted, relentless, and eccentric. As such, it would seem to be a fitting conclusion to the evening. Bon appétit!