

ANTTI OHENOJA

Original xylophone etudes in the new percussion repertoire

Lectio praecursoria

Antti Ohenoja's artistic doctoral degree was examined on September 27, 2022 in the Sonore hall of the Musiikkitalo in Helsinki. The theme of the postgraduate concerts was: The music of Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001), Japanese percussion music, and percussion in a chamber music context. The title of the thesis of doctoral degree was: From Petrushka to Les Noces A musical journey composing original xylophone compositions influenced by Igor Stravinsky, with an examination on practice as a process. Doctor of music Markus Kuikka acted as the chair of the examination event. The chairman of the board, Doctor of Music Marcus Castrén, gave a statement about the artistic part of the degree. Examiner Susan Powell, Professor of Percussion at Ohio State University, gave her statement on the written work.

In this lecture I will review my five doctoral concerts and the key elements of my thesis. The topic of my concert series was music by Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001), Japanese percussion music, and percussion in the chamber music context. The percussion music of Xenakis has fascinated me since I first started to learn his piece *Rebonds* (1987–89). In my concerts I also performed *Psappha* (1975) and *Okho* (1989) by him. *Psappha* is a multi-percussion composition and *Okho* is written for three djembes. It was interesting to plan the concert programs with contrasting pieces. The music by Xenakis is quite intense, and I wanted to make sure that I was able to find suitable places for the pieces in the concert programs. *Rebonds* started the second concert, which I thought worked well as an opener. The energy and the surprise element of the first percussion sounds in the concert gave *Rebonds* a pristine impact, and a feeling of an open canvas waiting to be painted with colorful sounds.

The fourth concert also started with Xenakis; this time the chosen composition was *Psappha*. *Psappha* is a relentless work that requires intense concentration and a high ability to read graphic notation. For me, reading and performing from the graphic notation took some time to get comfortable with, but after extensive practice the unusual notation started to feel familiar.

Okho for three djembes ended the concert series. This work was performed by me, Patrik Kiviniemi, and Elmeri Uusikorpi as the finale of the fifth concert. I enjoyed performing *Okho* the most out of the three Xenakis pieces. *Okho* is a marvelous piece

that utilizes West African drumming strokes with the composer's visions and calculations of architectural forms, created with the hands and sticks of the performers. I also enjoyed the variations of sounds that Xenakis combined between the three players. The full palm strokes in the center of the drum provided a low, dark bass tones, while the strokes played closer to the side of the drum and the slap strokes created high pitched, bright sounds. The rhythms were very powerful and almost hypnotic in their assertive and onward going manner.

Japanese percussion music was the second theme of my concert series. I wanted to perform Japanese percussion works, among other reasons because of the large and interesting instrumentations that the pieces usually have. The compositions are also composed skillfully, with brave and exciting musical contrasts. The marimba repertoire in Japanese percussion music is massive, and I was originally introduced to Japanese music through solo marimba pieces and Toru Takemitsu's (1930–1996) *Rain Tree* (1981) for vibraphone, 2 marimbas, and crotales. *Rain Tree* was not part of my concert series, but there were other interesting and exciting pieces that I included in the program.

I had an opportunity to collaborate with Japanese composer Toshi Ichianagi (1933–2022) at the Avanti's Summer Sounds festival over a decade ago. I even performed his duet for marimba and piano with him, called *Paganini Personal* (1982), which is based on Paganini's (1782–1840) solo violin caprice no. 24. Due to that experience, I chose to play two of his compositions in my concert series. *Trio Interlink* (1990) for percussion, violin, and piano was performed by me, Jackie Shin, and Eriikka Maalismaa in my second doctoral concert. Ichianagi's *Wind Trace* (1984) for three percussionists was the last piece in my fourth doctoral concert. I performed the piece with Jani Niinimäki and Petteri Kippo.

The last big theme in my concert series was the percussion in chamber music context. For me, chamber music is one of the most delightful musical settings to perform in. I enjoy chamber music especially because one has to listen and see from the other musicians' perspectives, how they like to interpret and shape the musical events in the compositions. Every musician has different characteristics, so it is interesting to observe how people react in different ways to musical impulses and passages.

EERO HÄMEENIEMI'S *TIIIN CHAAR*

The first music performance in the lecture was Eero Hämeenniemi's (b. 1951) *Tiin chaar* (2014) for marimba, tabla, and trombone. One of the most exhilarating aspects of the doctoral project for me was the collaboration with composers. *Tiin chaar* is my commission from Hämeenniemi. The title simply means "three, four". Eero wanted to incorporate three against four rhythms in the music, which are

heard several times during the piece, especially in the later section with the tabla and trombone. The three against four rhythm is essentially the rhythmic motive of the work.

At the beginning stages of the commission process I had telephone meetings with Eero, explaining what kind of piece I would like to order from him. We both have knowledge of Indian music. Eero has a vast knowledge of South Indian classical music, the Carnatic music, and I have some knowledge and performance experience on tabla in North Indian classical music, the Hindustani music. Hindustani music is also performed and studied in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

Eero and I did not have a very busy exchange of plans for the piece, because I felt that he already had a composer's vision for it. *Tiin chaar* turned out to be a wonderful piece. My dear friend and colleague Darren Acosta and I have performed the piece several times in Helsinki, and also in Porvoo. My defense was the first time we played music from the piece in public after approximately four years. Darren and I premiered the piece in my third doctoral concert in May, 2016.

COMMISSIONS FROM KA NIN CHAN AND LOTTA WENNÄKOSKI

The two other commissions that I premiered in my concert series were in the fifth concert. Ka Nin Chan (b. 1949) and Lotta Wennäkoski (b. 1970) composed new works for me. Chan's piece is titled *Pitkä Talvi* (2017), where he describes the long and dark winter of the Nordic country.

I quote the composer from the score's programme note:

This work describes: the anticipation of a harsh Winter,
the eventual acceptance of the force of nature
the appreciation of the beautiful wintry scenery
the anticipation of Spring
the resolution that time marches on

Wennäkoski's piece is titled *Rimbalzi* (2021). Both of the composers were open to my suggestions on technical and musical questions. The pieces are complex, with plenty of tiny details, so there were interesting exchanges of ideas and thoughts during the collaborative process. I had never worked with a string quartet before in a contemporary music setting, so I specifically requested from Ka Nin Chan that the instrumentation be for vibraphone, marimba, and a string quartet. The piece was conducted by Janne Valkeajoki, and the performers were Sibelius Academy's doctoral students and professional Helsinki musicians.

In Wennäkoski's *Rimbalzi*, which is Italian and means "bounces and rebounds", I performed with Heikki Nikula, who is a long-time leading authority of bass clarinet in Finland. I had a setup of vibraphone, gongs, and non-pitched percussion

instruments, and Heikki also had a small tam-tam and a temple block with his bass clarinet.

THE CONCERT SERIES FROM A BROAD VIEWPOINT

The first doctoral concert was a unique representation of percussion music over a time span of nearly a century, from 1918 to 2011. In this concert program I performed important works from the percussion repertoire, specifically on those instruments that I feel are most expressive and versatile to play. For me these are the xylophone, snare drum, marimba, and the tabla. The ending of the program highlighted my role as a ragtime ensemble xylophone soloist and improviser on three compositions by the American George Hamilton Green (1893–1970).

In the second doctoral concert, titled “Marimba Concertos and music by Xenakis and Ichiyanagi”, I explored the combination of percussion with ensemble. The chamber music theme of the concert series also included the performance of the aforementioned Toshi Ichiyanagi’s *Trio Interlink*, as well as *Rebonds*, which is arguably Xenakis’ most famous percussion solo work. The performance of *Allegria marimba concerto* (2003) by Jarmo Sermilä (b. 1939), which saw its premier performance in the second concert, was a long-time goal for me. It brought a colorful and interesting sound to the program with its unusual orchestration. The composer drew inspiration from his trip to Cuba, and it is written for a marimba soloist, strings, three trumpets, harp—which has a prominent role—and percussion. The concert concluded with Emmanuel Séjourné’s (b. 1961) *Concerto for Marimba and Strings* (2005). The composition is widely performed and has established itself as an energetic and melodic concerto with an easily recognizable French atmosphere. Both of the concertos were accompanied by the Camerata Finlandia Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Jackie Shin.

My third doctoral concert was a collaboration with wind players. I performed three wide scale solo works, beginning with Elliott Carter’s (1908–2012) *March* from his collection *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani* (1949/66). The second solo work was David Maslanka’s (b. 1943) ethereal and virtuosic marimba solo *Variations on Lost Love* (1997), and the third solo composition was Maki Ishii’s (1936–2003) expansive *Thirteen Drums*, op 66. (1985).

The compositions with wind instruments were Dave Maric’s (b. 1970) *Lucid Intervals* (2006), which I performed with trumpet artist Pasi Pirinen. Kimmo Hakola’s (b. 1958) *Five Clips* (2003) was the next duo with percussion and clarinet, which I performed with the aforementioned clarinet artist Heikki Nikula. The last two compositions of the program were also for percussion and wind instruments. Ka Nin Chan’s composition *Nature/Nurture* (2002) for marimba and wind instruments was performed by me on marimba, with wind instrumentalists and conductor Jackie

Shin. The concert reached its climax with the premier of Eero Hämeenniemi's *Tiin chaar*. The percussion part in the piece is a fascinating combination of marimba at the beginning which then transitions to the tabla after the introduction of the work. The role of the trombone is also versatile, and equal to the percussion part. In the beginning of the composition, the trombone has a lyrical character. In the second half of the piece the trombone joins the tabla in joyous and extremely rhythmical fireworks of polyrhythms and virtuosic cascades.

In my fourth doctoral concert I performed an extensive repertoire that included Iannis Xenakis' percussion solo *Psappha*, Toshi Ichianagi's *Wind Trace* for percussion trio, and Kazunori Miyake's (b. 1963) *Chain* (2001) for solo marimba. The themes of my concert series—the percussion solo music of Iannis Xenakis, Japanese percussion music, and percussion in the chamber music context—were strongly present in the program. The compositions by Dave Maric (b. 1970), Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic (b. 1962), Timothy Ferchen (b. 1947), and Joseph Schwantner (b. 1943) were demanding concert pieces that brought interesting and colorful aspects to the entire program.

The fifth and final doctoral concert took place in January, 2022. The concluding concert reflected the entire concert series, its impact on my artistic growth, and my aspirations for my whole doctoral degree. *At the Frontier*, the title of the concert, depicts the starting of a new chapter in my life after finishing the degree and starting to apply all of the new ideas and experiences that I have accumulated during the process. The concert featured exciting new premiers by Lotta Wennäkoski and Ka Nin Chan, and the Xenakis theme was highlighted with his explorative and innovative work *Okbo*.

In a nutshell, my doctoral concert series was constructed with well-known classics from the percussion solo and chamber music repertoire, alongside premier performances of compositions that I commissioned for my doctoral project. All of the composers that wrote new works for me have had important influences on my career as a percussionist.

Performance of an excerpt from Eero Hämeenniemi's (b. 1951) *Tiin chaar* (2014). Antti Ohenoja, marimba, Darren Acosta, trombone.

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

The core of my thesis focuses on Igor Stravinsky's xylophone parts, my original compositions, and the xylophone. I have been fascinated by Igor Stravinsky's (1882–1971) xylophone writing since I first heard it on recordings many years ago. Whenever the sound of the xylophone appeared in the music, I felt a sense of excitement and an immediate elevation of interest. I could feel a certain musical magic that

the xylophone's sounds and notes were expressing. Sometimes the parts only had a few notes in their entrances, but even those little thematic inputs impacted the musical events in the pieces. These impressions make the xylophone parts fascinating, dynamic, and multifaceted. A question might rise about why I chose to write about Stravinsky and the xylophone. To me, the xylophone is the most interesting orchestral mallet instrument, and Stravinsky's xylophone parts especially fascinate me. I also specialize in ragtime xylophone music performance, so the instrument was a very natural choice for me to focus on in the thesis.

In my thesis I reviewed and discussed my own xylophone compositions, which I composed based on Stravinsky's xylophone parts of *Les Noces* (1923) and *Petrushka* (1911). I have also been interested in composing music since my high school days. At first, it was jazz improvisation on vibraphone that caught my interest. There were also short elementary jazz and pop music composition lessons available in my high school, so I was introduced to composing music rather early on. When I moved to Canada to study at the University of Toronto, I was delighted that in my music theory courses, and also in the University's percussion competitions, the students were required to compose their own pieces. I really enjoyed these creative processes, and became familiar with performing my own music as well. My teachers from the Nexus percussion ensemble were also composing original music for their ensemble, and in other projects as well, so it felt natural to see and hear compositions by my teachers and classmates. For my doctoral project I took composition lessons with the composer Markus Fagerudd, who gave me insight into and knowledge of the composition process.

In my compositions for this thesis, Stravinsky's xylophone parts appear without alterations, excluding some tremolos being cut from their original length to make them fit better into the compositions. The xylophone parts from *Les Noces* and *Petrushka* are not included in their entirety in my compositions; instead, the most challenging and well-known passages were used and thematically developed to create a solo piece structure. I embedded the selected excerpts from Stravinsky's xylophone parts in my compositions, as I wanted to create an organic whole where the music would grow and develop around Stravinsky's musical textures and figures. Through that process I aimed to bring out new approaches and ideas for xylophone repertoire and performance. For decades, the marimba has been the most-used mallet instrument in solo recitals, and most of the existing solo repertoire is written for it. My two new xylophone compositions are additions to the xylophone repertoire, and it is my hope that they might enhance both the role and presence of the xylophone in the solo recital context. As an orchestral mallet instrument, the xylophone enjoys a leading role within the mallet instrument family.

In my thesis I also explored the historical aspects of the xylophone and its development. I tried to find answers to the question about the origin of the xylophone. That journey did not eventually come up with a clear answer to the question, and

as a matter of fact it might be a question that will never receive a definite answer, because of the long history of the instrument. There are ancient traditions of xylophones in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, and also in West Africa, in Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, and Gambia for example. Because the xylophone is an instrument with ancient roots, it is challenging to outline the origin and the developmental stages of the instrument. However, in my thesis I reviewed different viewpoints that percussion musicologists have debated over the years.

It is suggested that the xylophone originated in Asia or Africa. When Europeans arrived in Africa and Asia hundreds of years ago, the xylophone was already a highly sophisticated instrument in those societies.¹ For example, there are literary references to an Asian metallophone from AD 900. The metallophone is believed to have been an extension of the already highly developed trough xylophone.² In Africa, there were highly developed xylophones 400 years ago that have only small differences from the African xylophones of today. There were also many skillful players, and the xylophone was established as a popular instrument already at that time.³ James Blades (1901–1999), a famous British musicologist, suggests that the xylophone is in fact one of the earliest melodic instruments.⁴ He furthermore notes that the Asiatic and African xylophones have much in common. The only major difference is that the Asian xylophones are commonly trough xylophones, where the wooden bars have a trough (a wooden cradle under the bars) that resonates the bars' sound as one resonating chamber. The African xylophones usually have individual gourd resonators under the bars, like on a balafon. Blades suggests that knowledge of the instrument may have been transmitted via personal connections made through migration or commerce, which may have allowed the instrument to travel between the continents.⁵ It is also suggested that the xylophone could have been independently developed in Asia and Africa without any sharing of knowledge between the different continents. In Europe, the xylophone as such was first mentioned when Arnolt Schlick called it *hültze glechter*, which means wooden clatter, in his early treatise on organ building published in 1511.⁶

In the next chapters of my thesis I reviewed my compositions, which are aimed at university level students and professional percussionists. The compositions are technically and musically very challenging, and my aim was to make the pieces demanding and at the same time rewarding to study and to perform. Chapters 4 and 5 in my

¹ Blades, James 1984, *Percussion Instruments and Their History*, Faber&Faber. 71-72. .

² Ibid. p. 71.

³ Ibid. p. 72.

⁴ Ibid. p. 71.

⁵ Ibid. p. 74.

⁶ Anderson, Lois Ann, Blades James, Holland James, List George & O'Brien-Rothe Linda L. 2001. *Grove Music Online: Xylophone*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49801>

thesis focused on performance practice and analytical elements of the compositions. In these chapters I went through the events in the music and provided ideas on how to interpret and execute the musical passages. There are also percentual section charts and linearly displayed form structures for the compositions. I hope that the various aspects presented in these chapters help to clarify the structural elements of the pieces and give new ideas for interpreting the compositions. In the musical examples, the quotes from Stravinsky are in blue and my original passages are in black.

The final chapter of the thesis, before the conclusion, focused on practice as a process. I also reviewed my own compositions from this new angle of practice as a process. This is a topic that I am interested in researching more in the future; the connection between performance and psychology is a topic that intrigues me very much. In this chapter I talked about effective ways to practice, based on the points made by percussionist Raynor Carroll. I elaborated on his short practice tips in the text, and also discussed ways to practice percussion parts effectively in a short time frame. I also quoted some of the leading pedagogues in the percussion field on these subjects.

The aim of my thesis was to create new pieces for solo xylophone that were influenced by Stravinsky's xylophone parts, and to raise the popularity of the xylophone as a solo instrument. The importance of pedagogy was also at the core of the thesis. I wanted to share my experiences with the practice process, performance practice, interpretation, and technical questions with fellow percussionists. Ultimately, I wanted to contribute new ideas and thoughts on music to younger aspiring percussionists.

Premier performance of Antti Ohenoja's (b. 1982) *Etude Les Noces* (2020) and *Reflections on Petrushka* (2020). Antti Ohenoja, xylophone.