

“Percussion Concerto”--Colin Currie, performer; Jennifer Higdon, composer (2008)

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Essay by Christina Reitz (guest post)*



Jennifer Higdon

Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962), one of the most distinguished of American contemporary composers, has received numerous accolades and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and three Grammy Awards for Best Classical Composition, the first occurring in 2009 for the “Percussion Concerto.”

The “Percussion Concerto” dates from 2005 and was commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The Philadelphia Orchestra, under the baton of Christoph Eschenbach, hosted the composition’s world premiere on November 25, 2005. Percussionist Colin Currie performed as the soloist at each of these concerts and is the work’s dedicatee. Currie is also the soloist on this 2008 recording with the London Philharmonic Orchestra led by Maestra Marin Alsop, a longtime friend and champion of Higdon’s works.

Although Higdon’s primary instrument is the flute, she is experienced with percussion since her initial exposure to music occurred as a percussionist in Tennessee with the Heritage High School Marching Band. As such, one of the defining elements of her works remains rhythmic intensity. Higdon is probably most known for her orchestral works, but her numerous chamber compositions include those scored for percussion exclusively, including “The Grace of Presence” (vibraphone solo), “Like Clockwork” (percussion ensemble), “Splendid Wood” (marimba ensemble), and “ZONES” (percussion quartet or quintet and CD).

The City of Brotherly Love is the composer's current home and her adopted city since completing her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania under the tutelage of George Crumb. The Philadelphia Orchestra has hosted numerous Higdon world premieres, including her Concerto for Orchestra (2002), an important predecessor to the "Percussion Concerto." The fourth movement is scored exclusively for percussion further complemented by the celesta, piano, and harp, all significant instruments present in the orchestra of the "Percussion Concerto." Additionally, the fourth movement of "Concerto for Orchestra" and the "Percussion Concerto" begin with lyrical, pitched instruments before transitioning to unpitched instruments allowing the composer to explore the abundant diversity possible within a percussionist's arsenal.

The "Percussion Concerto" was composed in its entirety while Higdon was a fellow at Civitella Ranieri in Italy. Higdon frequently writes with the premiering musician in mind by customizing the composition to their preferences and strengths that results in a tailor-made work, but never to the extent where it cannot be performed by others. Such an example is evident from the opening of the "Percussion Concerto" which begins with a marimba solo, the favored instrument of Currie.

The concerti genre has an extensive history that spans centuries; however, it is only relatively recently that percussionists have been the featured instrument as composers started to explore the vast array of possibilities within this section. Historically, concerti have consisted of three separate movements in a fast-slow-fast pattern with a cadenza near the end of the first movement. Cadenzas, extensive passages for the soloist full of technical bravura, were originally improvised but eventually became more frequently notated by the composer. All of the aforementioned parameters are present in Higdon's work but altered considerably, eschewing predictability entirely. First and foremost, the "Percussion Concerto" consists of a single movement, which, as mentioned, previously begins with Currie playing the marimba. It is significant to note that this unaccompanied introduction consists exclusively of open fifth intervals, a signature harmonic compositional trait of Higdon.

The soloist's opening continues to explore pitched instruments, alternating between marimba and vibraphone. To facilitate these transitions, Higdon has suggested in the score, the pitched instruments (marimba, vibraphone, and crotales) be arranged on one side of the conductor and unpitched instruments on the opposite side. A contrasting, lyrical passage that takes the role of the slow movement is introduced by a substantial decrease in tempo. The soloist along with the three percussionists present the melodic material with bowed vibraphone and crotales, a technique that one can associate regularly with Higdon. She contributes this unique color to her studies with Crumb; its first noticeable appearance in her works occurs in her incredibly famous symphonic poem, "blue cathedral" (2000) and later in the fourth movement of "Concerto for Orchestra." Throughout this section, the accompanying orchestra is thinned considerably with small, unorthodox soli scored for members of the string section, for example the first stand of the first violins, violas, and celli. Such scoring is not atypical of Higdon's orchestral compositions and indeed, is a significant aspect of her compositional style. Somewhat less common are the aspects left open to the performer where at times, Higdon only gives the soloist a range of pitches to sound within notated rhythms. The return to the opening tempo towards the end is reminiscent of a spritely third movement and contains the truly unique cadenza. This passage

features not only the soloist but initially the three orchestral percussionists as well. The four percussionists open the cadenza with woodblock and temple blocks, instrumentation that is maintained by the orchestral percussionists as the soloist begins to improvise on the temple blocks and various instruments on the trap table. When the orchestral musicians are phased out, Currie presents a fully improvised cadenza introduced and concluded with the bongos. The orchestra returns to triumphantly close the composition on a D major chord, a sonority often found at the conclusion of Higdon's orchestral works.

Since the world premiere, the "Percussion Concerto" continues to be programmed regularly by orchestras internationally and has consistently received positive reviews. Geoffrey Norris from "The Daily Telegraph" wrote of the European premiere that the composition has "rhythm, color and sinew. It capitalizes on the intoxicating blend of musicality, muscle and agility that is Currie's forte, and it finds ingenious solutions to the problem of pitting percussion against orchestral forces [...] Higdon transcends any influences with a dazzling imagination of her own." In 2009, the work was arranged for soloist and wind ensemble and premiered May 10th of that year by the President's Own Marine Band featuring Christopher Rose with Colonel Michael Colburn on the podium. In either form, Jennifer Higdon's "Percussion Concerto" has found a permanent place in the canon.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.