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Insights into Multiple Percussion Performances

Just as the solo multiple-percussion repertoire has increased exponentially since 1970, so have the performance challenges. Thanks to the explosion in the literature, younger and younger players are taking on multiple percussion works, and that's great. But I'd like to address some of the hurdles that less-experienced players have to face.

To consider touring and stage logistics, let's select one composition and examine the set-up and instrument selection. Cold-Pressed by Dave Hollinden is a hugely popular piece for 19 percussion instruments that's widely performed and studied at the high-school, university and professional levels. For reference, please check out my website, www.josephgramley.com, where you can listen to my own recording of Cold-Pressed and check out photos of my set-up.

In fact, I've changed the set-up over the years in order to improve both touring logistics and stage movement. Audiences can become impatient with set-up changes that take too long, so I decided to put all of my multiple percussion set-ups on multi racks. When you have to set the piece up quickly and move the set-up in the course of the performance, using this rack system can really save time and hassle. The same is true when you're just packing up and getting back on the road. I have found that the round racks work best for me. Taking time to customize your rack system will pay off in the long run.

Let's now look at specific instrument selection.

For Cold-Pressed, I use both the Black Swamp Bentwood Temple Blocks and the Black Swamp Birch Tone Blocks. I use these blocks at different parts of the piece, for both balance and orchestration. For the louder, more rocking sections, I use the Birch Tone Blocks. For the middle section, which is given the notation "Dark, Ritualistic," I use the Bentwood Temple Blocks.

This allows for a change in timbre between the two sections and makes for better dynamic balance with different instrument groups. Another reason I use the Birch Tone Blocks is the mounting system. It can seamlessly integrate them with a multi-percussion rack; as the score requires, I can take off three of the blocks and mount wood blocks and cow bells in their place. Since each block has its own clamp, you can use some or all of the blocks in any configuration you choose. My woodblocks for Cold-Pressed are the MWB2 Medium and the MWB3 Small woodblocks. For the tambourine on this piece I like the new Black Swamp Resin Fiber Tambourine. It can really stand up the beating it gets from mallets and sticks during Cold-Pressed! My snare drum of choice is the Black Swamp Multisonic. I can fine-tune it to any concert-hall situation and get the benefit of its amazing sensitivity for both loud and soft passages.

Often, in a multiple percussion work, we have to learn a new notation system for each piece, but in Cold-Pressed, Hollinden made the inspired choice to use what is known as "timbre-staff notation." There is no correspondence between notated and sounding pitch, but the piece is certainly a lot easier to read this way: each instrument is assigned a note on the staff, and this how I set it up. The "white notes" would be the floor tom, snare drum, bongos, temple blocks, high wood block, high cow bell and high crotale. The "black notes" would be the mounted tom, tambourine, two cow bells, low wood block and low crotale.

I hope this gives some insight to the logistics and performance choices associated with multiple percussion repertoires.