

SPEAK PERCUS SION

Filament Essays

**A language from leftovers – Speak Percussion in the
post-instrumental realm.**

Håkon Stene

2023

If we imagine the evolutionary tree of musical instruments, the trunk of that tree tells us the story of percussion – a global conglomerate containing hundreds of different instruments. As one can imagine, this conglomerate has a history about as long and complex as man’s history with making noises. And yet, it is only within the past few decades that the methods of percussion have changed dramatically. Surely, one would be tempted to attribute such changes to general technological developments in this era. However, the technology of a beater striking a surface has remained surprisingly unchanged for the last 35,000 years. It is rather a conceptual mutation, pertaining to how percussionists experiment with their identity, that has taken place.

We have seen multiple examples of experimental performers pushing the limits and methods of their practice in the last century. Influenced by phenomena such as modernity, the idea of material progress and the liberation of traditional hierarchies, the New Music movement has fostered many sound inventions and has granted percussion practitioners an autonomous position in the field of Western classical music. Percussionists have migrated from archaic ritualistic noisemaking, through historical models of military drumming and courtly kettledrumming, to the advanced practices of the 20th century within all kinds of genres, to a current paradigm based on the idea that any performative content beyond striking – whether making sound with or without instruments, performing text, movements or displaying visual material – may be part of our array.¹

When I wrote my PhD in 2014, I tentatively used the term “post-percussion” or “post-instrumental” in an attempt to describe this latter paradigm. In my opinion, certain aspects of our craft had become a conceptually connected conglomerate operating outside of standardised norms of performance, to the extent that they needed their own categorisation. This expansion often seemed to come at the cost of professional expertise, in the sense that we were experts in the field of percussion but novices in the post-instrumental realm. Because the performance methods and techniques employed changed constantly from one piece to the next, no core expertise was to be found. Subsequently, percussionists needed to become experts in being non-experts.

¹ Readers interested in a detailed outline of the ancient history are advised to read James Blades’ classic *Percussion Instruments and their History* (Westport, CT: The Bold Strummer, 1992).

I personally welcomed this turn of events, as I felt the possibilities of mainstream percussion practices had been thoroughly explored. In addition, as a collaborator in the field of New Music, I had no personal interest in pursuing the lineage of canonised practices when commissioning new work. How were percussionists in the new millennium to discover new ground beyond what we already had? If one agreed that an important value of the New Music movement had been striving for new sound inventions, expanded material definitions, and a fundamental questioning of what music and performance could be, the fields of acoustic sound research, complex notational practices, and microtonality were saturated, especially in the wake of the modernist movement, say, from the 1990s onwards.

Drawing on the notion that the golden age of Western classical piano composition was roughly between 1800–1910 (Beethoven – Chopin – Debussy), my conservative estimate was that the golden age of Western classical percussion music seemed well behind us, located somewhere between landmark composers such as Edgard Varèse (1883–1965), Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001) and Steve Reich (1936–).² Thus, in order to create new and interesting hybrids, percussionists had to break out of percussion, to search for material in the debris and between other practices.³ Drawing on the ethos of building a language from the material eschewed by the classical tradition, one could construct new alphabets from the leftovers, which in turn could be accessed by musicians across different practices, not only by percussionists.

In the past decade, a rich body of work contributing to the formation of a post-instrumental practice has been created.⁴ Beyond its inventive mind-set, this body of work could be categorised as heterogeneous and sprawling, thus defying standardisations of compositional

² This list should be much longer, not least containing improvisers and sound artist, but for the purpose of this short text I allow myself to be brief.

³ Some earlier instrumental works pointed in possible directions. I had been able to perform Helmut Lachenmann's "[Salut für Caudwell](#)" (1977) for two speaking guitar players. Perhaps the same was possible with his "[Pression](#)" (1969) for solo cello, or "[Guero](#)" (1970) for piano, and other [works of similar nature](#)?

⁴ To exemplify this, I include an incomplete list works and artists, in no particular order, which I recommend checking out:

- Julia Wolfe's folk-inspired table top string quartet [Forbidden Love](#) (2021);
- [reConvert](#);
- Composer [Simon Löffler](#)
- [Roberto Maqueda/Simon Steen-Andersen's Asthma](#) (2017);
- Correntin Marillier's "[SPIN](#)", "[All-Arme](#)", "[Music for Drums and Fans](#)"
- Musician and researcher Louise Devenish's [recent article](#) on the topic.

and technical craft. Whether these works remain one-off experiments, or prove to be models for further experimentation and creativity, remains open.

Speak Percussion is one of the most vital contributors to this category. The intensity with which they expand music's range, with every new piece and material exploration, is impressive. Over the past twenty years its performers have combined the heritage of percussive technology with an explorative ethos to extend into areas beyond both percussion and concert music. They speak to us with an intelligence, curiosity, and wit which should not be missed if you care about current tendencies in art and culture.

Håkon Stene, Oslo, January 2023.