The Electronic Percussion Experience

Hesitation and appreciation

By Josh Armstrong and Kyle Maxwell-Doherty

Joining a new ensemble for the first time can be a nerve wracking, stressful, and exciting experience that most of us have probably experienced at least once in our careers. Joining an ensemble composed entirely of electronic percussion instruments for the first time can result in extreme exaggeration of these feelings and emotions. In beginning to understand how electronic percussion really works, anxiety, utter confusion, laughter, and the occasional "deer in the headlights" look were all very common. However, if you can venture into the world of electronic percussion with a peer, colleague, or friend, the journey will be highly rewarding and influence future performances. Crosstalk was our way inside.

Crosstalk, the University of Arizona's Electronic Percussion Ensemble, offers a workshop experience for students to interact and perform with electronic instruments and music software widely used in the professional field. Entering the ensemble with limited knowledge in electronics, as well as differing acoustic backgrounds, we realized the knowledge gained from this experience was surprisingly transferable to acoustic percussion performance.

At the beginning of our time in Crosstalk, our exposure to electronics was at a similar level. We had each performed a solo piece with tape accompaniment, "The Final Precipice" by Jeffrey Peyton and Bruce Hamilton's "Edge (Corrugated Box)." However, neither of us had experience performing on any electronic percussion instruments. Our only exposure with these instruments involved watching performances by Future Man with Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, as well as hearing a colleague realize the synthesizer parts for an Emerson, Lake and Palmer transcription in percussion ensemble.

While on a recent road trip we had a discussion about our experiences in the ensemble. W shared many opinions, but some pivotal differences quickly became apparent. We both distinctly remember our first reaction to an entire room dedicated to exclusively electronic percussion and its striking similarity to a crowded storage closet. Looking back, however, we can agree that our first impressions were far from accurate; performing on purely electronic instruments has profoundly benefited our musicianship and overall outlook on music making.

We began discussing our individual preparation for Crosstalk rehearsals. A central theme in our discussion became how our unfamiliarity with the various controllers contributed to the difficulty of rehearsal preparation and posed the greatest challenge for us as beginners. The controllers we were using feature hundreds of parameters that can be programmed within the controller and inside the DAW (Digital Audio Workstation), all of which affect the resulting sound. It took some time to learn these elements and program them to obtain the sounds we were looking for. Like many new experiences, the learning curve smoothes out after continued exposure to the devices and computer software. Even after a year or two of experience, checking the owner's manual every so often is still a common occurrence.

We found that an electronic rehearsal was not much different from acoustic ensemble rehearsals: We attempted to blend the sounds from all players, navigate the passages accurately, and offer a positive musical experience for our audience. The real change came in the technological aspect of Crosstalk rehearsals. In order to achieve the proper blending of sounds, simply playing softer, louder, or with a different touch (as in an acoustic rehearsal) would not suffice. An adjustment of the controller or sampler volume could be a quick fix, but frequently applying a filter or effect was the necessary solution. Sometimes entire rehearsals would be spent tracing a variety of technical issues, starting with the controller and ending with the computer. However, through troubleshooting, we learned much about how these controllers and computer programs function.

It became immediately apparent that the creation of a given sound was not, in fact, black or white. Some felt very strongly that when realizing an instrument in the computer program Reason or similar programs such as Live or Cubase, the best option was a complete and accurate acoustic representation. In contrast, others preferred the creation of a uniquely "electronic" sound. Essentially, if the composer asks for a piano, would you or would you not simply play piano? The choice of sound production is, of course, a personal and a musical one. A point of agreement between the authors is, however, that whatever decision is made, the final sound must blend well with the rest of the ensemble.

We both agree that Crosstalk greatly influenced our acoustic performance during and after the experience, namely in sound production and ensemble blending. As there are endless sound libraries available to the digital musician today, simply "playing around" in Reason or a related program exposes our ears to the countless intricate differences of a single sound or instrument. Taking that new sound revelation and applying it to an acoustic instrument was an immediate and almost unconscious reflex. Discovering the many possibilities to manipulate sound acoustically, whether by playing on a different part of the instrument or by using alternate implements, became an immediate obsession. Additionally, through the process of creating a brand-new blended electronic sound, creating unique acoustic blends as an ensemble began to happen with great frequency. This increased awareness of the electronic ensemble sound greatly affected our sound production in acoustic environments.

When pondering the future of electronic music, and specifically electronic instruments, much is still unknown. Perhaps electronic ensembles will become standard in music education programs or remain few and far between. Either way, current and future generations of students are becoming increasingly technologically savvy, and continuing to remain current with these advances is important whether you are a hobbyist, performer, or an educator. This uncertainty and endless possibility certainly makes the electronic percussion experience exciting. While one of us is content with the knowledge gained, but still prefers an acoustic atmosphere, the other applied the knowledge from Crosstalk by expanding into the solo electronic percussion realm.

Joining Crosstalk with both hesitation and apprehension was expected. Though many

differences exist between our experiences, performing on electronic percussion instruments affected each of us much more than initially anticipated. As we continue to grow as musicians, the challenge to better each and every aspect of our performance is constant. Perhaps moving away from the acoustic sphere might just make it a bit easier after all!

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