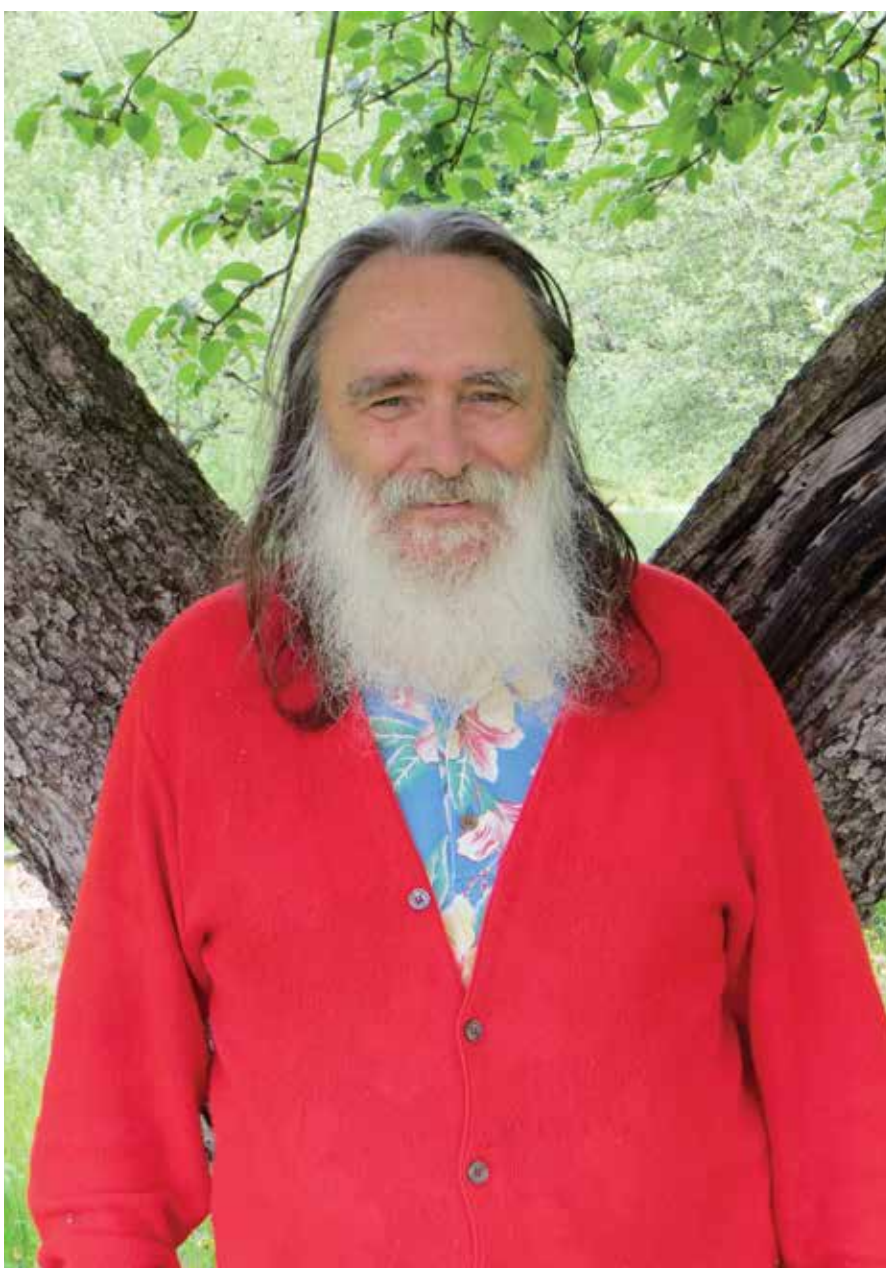


Amidst the Noise: Stuart Saunders Smith's Percussion Music

By Jeremy Muller

Current percussion literature showcases a wide range of styles by composers of varying contribution. Among the arsenal of percussion music available, one must recognize Stuart Saunders Smith's contributions. His voice is unique and discernible, and he is considered by many as one of the most important percussion composers alive today.



Smith's musical contributions can be divided into five distinct genres: rhythmic intricacy, musical theatre, musical portraits, music of mobiles/coexistence, and trans-media. His music of rhythmic intricacy typically does not offer new or unusual challenges in learning new musical symbols; however, it often contains broken polyrhythms, presenting challenges for learning a new musical language. The performer must be willing to navigate a labyrinth of rhythms that do not present a conventional way of execution.

In his theater music, Smith explores the corporeality of percussion performance to acting. In "Songs I–IX," "Tunnels," and "...And Points North" he has added instruments/props, staging, movement, and other musical parts to elevate speech to something reminiscent of theater. These three pieces are for a single performer, often having to embrace multiple character personalities within a short time span. Smith's musical portraits intend to capture the spirit of family members in the form of a sound portrait (see Examples 1 and 2).

Mobiles and music of coexistence, often called "open-form" compositions, stem from the visual arts of the 1930s.¹ Mobiles are short, singly notated ideas that are used at the performers' discretion but are provided by the composer. The form of the work is only constructed during performance; so a collaboration arises while using this "cut-and-paste" process of music making. A piece like "The Narrow Path" (see Example 3) certainly falls into "music of coexistence." This exposes the human condition; it creates a relational bond between the musicians while still giving them freedom to be autonomous. The musicians will each have different levels of loyalty to the bond or autonomy, and that friction demonstrates the human psyche.

Trans-media works are not percussion-specific, but can certainly extend on the performance practices and idioms of contemporary percussion performance. The work here is in performance art shared among many different forms. It is an exploration in democratizing all art forms.

I have enjoyed firsthand experience with many of Smith's compositions, having performed works including "Thaw," "Links No. 1," "...And Points North," and "Transitions and Leaps." While Smith has written many works specifically for percussion instruments, some of his

compositional styles are not instrument specific (or even musician specific), but can be performed by percussionists. Consequently, my perspective is a performative approach to his music, and the interview questions in this article reflect that strategy. Of the many conversations

I have had with Stuart over the years, from politics to farming in Vermont, music is always part of the conversation. This interview took place over several corresponding meetings and telephone calls.

Example 1. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Family Portraits: Delbert," for solo percussion, page 2.

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Example 2. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Family Portraits: Erika," for vibraphone and violin, page 11.

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Example 3. Stuart Saunders Smith, "The Narrow Path," score realization at section V.

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Interview

Jeremy Muller: Let's start with "One for Syl" written for vibraphone in 1970. Most of the aesthetic ideas in your later music stem from this short piece you wrote as a student, correct?

Stuart Saunders Smith: In "One for Syl," I was working with the idea of trying to create a music that had non-sequiturs—stark changes of subject. And what I learned afterwards is that when you're trying to make a music of non-sequiturs, you end up with a music of connections that you hadn't really foreseen.

That's because the mind connects up everything. We don't perceive chaos; if we did perceive chaos, we would be ill. It would drive us mad. The mind is a creator of form and substance.

The other piece I would add is "Poems I, II, III" for brake drums and narrator. If you look at those two works, you can see that I've done a lot of work with text and percussion, which starts with "Poems." And I've written an enormous amount of vibraphone music, so from 1970 on it has been a continuation of those two tracks—every year writing something for vibraphone and something with text. Of course, I write other pieces—violin, cello, you name it—but those are sort of the two tracks that have continued throughout my life. [See Examples 4 and 5.]

JM: Your traditionally notated works are sometimes thought of as a composed-out improvisation, would you agree?

SSS: Yes and no. I think of composing as a very slowed down improvisation. I don't use engineering principles in order to write a piece. I believe that there is intelligence everywhere, and if we listen to it and get out of the way, we can notate it. When we mention traditional notation, I think all graphic notation is traditional in the Western world—whether it's off or on the staff. The fact of the matter is, when you look from Gregorian chant onward, from Europe to America, printed notation is one of the great gifts Western civilization has given to world culture. I have invented some notations, for instance, "Return and Recall," "Transitions and Leaps," and "Tunnels." Also, my mobiles and music

Example 4. Stuart Saunders Smith, "One for Syl," page 1.

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Example 5. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Poems I, II, III" ("Poem I").

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have not been a jazz “performer” in recent years?

SSS: Jazz is a touchstone. When I want to listen to music, I listen to a lot of John Cage and Bill Evans. My music is somewhere in there; it’s influenced by a lot of different musicians. But you could probably categorize all of my music in some way or another as “new jazz.” If you wanted to categorize it, that would be the closest. People will say to me, “What kind of music do you write?” And I say, “Well, my music.” And they respond, “Yeah, but what kind?” I say, “Well, you know, basically my own.” I know a lot of music, I’ve studied a lot of music, and I’m sure it’s all contributed to some kind of influence. If I’m really pressed I’d say it’s “new jazz,” but there’s no rhythm section. You heard the music, did it sound like jazz to you, today?

JM: *I never thought there was a jazz influence until I read about your music.*

SSS: So you don’t even hear it? And that’s a valid experience.

JM: *I can see how it’s in there when I think about it.*

SSS: Right, but if you didn’t know me and went to that concert today, you wouldn’t say, “Oh, that’s jazz!”

JM: *Have your traditionally notated works taken on more of a character of written-out mobiles?*

SSS: No, the music of coexistence and the mobiles have distinctly different sounds than works that I craft the beginnings and endings to. And the music of coexistence has recently got to a state, like with the work “Winter,” which you heard a little bit of today, of making it a very rich, soupy mess that I like very much. It just sits there, and it doesn’t have an impetus to move forward. It just is there, and it’s there for a long time. I like that a lot lately.

JM: *John Cage created works that invited performer collaboration and added variables to the performance as an aesthetic of chance. Your mobile compositions certainly achieve this but with a different aesthetic goal.*

SSS: Yeah, mine’s a music of choice, his is a music of chance. Lou Harrison once said, “I’d rather chance a choice than choose a chance,” which I thought was very cute. But I have enormous respect for John

Cage’s work and have played a lot of it and organized concerts of it, and it’s a towering achievement. In my work, I’m interested in taste, and the evolution of my musical taste is evident in the scores.

JM: *Would you say that your jazz background is the foundation for your approach to mobile forms?*

SSS: Yes it’s a foundation; it’s a conceptual foundation. I’ll tell you a story: When I was little, my father would take me to jazz concerts. I was eight years old. He said he wanted me to go and hear this famous trumpet player, Louis Armstrong. And so we went down to Old Orchard Beach, Maine where Armstrong was going to play. We always got there early; so, we could watch the drummer unpack. This time, we got there around six o’clock for an eight o’clock performance, and we heard someone practicing scales and then practicing jazz licks on the trumpet. There he was, Louis Armstrong. We walked up and heard him play, and we were very quiet. He was playing various jazz licks. It turned out he was rehearsing the licks that he would change the order of in performance. So he had composed ideas that he would rearrange, or not rearrange; sometimes he’d play verbatim. I drew on that memory when I made my musical mobiles, where I give the musicians the musical licks and then they can play them in any order they feel like, given their placement in the music on stage.

Same with music of coexistence: If you listen to John Coltrane’s later works, when he had many improvisers each improvising at the same time, he would come up with unique musical patterns by doing that. And I do that with music of coexistence, where the musicians are essentially given simultaneous solos, and they just do their thing, and the listener puts the composite of all of that together.

JM: *Mobiles give us a compelling procedure to music that is one of many non-linear approaches to form and structure.*

SSS: The mobiles in the music of coexistence influence the works that I compose that aren’t those—the works that I make a beginning/middle/end. Therefore, the musical continuity is a viscosity and highly influenced by mobile music and coexistence music. Unexpected things can happen.

There are two ways I look at music.

One is the multi-coursed meal: Here’s an hors d’oeuvre, here’s a little salad, and then you have something else, so on and so forth. I’m not really interested in that anymore. I like soup. You have all these different ingredients in the soup, and in each spoonful you get different ingredients, like you get a cauliflower with pea soup, you got the carrot in your pea soup, but then you get cabbage in your pea soup, and back to the cauliflower. I try to make “soup” music.

JM: *So why do you think the “three-course meal” seems to prevail in most situations?*

SSS: It’s too much like time. I don’t think time exists for human psychology. I think it’s a very useful concept for scientists because they need to measure stuff. So they measure from the Big Bang until now, and they continue measuring and measuring. Fine, they measure. As a musician I don’t measure.

JM: *I think most people tend to imagine linear forms as “telling a story,” but I think mobiles tell a story just as much, if not more. What is your take on this?*

SSS: I think that we love a story and will make stories out of things; so, I don’t have to worry about telling a story. James Joyce is a great example of a “soup” novelist. He allowed things to happen, and he transcribed the mind and how it works in *Ulysses*. I have a great respect for that. I don’t think we live linear lives. It’s like this internal dialogue that’s going on; as we’re sitting here people are walking by, someone’s making a phone call, we hear a little bit of that, and we’re still talking and having an interview together. Your leg just itched.

JM: *That’s how I see all the mobiles.*

SSS: Yes, it allows for all of that. It allows for multiplicity of intention.

JM: *You’ve mentioned to me a subclass of mobiles, which you call, “music of coexistence.” Describe how this fits within mobiles.*

SSS: What I heard with mobiles was that they become a kind of “group think.” For instance, I’m thinking of “Gifts,” where there’d be these crescendos-decrescendos, and I wanted to avoid that kind of simple arcing. So then I wrote “Notebook”; the melodies are so intricate that the arcing couldn’t happen. In 1995 I wrote a piece called “Strays”

for tenor recorder and xylophone, and the performers each had their parts and weren't allowed to play together until they got on stage. I wanted to see how that would work. I was very excited by the results. From then on, I've done mostly music of coexistence—more of those now than mobiles, actually. [See Example 7.]

JM: So they do not rehearse together until that moment of the performance.

SSS: Yeah, and in music of coexistence you rehearse so you know what everyone's doing, but you do your part. To me, it is a good political metaphor where people have the nobility to be themselves in an organization. You don't have to compromise, but then you cooperate

as well. So it's a medium ground; the individual can be an individual and have that circumscribed universe of individuality at the same time as being in a group.

JM: Since there are no definitive performances of mobiles, each performance is only a snapshot of one possible outcome?

SSS: One way of looking at mobiles is that you're composing a family of pieces. They're related, as in a family, but everyone's different.

JM: To record a mobile would present one version, or one "family member."

SSS: Yes, that's right.

Example 7. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Gifts," realization of a possible combination of mobiles.

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Example 8. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Transitions and Leaps," part one, page 3.

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JM: In reference to your trans-media systems, you have stated that you find it important that interpretations of media works must maintain their identity, or profile, from performance to performance. Cage was interested in removing that identity. Explain your reasons for wanting interpreted works to be recognizable.

SSS: What I noticed with off-the-staff pictorial scores, often times called "graphic scores," was that you could interchangeably put the picture on the wall and it could be this piece or that piece or this piece. There seemed to be no identity to that kind of work; it's just a picture you interpret. So you could be doing the *Guernica* by Picasso or a piece by "X." I thought there must be a better way of creating a work that was identifiably itself. And trans-media works, using pictographs or ideograms, do just that. If you say "imitate somebody," well you could recognize that as an audience member that you're imitating. If you're saying "be in unison with somebody," that's clear whether it's dance, music, mime, or theatre. But the actual imitating is clear in any one of those forms. So I use pictographs and ideograms as my notative strategy in order that I make a system that's recognizable as "that" system. In other words, if you see "Return and Recall," and I've seen four dance companies do it one right after the other in a concert, you clearly see that it's "Return and Recall," but, there's a tremendous difference in each group's interpretation of that performance system. You recognize it as that particular performance system, and that's one of the things I was after. The main thing I was after was trying to make art that is beautiful, but how do you do it for any performing artist? How do you make an art that is "trans-media"? I have three such pieces: "Transitions and Leaps," "Return and Recall," and "Initiatives and Reactions." They all are different performance systems, as you well know. [See Example 8.]

JM: Based on my understanding of trans-media systems, you are not only trying to compose for "all the arts," but a major goal is to create a situation where composer and performer(s) conspire. This potentially can obfuscate the composer-performer dichotomy by challenging the conventional paradigm. What is your take on this?

SSS: Yes, I think that the way that these

pieces should be put in a program is: "Return and Recall" performance system by Stuart Saunders Smith, realized/composed by [list the group]. So, it is a collaboration.

I heard during the Cultural Revolution in China that they were interested in collective composition because they thought that individual work was too Western and too capitalistic. They wanted a communist paradigm for composing, so one composer would do the orchestration, one would do the melody, and another one would do another part. It seemed to me that it wasn't a very good way to do it, so I kept thinking about the problem and came up with these solutions—three solutions to the problem of group composition.

JM: *And it stills maintains some individuality, too.*

SSS: Oh yes, definitely. You're not denying individuality; you're enhancing everybody's contribution. That's the problem with the Chinese one; they denied individuality instead of realizing it takes individuals to cooperate.

JM: *Your theatre music is rooted in your speech poems, "Poems I, II, III" (1970) and "In Bingham" (1985). Are you exploring rhythms that dwell in human speech?*

SSS: Yes. Since the first "Links," I've been trying to come up with a speaking music. There are some musics that are really about speech; one is jazz. It's absolutely a speech music. Classical Indian music is also a speech music. When you listen to anyone talking, like I'm talking now, sometimes it speeds up and sometimes it slows down as someone's thinking "What's the next word?" We have a really rich variety of durations that we communicate with, and I'm mindful of that when I'm composing. I let that happen.

JM: *Is your theatre music also an extension of your trans-media systems?*

SSS: No, I don't think so. I think that my trans-media systems naturally lead to theatre. I'll give you an example of why. Let's say you're a dancer, you're doing "Return and Recall," and you come up with a source. You do the source in unison, but in doing that someone makes a little bit of sound with their feet. Well, that sound can then be used later on as something you recall and bring back.

All of a sudden you have sound and movement. Or a musician plays and they have a particular way they hold their body; well, that's something you could work with by itself. If you really pay attention, you could end up with music theatre that has all of those components. Traditional dance and traditional music already have movement, sound, and image. I remember seeing a video of Horowitz walking to the piano, and the way he walked was extraordinary. He patted the piano as if it was a little puppy dog, he sat down, and then "wonk." Well, all of that was performing—how he got on the stage, the patting of his beloved piano, you know, it was one big package.

JM: *In your theatre music, is it accurate to say you are also exploring an area between the conscious and subconscious?*

SSS: Yes.

JM: *And this is how the "surrealism" term fits in with your work, according to John P. Welsh?*

SSS: Yes, but I never felt comfortable with the word "surreal" in that I never was interested in the surrealist movement. It always seemed to me facile, great ideas, but very little room for epiphany, for spiritual growth. It seemed a reaction to the horrors of war, and then some of it comes from neo-fascists. I just never felt comfortable with that, and it's a European

Example 9. Stuart Saunders Smith, "Tunnels," page 1.

I tick nun
then jaw kelp,
at cussing moons.

molto cresc.

* Sing, "Blue Moon".
Because under the pelvic laces ,
There are, no fins!

Alone, the inverted Cone
with small openings
ran the instruments
gliding through the antediluvian
declining phase;
because
nest egg pulpits opposed to demand,
Said ready-made theory is USELESS.

That is why Snuffish thought
the WORLD of land
Set apart for the avoidance of intimacy.

* Actually sing and
play in unison just
the Blue Moon opening
lyric and melody of
the old pop standard
"Blue Moon."

Bantam.

art movement and has very little to do with America. There are no American surrealists. So I think that when people saw “By Language Embellished, I” or “Tunnels,” it superficially sounds like the sound poets but it isn’t. It’s about text and different ways of putting together words. [See Example 9 and Lee Hinkle’s performance video of “Tunnels.”]

JM: *Different associations for the words.*

SSS: Yeah. There are really two kinds of speech songs. There are the speech songs like in “Songs I–IX,” “By Language Embellished, I” or “Tunnels,” where you’ve got “engineered speech,” we’ll call it, where the connections between the words are more abstract than “In Bingham” or “Three Winter Carols.” The latter are like more traditional poetry. And those are the two streams of speech songs that I’ve been working with since “Poems I, II, III,” since 1970.

JM: *John P. Welsh says your theatre works are unconventional in that they demand participation by the audience.³ Do you agree with this? How exactly does an audience participate?*

SSS: I think the late string quartets of Beethoven, the early work of John Coltrane—they all need an audience to make sense out of them. The audience participates by listening and connecting up sounds into structures they hopefully enjoy. I don’t see it as that different from my work.

JM: *So it’s not really unconventional, in that the works demand participation; it’s very conventional in that sense.*

SSS: Very conventional in that sense, yes. It’s proscenium stage presentational; it’s theatre.

JM: *Of the three “mini-operas”—“Songs I–IX,” “Tunnels,” and “...And Points North”—the latter is the only one that represents place, while the first two seem to explore the subconscious. [See Example 10.]*

SSS: Yes, and “By Language Embellished, I” also explores the subconscious.

JM: *Furthermore, “...And Points North” is written about a memory you have of Maine, and the work includes a section that requires the performer to speak the regional Native American language. Is this work more of an introspective*

See a video of “Thaw” performed by Jeremy Muller and “Tunnels” performed by Lee Hinkle in the digital edition of this issue at www.pas.org/publications/percussivenotes/notesonline_copy1.aspx



composition while the other two are broad examinations of the human mind?

SSS: You could say that. I see them all as introspective. “Songs I–IX” and “Tunnels” have aspects of zaniness and humor; but, I think you still have someone alone with their thoughts, as unconventional as they are. On the surface there’s a joke or really bad pun that’s funny, but after you hear it many times you begin to see that there’s more to the texts than just unconventional language. You begin to make sense out of them. I like to say, “Hopefully an artwork makes nonsense then new-sense, when it becomes common sense we need to move away from it. We don’t need it anymore.” I’m trying to make nonsense with a beautiful sheen, so people will want to revisit and then gradually learn it. It’s like that idea of a horizon I mentioned before. And then once it’s learned, they should move on to other music that takes them through that kind of journey.

JM: *Are there any other insights to your music that you would like to share before finishing up?*

SSS: Well I’ve been at it now for over 40 years, and I hope that when I leave this Earth, I’ve left something that others will continue to find interest in. That’s all I have to say.

A Final Anecdote

I vividly remember the very first performance of Smith’s music that I witnessed. It was a performance of “Polka in Treblinka,” a percussion trio based on a Nazi concentration camp from World War II. Each instrument of the trio represents a particular detail of the camp: snare drum and hi-hat are the machine-gun fire, xylophone is the bones of the dead, bass drum with rice on the head is the smokestacks from the gas chambers [see Example 11]. Clearly this piece is quite a dramatic undertaking and can impact the audience in powerfully emotional ways. I discovered that this chaotic texture of broken polyrhythms and antithetical dynamics represent a form of human expression that goes beyond the limitations of words. A horrific event in our human history is sometimes best taught and expressed to later generations through art. Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best: “The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature.”⁴

Stuart Saunders Smith is a composer that has been exploring Western art music through American cultures and traditions. One of his compositional hallmarks is

Example 10. Stuart Saunders Smith, “...And Points North,” movement one, page 1.

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his ability to develop a discrete style of music that is devoid of obvious European influences. He has significantly contributed to percussion repertoire with his vibraphone music, including the “Links” series as well as other evening-length works including “Plenty” and “New England” and half-hour works “They Look Like Strangers” and “The Starving Month.”

In addition, he has created an extensive solo repertoire for orchestra bells that did not exist before his work “Thaw” [see Example 12 and the author’s performance video]. This is important to understand because the orchestra bells, like many of our conventional orchestral percussion instruments, have

remarkably developed from a turbulent past. Most of these instruments were first used as programmatic associations, and the orchestra bells were no exception. The history of this instrument’s role has largely been imitative—bell tower carillon, music boxes, and Messiaen’s famous use of transcribed birdcalls. Beyond the duties of the instrument, there has been significant debate on the notion of orchestra bells (percussion glockenspiel) versus keyboard glockenspiel. While many technological advancements were made to the instrument and in percussion pedagogy, the percussion glockenspiel has slowly replaced the keyboard glockenspiel in many symphonic and orchestral works.

These delicate, resonant textures have been given to modern percussionists to recreate; but the sound is, quite honestly, harsh. The instrument is not in a comfortable range for the human ear, and performing is a constant battle of management (i.e., using twenty-five percent of your energy may be just right, while twenty-six percent will overpower the ensemble). Make no mistake; the orchestra bells are anything but delicate. I believe Smith has embraced this quality and re-identified the orchestra bells by developing solo literature separate from those associations and demonstrating the instrument’s true unbridled nature.

Conclusion

While Stuart Saunders Smith’s music is conveyed through many facets of expression, this multi-disciplinary approach originates from a single aesthetic idea. His percussion music stretches the performer into the roles of actor, narrator, composer, and interpreter. Smith challenges both performers and listeners, and demands a reaction. Challenges help music grow; they push the creative human mind to a new consciousness and bring insights to processes we possibly overlooked. Perhaps this struggle is meant to be a perpetual and ever-evolving process that we all must face while pursuing our artistic vision. It is individual, yet it is something we all experience. “The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.”⁵

Endnotes

1. John P. Welsh, *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 2.
2. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 227.
3. Welsh, 152.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 18.
5. Emerson, 9.

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- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “Nature.” *Essays and Lectures*. New York: Library of America, 1983, 9–49.
- Falvo, Rob. “Stuart Saunders Smith’s ‘Ground’

Example 11. Stuart Saunders Smith, “Polka in Treblinka,” page 2. Top two staves are xylophone, bottom stave is percussion.

SHABAT SALOM
♩ = 72

* (*) = ghost notes

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Example 12. Stuart Saunders Smith, “Thaw,” page 2, second stave.

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for Solo Glockenspiel: Clear Complexity.”
Percussive Notes 49; 3 (2011): 42–49.

Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On The Value Of Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

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Recordings

“Links No. 1” and “Links No. 4” can be found on the CD *Stuart Saunders Smith: The Links Series of Vibraphone Essays*.

“...And Points North” and “Polka in Treblinka” can be found on the CD *Breath: The Percussion Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*.

“Poems I, II, III” and “Family Portraits: Delbert” can be found on the CD *The Year Begins to be Ripe: Sylvia Smith performs music for percussion and voices*. Smith Publications, <http://www.smith-publications.com>

Dr. Jeremy Muller, a percussionist dedicated to exploring the confluence of technology and modern performance, recently was awarded an Artist Research and Development Grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. He earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Arizona State University, a Master of Music degree from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and a Bachelor of Music degree from Appalachian State University. Muller regularly performs with Crossing 32nd Street Ensemble in Phoenix, Arizona and is on faculty at Scottsdale Community College, where he teaches percussion, composition, electronic music, and computer music courses. **PN**

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