

Steven Schick

So strong was his teenage attraction to modern percussion music that he outright defied his parents in order to dive headfirst into the budding genre. As a recent retrospective concert makes clear, today his name is nearly synonymous with the craft.

Story by Will Romano • Photos by Bill Dean

In some cultures the concept of the doppelgänger is interpreted as an omen of bad luck. Occultists, mystics, and armchair psychiatrists all view visions and dreams of twins as signs of spiritual discord or epic struggles between the forces of good and evil. For Steven Schick, distinguished professor of music at the University of California, San Diego, and one of the solo percussion field's most revered interpreters, meeting his cosmic counterpart was a haunting experience he hasn't easily forgotten.

"I don't think I've told this to anyone," Schick says, "but when I was playing some concerts in Paris in June [2013], I met my twin crossing the street." The drummer's

mirror image was middle aged, wore intellectual-type glasses, and carried a sweater over his shoulder and a newspaper under his arm. He was American, as far as Schick could surmise, and seemingly the product of some alternate reality. "It would appear we were very similar but followed

out of science classes on his way to sabotaging a future in medicine, and pursue the career of his dreams—the art of solo percussion.

"That guy crossing the street is me if, at age eighteen, I had not gone into music," Schick says. "It was so bizarre to see how

"I see yoga as inseparable from practicing. They are one and the same. My goal is to play this music into my seventies and eighties, the way pianists do."

different life paths," Schick says.

Schick's father, an Iowa farmer, never wanted the musician's life for his son. In fact, he expressly forbade it, provoking the rebellious youngster to double down, flunk

much difference music has made to my whole worldview, about whom I've fallen in love with, about what I listen to." For Schick this chance encounter wasn't a harbinger of doom but a reminder of the

religious-like “conversion” he experienced, decades ago, when he was first introduced to solo percussion.

“I was like Paul the Apostle on the road to Damascus,” Steven says. “I was as fervent as you can imagine. I couldn’t stop talking about solo percussion or thinking about it. I was consumed by it.”

Arguably, in the last twenty years the world of solo percussion has grown exponentially and drifted ever so slightly into mainstream culture, thanks, in part, to Schick, who’s commissioned and premiered more than 150 new pieces, as well as collaborated with the Bang on a Can All-Stars and juggled job descriptions from performer to educator to symphony conductor. Charting the trajectory of the field without Schick’s presence would be sheer speculation. One thing is certain, however: The solo percussion genre would certainly have fared worse had Schick continued his medical studies.

Sure, many modern drummers are familiar with Iannis Xenakis’s lively and mildly ethnic compositions; Harry Partch’s philosophical “corporeality” and wholesale rejection of Western tuning; the roaring silence of John Cage’s “27’ 10.554” for a Percussionist”; the siren blasts of Edgard Varèse’s “Ionisation”; Karlheinz Stockhausen’s 1959 masterwork, “Nr. 9 Zyklus”; and Evelyn Glennie’s extensive output. But for the better part of the twentieth century, unaccompanied percussion was hardly a thriving field.

“I think that there were many years in which I may have been the only person, particularly in America, playing solo percussion pieces,” Schick says. “I’m not saying that this genre would have disappeared without me, but if you attended an American classical music concert in the mid-1980s, you didn’t find very



many people playing this music.”

Although Schick remains a member of a rare breed, he’s far from extinct. In fact, these days aspiring percussionists and composers alike seem more willing than ever to receive his rhythmic revelations. Case in point: Schick performed and hosted a pair of concerts (titled “Origins”

and “Responses”) and a panel discussion in early 2014 at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre in New York City. The events were designed to celebrate the pioneering percussionist’s sixtieth birthday and to present a loose historical chronology of the development of solo percussion music, which included a mix of early avant-garde

and modern works by Xenakis, Stockhausen, John Luther Adams, and David Lang, among others, and world premieres of compositions by Nathan Davis and Lei Liang.

The concerts’ subtext, however, alluded to Schick’s symbiotic relationship with the genre at large. The percussion trailblazer predates the oldest piece performed for the program, and both he and the style of performance he continues to champion have evolved roughly within the same time frame, each being shaped by the cultural and musical revolutions marking the last six decades.

The innovative twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century pieces in Schick’s repertoire are products of radical departures



Courtesy of CF Peters

“Intellectually demanding? I would say Ferneyhough’s ‘Bone Alphabet.’ It took me about 1,200 hours to learn.”

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STEVEN SCHICK

from traditional approaches to writing notation and are brought to life via unconventional choices in instrumentation, fluid physicality on stage, an experimental spirit, and accelerated learning methods. Yet despite the level of precision and dynamism inherent to Schick's rhythmic facility, there's something undeniably accessible, witty, and ultimately animalistic about the percussionist's work. It's these very same primal aspects that, perhaps, distinguish Schick's field of expertise from other disciplines of contemporary and classical music study.

MD was recently honored with the opportunity to speak at length with Schick about his life and career and the field of solo percussion.

MD: Do you think the profile of the solo percussion field has been raised in the last couple of decades?

Steven: It used to be that you had to convince people it was worth listening to. I mean this in a general way, but you did this in a sort of vaudevillian approach: "Look what that crazy guy can do," and that was at least one step closer to something interesting. That is not quite what we want, but I think it feels like it's equalizing with respect to the way that people listen to other instruments.

MD: Can you give an example?

Steven: One day I was playing in Washington, D.C., at the National Gallery of Art, and I got an email from somebody who, at that point, was with the Marine Corps band and wanted coaching on one of the pieces I commissioned. I thought, *Okay, this thing that I thought was as far to the fringe as it could have been twenty-five years ago has clearly moved to the mainstream.* In addition, you find every university percussion program, or nearly every one, dealing seriously with this kind of music.

MD: Talk about your performances at Columbia University earlier this year.

Steven: One of the reasons for the event is that I'm turning sixty this year. In fact, the oldest and first serious piece, in my opinion, that was written for solo percussion is younger than I am. I was five when the first piece on that program was written. I came along a generation after the very first of those percussionists.

MD: What were some of the most mentally and physically challenging pieces to perform?

Steven: Michael Gordon's piece "XY" is probably the most physically challenging. It's fifteen minutes of just full-out drumming in constantly shifting

polyrhythms. One hand is [playing] in six, and the other is in five. "XY" means one hand is getting louder while the other hand is getting softer. There's this constant phase crossing of one polyrhythm against another.

Intellectually demanding? I would say Brian Ferneyhough's "Bone Alphabet," which is the uncontested winner in that category and calls for seven undefined sound sources; adjacent instruments should not be of the same material. It was written for me, but it took me about 1,200 hours to learn and memorize the piece of nine or ten minutes in duration.

MD: How long did it take you to generate the technique required to perform these pieces?

Steven: Well, that's a fantastic question. When I began being interested in solo contemporary music, which started with my being interested in solos—although that is certainly not the only thing I do—the genesis of the whole genre was recent enough that there wasn't an established technique. Looking at a piece like "Bone Alphabet" [first performed in 1992] that has this incredible density of rhythms, you need four sticks going at once to perform it. There wasn't a codified set of techniques. You had to make it up.

MD: Stockhausen's "Zyklus" was scored with no true beginning or ending. Some refer to it as a "circular" piece.

Steven: All of those pieces in the "Origins" program have a level of freedom given to the interpreter that percussionists weren't used to. There's also this weird thing that happens where you study the piece and you start realizing that certain decisions that seem theoretically possible just don't work. What "Zyklus" allows you is the freedom to start where you'd like.

There are moments in which Stockhausen writes absolutely everything specifically, but it's a little bit like the Alan Shepard suborbital flight: It's a taste of what it would be like to launch yourself out into free space and never come back. "Zyklus" is also the first serious piece of solo percussion I saw performed.

MD: There seemed to be a narrative thread running through "Origins" and "Responses."

Steven: The thing about "Origins" is that it's music that comes from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. "Responses" was my personal responses to *those* pieces. I'm glad to hear you say that about the narrative. It's true. I didn't commission the pieces in the first concert, but I stood behind them. I hope this doesn't sound maudlin: I defied my parents to become a

musician. I took this unbelievable step off the cliff when I did that, and the vehicle that I was riding in at that moment was those early pieces. In a way, they were more personal.

MD: What does a piece such as "Psappa" mean to you?

Steven: You've asked me about two of the pieces which, I mean, completely and utterly changed my life. The first case was Stockhausen's "Zyklus," and the other is Xenakis's "Psappa," which I've played upwards of 800 times over the last thirty years. If there's a true magnetic north for my career as an interpreter, it's "Psappa."

MD: Let's talk about your setup. You'll likely say that the choice of drums depends on the piece you're playing or what the piece calls for.

Steven: You get both. Many of the pieces are scored specifically, and others are of free instrumentation. For instance, I bought a bottle of Glenfiddich whisky in the mid-1990s, and it has traveled everywhere with me.

MD: You were an established solo percussionist when you joined the Bang on a Can All-Stars in the early 1990s. How did you transition from your solo work to a group setting?

Steven: I was an avid drumset player when I was nineteen, but when the group was founded I was in my late thirties and hadn't played drumkit in a long time. I was, in essence, uniting these two aspects of my life, which I really kept separated.

MD: What can you tell us about your earliest experiences with music?

Steven: My three great loves growing up were sailing, rock music, and classical music. I was never going to be a musician. My father essentially forbade it. "No son of mine," that kind of thing. My dad was a farmer, you know? I grew up in Iowa. I was in a pre-med program in school until the discovery of this music that was in its infancy. It compelled me to say, "I'm getting in on the ground floor." I transferred from a small private school to the University of Iowa. By the sheerest of luck I discovered a hotbed of interesting music in Iowa City, which was one of the leading areas of the country in the early 1970s, from that standpoint.

MD: You stress the physicality of playing in your first book, *The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams*. How do you keep yourself in shape?

Steven: For quite a long period of time, something approaching twenty-five years, I've had a consistent yoga practice. I always see that as inseparable from practicing

itself. I don't think, *Oh, I'm going to exercise, and then I'm going to practice*. They are one and the same. My goal is to play this music into my seventies and eighties, the way pianists do. I also walk, mostly by myself. In fact, I walked from San Diego to San Francisco several years ago, by myself.

MD: You walked from San Diego to San Francisco?

Steven: I proposed to my wife, who was living in San Francisco at the time, and I walked up for that purpose. It was about six and a half weeks of walking—twenty miles a day. One funny story was when I met this woman who stopped me and said, "What are you doing?" I was out in the middle of nowhere, and she told me that she was a psychiatrist and that, you know, "I can help you." Basically, "You must be nuts!"

On the musical side, I've always thought that noises we hear outdoors are not very different from the noises we make on stage. The work of composer John Luther Adams, who I've worked with, is informed by natural sounds. As an art of noises, the world of percussion is very similar to just taking a walk and trying to figure out where you are simply by hearing what's around you. I'll be writing about that experience in my next book.

MD: If it's not too personal, what happened with your first marriage?

Steven: Tolstoy was right: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It's a little hard to describe. I feel personal about that. We were married for twenty-five years. I'm still on very friendly terms with my first wife, and when I think about these pieces, I learned them when I was with her. I owe her and give her an enormous amount of credit.

MD: Are any pieces difficult to perform because of the memories they evoke?

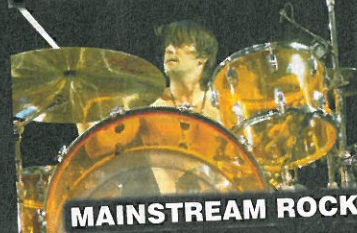
Steven: I think the pieces I play are like amber in the way amber traps all these natural things that have tried to go through it. Still, I never really identified so strongly with a piece of music that I thought, *I can't play it because it evokes a painful memory*. I can't say that "Psappa" is "our song," although when I met Brenda [Steven's second wife], and this was after a long period of living alone, the first thing she heard me play was a James Tenney piece. She was a lawyer and worked in land conservation. She didn't have a musical background at all. She came to me with tears in her eyes and said, "This is the most beautiful piece of music." It was just a noise that started soft and got louder and got soft again, and I thought, *This is the girl for me*.

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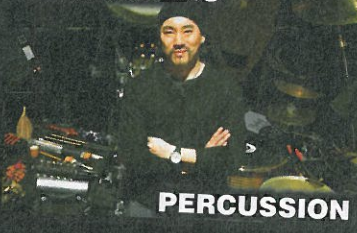
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