

A New Approach of Learning and Rehearsing Steve Reich's *Drumming*

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Description of the Content

In 1970-71, Steve Reich composed *Drumming*¹ after his lessons with traditional drummer Gideon Alorwoyie in Ghana. Not only integrating the Ghanaian drumming in his minimal compositional techniques, Reich applied the oral music practice—learning the music holistically via listening and imitation—in the creation of *Drumming*. During rehearsals, Reich taught his ensemble how to play the music himself, referring to the rhythmical patterns he had jotted down in his notebook during his lessons in Ghana. The manuscript was made after the entire work was completed and it circulated orally among classical percussionists. Only in 2011, Reich made the first definitive full score² meaning to reduce disappointing performances caused by the ambiguous markings on the manuscript.³

I question whether the new edition is the best solution for studying and performing *Drumming*, considering the significant advantages that oral learning can bring. From my field study⁴ on the West African balafon⁵, I observed the balafon music also pertains to oral tradition, which is passed on without using notation. The observations have brought new insights to my artistic domain as a classical percussionist: embodied sound-producing movement becomes one mediation of musical materials; and holistic imitation promotes better ensemble musicianship (analysis, synchronization and listening) and creates a collaborative working environment.

In Autumn 2014, I attempted to integrate the advantages of oral tradition in the rehearsal practice of *Drumming*, and furthermore, reduce the ambiguity that the

¹ *Drumming* is written for 12 musicians: 9 percussionists, 2 singers and 1 piccolo. Percussion instruments include bongos, marimbas and glockenspiels. The piece lasts from 55 to 75 minutes, depending on the number of repeats played. It is divided into four parts that are performed without pause.

² Reich S., *Drumming*, New York: Hendon Music, 2011.

³ *Ibid.*, preface. Adams Liwinski, the percussionist of So Percussion ensemble, <http://adamsliwinski.blogspot.be/2011/11/oral-traditions-whats-in-score.html>

⁴ The field studies were carried out two times between 2012 and 2013 in Mali and Burkina Faso. These two countries are neighbors of Ghana, situated in the West of Africa.

⁵ The balafon is a wooden idiophone keyboard.

practice provokes. I invited students⁶ from the *Royal Conservatoire Antwerp* to perform *Drumming* using neither the newly edited score nor the manuscript. I prepared two types of study material: 1) online videos⁷ of the music patterns, showing the hands movement playing on the instruments; and 2) an event table of the musical structure. Afterwards, I interviewed each percussionist to reflect on the process of learning and rehearsing. Half of them affirmed the method is feasible and brings positive impacts to their music practice, despite others reported inefficiency in the method due to some students' poor rehearsal discipline; also importantly, the project motivated the students to use the informal method in future projects and aroused their interests in artistic research.

Video list

Video instruction for bongos player in part 4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PcALa8A1hQ>

Video instruction for marimba player in part 4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP_ivEIyO8c

Video instruction for glockenspiel player in part 4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzHLLGRVliQ>

Describe the link to the questions of the call

The integration of the research output is made possible through the design of the research process. The oral music practice is integrated in my artistic practice during the research process through my participation as the coach and performer of the ensemble. And through the same process of participant-observation, the peers—the percussion students and the ensemble—can experience immediately the impact of the new practice and give feedback about the learning and rehearsing process.

Moreover, the investigation process and outputs can be transformed and integrated in the practice of other ensembles groups and compositions. There are two types of artistic outputs that contribute to ensemble teaching and performing: 1) the reflective evaluation of the researcher and the percussion students; and 2) the video and written materials used in the study. These outputs will be shared in journal articles and

⁶ The focus of this case study is the application of oral transmission method in percussion performance; therefore, the research process is only carried out to the percussionists of the ensemble. Singers and piccolo performer received scores for study and rehearsal.

⁷ *c.f.* video list.

academic conferences to reach a wider community of music practitioners.