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Queens-based Percussia Premieres Four Works at Jackson Heights Library Concert

Performing three world premieres and one New York premiere, this contemporary chamber music ensemble showcases six talented musicians from Queens and Manhattan.

(JACKSON HEIGHTS, NY – August 26, 2009) Percussia, a Queens-based contemporary chamber music ensemble, brings three world premieres and one New York premiere to the borough in this “Cutting-Edge Queens” concert on October 10, 2009, at 3 p.m. The performance will take place at the Jackson Heights Branch of the Queens Public Library (35-51 81st. Street, Jackson Heights, NY 11372; 718-899-2500). Admission is free.

Performing works written by six acclaimed modern composers, the event also includes reprisals of two works that the group world-premiered at Queens Library concerts in 2008 and 2009. “The entire concert consists of pieces especially written for Percussia,” says Artistic Director Ingrid Gordon. “It’s important to give repeat performances of high-quality commissions.” Played on percussion, flute, harp and viola and featuring soprano vocals, Percussia’s ensemble for this concert showcases talented musicians from Queens and Manhattan, including Gordon on percussion; Andrea Pryor on percussion; Susan Jolles on harp; Margaret Lancaster on flute; Lev ‘Ljova’ Zhurbin on viola; and renowned soprano Melissa Fogarty.

The first three compositions on the “Cutting-Edge Queens” program were originally conceived as part of the 2008 Tobenski-Algera Concert Series, a commissioning project organized by composers Dennis Tobenski and Jeff Algera to present new works by young and emerging composers. The result of this project is three new compositions by Scott J. Ordway, David Roberts and Jamie Keesecker, which will be world-premiered for the first time at this Jackson Heights Library concert. Also in this concert, Percussia will reprise its world premiere performances of composer Matthew Welch’s “Variasi Ombak” and Dennis Tobenski’s “Starfish at Pescadero.” The concert will conclude with the New York premiere of “Formas Del Viento” by Alejandro Viñao.

“Of thoughtful children, and madmen” by Scott J. Ordway

“Cutting-Edge Queens” will kick off with the world premiere of “Of thoughtful children, and madmen,” written by composer, conductor and writer Scott J. Ordway. Featuring flute, viola, marimba and harp, Ordway composed the work specifically for Percussia and soprano Melissa Fogarty. Hailed as “outstanding” by the *New York Times* and given “high marks” by *The Wall Street Journal*, versatile soprano Melissa Fogarty’s wide range of experience has taken her from leading child performer at the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera to the stage, where she has been a featured soloist with orchestras and ensembles including the New York Collegium, Concert Royal, ARTEK and Seattle Baroque Orchestra.

“Of thoughtful children, and madmen” is a short setting of W.H. Auden’s beloved poem, “Lullaby.” “The music brings to life the poem’s haunting themes of time and beauty, faith, human frailty, and the often ephemeral character of our most poignant loves,” says Ordway. “Shifting, delicate textures support a sighing, lyrical setting of Auden’s text that builds through a series of climaxes before reaching a peaceful conclusion.”

Originally from Santa Cruz, California, Ordway is presently a Benjamin Franklin Doctoral Fellow in composition at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. From 2008 to 2009, Ordway was Associate Conductor of the Juventas New Music Ensemble in Boston, and from 2007-2008, he was the music director of the Eugene Contemporary Chamber Ensemble in Eugene, Oregon.

Ordway is also the author of two symphonies, one of which was the winner of the 2008 John Kenneth Cole Composition Prize, as well as numerous works for solo instruments, voices, and chamber ensembles. He is a published James Joyce scholar and has been featured as both a composer and conductor on public radio in the United States and Europe. A distinguished alumnus of both the University of Puget Sound (BA) and the University of Oregon (MM), where he studied with Robert Kyr, David Crumb, and Robert Hutchinson, Ordway also holds a Certificate of Merit from the Accademia Chigiana in Siena, Italy, where he studied with Azio Corghi. He is also the recipient of grants and awards from the American Composer’s Forum, the American Music Center, the Oregon Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, the University of Puget Sound, and the University of Oregon.

“The Three Scarlet Berries” by David Roberts

Next on the program is the world premiere of “The Three Scarlet Berries” by composer David Roberts. Written for two percussion instruments (marimba and

unspecified wooden percussion instruments and drums) and soprano, the work is inspired by and features Amy Lowell's poem, "The Tree of Scarlet Berries":

The rain gullies the garden paths
And tinkles on the broad sides of grass blades.
A tree, at the end of my arm, is hazy with mist.
Even so, I can see that it has red berries,
A scarlet fruit,
Filmed over with moisture.
It seems as though the rain,
Dripping from it,
Should be tinged with colour.
I desire the berries,
But, in the mist, I only scratch my hand on the thorns.
Probably, too, they are bitter.

"Sensuous and almost dreamlike in the description of the minutia of the scene, everything here is miniature and just so," says Roberts. "It is a tiny model railroad, demonstrating human relations in reduced scale: the desire of a thing, its fruitless pursuit, and, knowing no more about it than that we cannot obtain it, the conclusion that the object of our desire must, finally, be unworthy of us. It is very funny, very tragic, and very small.

"My setting became somewhat lighter than the text, more my reaction to the poem than the poem itself," Roberts continues. "Nonetheless, I strove to keep the humor, brevity, and concision of the original intact. Perhaps I am sitting in the house, watching the scene through a little window rather than standing in the sodden garden of human interaction myself."

Roberts works in both acoustic and electronic media and has composed for a wide variety of ensembles and instrumentations: acoustic chamber ensembles, orchestra, fixed media, and interactive electronics among others. He is currently interested in orchestral music and works that integrate electronics and live performance.

Roberts recently completed his master's degree at the University of Oregon, where he studied with David Crumb, Jeffrey Stolet, and Robert Kyr, and in the fall he will begin work on his doctorate at Indiana University. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Music from the University of Puget Sound, where he was a student of Robert Hutchinson. He has also studied with Kevin Putz and Bob Aldridge and attended master classes with Veljo Tormis, Martin Bresnick, Mark Applebaum, Scott Wyatt, Allen Strange, and Marilyn Shrude among others.

Roberts' music has been programmed at the Oregon Bach Festival Composers Symposium, the Brevard Music Center, the University of Oregon Vanguard Series, Future Music Oregon, and the University of Puget Sound New Music Society. He has had performances by So Percussion, ITCH Ensemble, the Eugene Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, and readings by the Fireworks Ensemble and violinist Jerry Elias.

“Colored Hats” by Jamie Keesecker

“Colored Hats” by Jamie Keesecker, the next world premiere on the program, was also inspired by and features poetry. “The poetry of Gertrude Stein tends to rely on familiar patterns of speech that are combined and juxtaposed in a way that the result appears to be purely nonsensical from a syntactical point of view,” says Keesecker. “Stein, in her so-called ‘nonsense poetry,’ seems to be primarily concerned with the rhythm of the text in conjunction with the natural timbral shapes created by the pronunciation of the words. In other words, Stein’s poems are all about the sound of the English language and the feelings that can be conveyed simply through impression of speech. In this respect, Stein could be considered more of a composer than a poet.”

Keesecker used Stein’s poem “Tender Buttons,” which he says has “moments of lyrical quality, as well as moments that suggest a lighter or whimsical character” to influence his composition, which was written for soprano and the full ensemble, including marimba and temple bowls. “The intent of this piece is to bring out the musical aspects of the poetry in a manner that is true to Stein’s work,” he says. The title of the piece refers to a particular part of “Tender Buttons:”

“Colored hats are necessary to show that curls are worn by an addition of blank spaces, this makes the difference between single lines and broad stomachs, the least thing is lightening, the least thing means a little flower and a big delay a big delay that makes more nurses than little women really little women. So clean is a light that nearly all of it shows pearls and little ways. A large hat is tall and me and all custard whole.”

Keesecker is primarily a composer of instrumental chamber and orchestral pieces. His music has been performed at a variety of new music venues in the United States and abroad, including the Oregon Vanguard Series, the Oregon Bach Festival Composers Symposium, and the International Trumpet Guild’s New Works for Trumpet 2005 concert in Bangkok, Thailand. Recent highlights include performances by So Percussion, the Eugene Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, and a recording by the California-based horn quartet QUADRE.

Keesecker holds degrees in composition from the University of Oregon (MM) and

the University of Arizona (BM), and is currently pursuing a PhD in composition at Duke University. In addition to composing, he is an active hornist performing in various new music ensembles, most recently with the American Creators Ensemble at the 2009 Oregon Bach Festival.

“Starfish at Pescadero” by Dennis Tobenski

“Cutting-Edge Queens” will also include a repeat performance of Dennis Tobenski’s “Starfish at Pescadero,” which Percussia world-premiered at the Langston Hughes Library in November 2007. This emerging New York City composer’s six-movement piece is inspired by and features the poetry of San Francisco poet Idris Anderson. “The poem, on the surface, is a trip to the beach—little vignettes of a couple,” says Tobenski. “Underneath it’s about the inexplicable sadness that can accompany even the happiest times, and in inability to communicate our feelings to one another, particularly to those we love most.” In addition to percussion (vibraphone, tom toms, snare drum, splash cymbal), harp, viola and flute, the piece will feature soprano Melissa Fogarty, who has a long-standing working relationship with Tobenski.

Originally from Kanakee, Illinois, Tobenski studied Vocal Performance and Music Theory & Composition at Illinois State University. After finishing his Bachelor’s degree, Tobenski moved to New York City, where he has continued studying with composers Daron Aric Hagen and David Del Tredici. Various groups at Illinois State University, baritone John M. Koch, and tenors Denton Tobenski and Rob Frankenberry have all commissioned works from Tobenski. He is also the co-founder of the Tobenski-Algera Recital Series, a concert series devoted to the presentation of new works by young and emerging composers.

“Variasi Ombak” by Matthew Welch

Also in this concert, Percussia will also reprise its world premiere performance of composer Matthew Welch’s “Variasi Ombak,” which the ensemble first debuted at a concert at the Langston Hughes Library last September. Composed for flute, viola, harp and two percussionists (vibraphone and marimba), this somber set of pieces extends Welch’s focus on a dialectic between musical devices found in Indonesian gamelan and Celtic music. The choice of instrumentation touches both realms of disparate music traditions such as the Irish flute, the fiddle and the celtic harp; or when viewed from the other side of the world, the suling, the rebab, and celempung, respectively.

Welch’s work was influenced by “Sonata for flute, viola and harp” by Debussy, who was very inspired by seeing gamelan at the 1889 Paris Expo, and “And Then

I Knew ‘Twas Wind” by Toru Takemitsu, who designed this trio to be played with Debussy’s. Both composers were very taken with water and the sea and Asian music traditions. The term *Ombak* in Bali, meaning “waves,” refers to the tremolo sound of the gamelan, as well as the undulation of the music. “I have tried to let this principle guide this incarnation of this work,” says Welch, “not to mention it has been written on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, where I am constantly surrounded by the sound of waves.” *Variasi* in Indonesian means, most literally, “variation,” referring to the variety in renegotiating musical material by individual instrumental tastes.

Welch holds two university degrees in Experimental Music Composition, a BFA from Simon Fraser University, and an MA from Wesleyan University. He has studied with noted composers, such as Barry Truax, Rodney Sharman, Alvin Lucier and Anthony Braxton. His compositions range from traditional-like bagpipe tunes to electronic pieces; improvisation strategies; and fully notated works for solo instruments, chamber ensembles and orchestra. He has also taken part in a number of compositional collaborations with Indonesian gamelan composer-performers in Bali and Java, performed in free improvisation contexts with numerable New York City improvisers, and played with art rockers in the Brooklyn underground.

As a virtuoso of the Highland Bagpipe, he studied traditional music with Gold Medalist masters, such as Colin MacLellan, Jack Lee, Angus MacLellan and Andrew Wright and has also premiered a number of new compositions written by contemporary composers. Welch also was a member of the four-time World Champion Simon Fraser University Pipe Band, winning with them in 1999 and 2001. The eclectic breadth of his interests in Celtic music, gamelan, minimalism, improvisation and rock converge in compositional amalgams for his New York-based ensemble, Blarvuster.

Welch appears on Anthony Braxton’s *10 [Solo Bagpipe] Compositions* (2000) and three compact discs of his own music: *Ceol Nua* (Leo 336, 2002), highlighting orchestral and chamber works; *Hag at the Churn* (Newsonic 33, 2003), a collection of electronic concoctions; and *Dream Tigers* (Tzadik 8015, 2005), a program of ecstatic chamber music.

“Formas Del Viento” by Alejandro Viñao

The concert will conclude with the first movement of “Formas Del Viento” by Argentinean-born composer Alejandro Viñao, now a British citizen. This piece was commissioned by a consortium of players—including Percussia’s Artistic Director Ingrid Gordon—at the Festival Cervantino in Guanajuato, Mexico, where it was first performed on October 18, 2008, by Asako Arai, flute and Pedro

Carneiro, percussion. While the original arrangement had one percussionist playing marimba and vibraphone stacked on top of each other at the same time, the composer re-arranged for the piece for trio, which is how it will be played in this performance. With Lancaster on flute and Gordon and Pryor on percussion, this is the piece's New York premiere.

The title of the first movement, "Dance of the Night Wind," was taken from the poem "The Night Wind" by Rudyard Kipling:

*At two o'clock in the morning, if you open your window and listen,
You would hear the feet of wind racing towards the sun.
Trees in the darkness whisper, and trees in the moonlight glisten,
And though it is still dark, you know that the night is done.*

"In the first movement of this piece I tried to achieve an effect of outward simplicity," says Viñao. "A tune or melodic cell with a certain 'groove' repeats itself, time after time, subjected only to what appears to be just minor variations. I imagine my audience listening to the 'Dance of the Night Wind' with a certain abandon. And as the structure and rhythms get more complex the listener might just sink into them without expecting great tension or drama to unfold. In this sense this movement is unlike most of my music where the complexity of the form and local syntax is apparent.

"I was not seeking simplicity, which is not much, but what Jorge Luis Borges has described as 'secret complexity', a feeling that there are more layers to a discourse than it appears to be and that we are happy to let that underlying complexity remain in the background," he continues.

Viñao's music is characterized by the use of pulsed rhythmic structures to create large scale form and by a melodic writing develops through rhythm rather than harmony. In addition to instrumental and Electroacoustic compositions he has also been involved with the creation of multimedia works, has composed music for some 20 films and produced several radio programs for the BBC. In recent years Viñao has written a variety of percussion works that are rapidly becoming standard repertoire in the concert hall and in the pedagogical world of the conservatory and the university.

Viñao studied composition with the Russian composer Jacobo Ficher in Buenos Aires. In 1975 he moved to Britain where he continued his studies at the Royal College of Music and the City University in London. He has been resident in Britain since then. In 1988 he was awarded a PhD. D. in composition at the City University. He has received commissions from various performing groups and institutions around the world such as I.R.C.A.M.— where he worked regularly in

the 1980's—and G.R.M. in France, M.I.T. in the USA—where he was the composer in residence in 1987—the BBC Symphony Orchestra and many others.

In 1994 Viñao was awarded the Guggenheim fellowship in composition. His piece “Apocryphal Dances” was premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in London in 1997. That same year Viñao was invited to Japan to present his music in a Portrait Concert. Later that year, his chamber opera Rashomon was premiered in Germany. This work was commissioned by ZKM for the opening of their new building in Karlsruhe. Since then Rashomon has been produced in Paris, London and Gothenburg.

Following the success of his choral work Epitafios, Viñao was commissioned to write a new piece “La Trama” for mixed choir and computer by the German Sudwestrundfunk. This work was premiered in February 2003 by the SWR Vokalensemble Stuttgart. His latest music-theatre work The Baghdad Monologue has been performed in Germany, France, Britain, Sweden, Portugal and Norway, and a new production by Theatre Cryptic will be touring Scotland in 2009 and 2010.

Viñao is the winner of numerous scholarships, awards, and composition prizes, including the ‘Golden Nica’ Prix Ars Electronica (1992), 1st Prize at The International Rostrum at the Unesco World Music Council (1984) and many others. Viñao’s music has been played and broadcast throughout Europe and the United States and has been featured in international festivals such as the Tanglewood Festival, the Warsaw Autumn Festival and the London PROMS.

Percussia: Beating a path to modern world music.

With percussion as its driving force, Percussia is known for delivering dynamic and engaging performances. In addition to becoming a regular at Queens Public Library concerts, Percussia has performed at New York City’s innovative venues Merkin Concert Hall and Symphony Space and at the New Directions in Percussion Festival at Cornell University. This New York City-based chamber music ensemble makes percussion the foundation for a new sound. Playing both world and Western percussion instruments, the group melds the music of different lands into its own contemporary soundscape. The resulting international music crosses genres, styles, and cultural boundaries, connecting people through music’s common thread of percussion. Percussia’s varied repertoire is a mixture of contemporary chamber music, world and folk music styles, and original arrangements. While percussion takes center stage, the group blends its rhythm with melodic instruments for added dimension.

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High-resolution photos available upon request.