

# ENSEMBLE EVOLUTION

By Gary France

An international percussion ensemble experiment



In October 2010, Maria Finkelmeier, Jacob Remington, and Charles Martin came together in Piteå, northern Sweden, to create a new experiment in music education and artistic development: a Master's course where a small group of students form their own percussion ensemble, write their own repertoire, work with composers and visiting artists, and organise tours and events.

This ensemble course was the brainchild of Anders Åstrand, Sweden's leading mallet specialist, and Maria Finkelmeier, a recent graduate of Eastman School of Music who had moved to Sweden in 2009 to look for new opportunities for personal development.

Two more students answered the call for applications. The first was Jacob Remington, a promising Marimba player and composer from Fort Worth, Texas who had just spent a year at London's Royal Academy of Music. Charles Martin also responded, an innovative percussion and computer music specialist from Canberra, Australia, who was on tour with his cross-art form performance group, *Last Man to Die*.

The location for the new ensemble was compelling. Piteå is small town only 100kms south of the Arctic Circle but has 2 music schools where a line of notable percussionists have studied. The isolated location is perfect for focussing on artistic development while state of the art facilities and fast internet keeps students in step with the world.

The far north environment has its own effect on creativity. Temperatures in the harsh Swedish Winter can fall below -30°C and the bay and rivers freeze into strange landscapes. Autumn and Spring are ideal seasons for watching auroras while the Summer sun never truly sets. This strange world seemed ideal for creating new musical connections.

When these 3 students finally met in Piteå they chose a name and a direction for their new group: Taking elements of Jazz and Contemporary Classical music, Ensemble Evolution creates musical experiments by incorporating improvisation, new media, and music technology into an original concept of a 21st century percussion ensemble. The group's first project was scheduled within days of their meeting: a collaboration with their mentor, Anders Åstrand, as well as international artists Dave Samuels and Evaristo Aguilar. For this debut concert, the trio worked together on an improvised work, "Sounds of Piteå".

This first piece heralded some of the topics the group would focus on over the coming months, exploring group composition and improvisation, finding musical roles for 3 percussionists and making connections between percussion and electronics.

After these initial concerts in Piteå and Stockholm, the ensemble visited the US to attend the Percussive Arts Society's International Convention (PASIC) and to gather inspiration for the kind of projects they might pursue over their residency in Sweden. On returning to Piteå the group decided on their course of action: they would organise a new percussion festival focussed on allowing teachers, students and freelance artists to present their music, ideas and creativity to each other on an equal footing.

They scheduled this new Piteå Percussion Repertoire Festival for March 2011 and set about

creating their artistic contribution, a set of new compositions for percussion trio to be presented at the first concert. To achieve this goal, the group scheduled a series of creative workshops. Improvising together, reading and revising each others compositions, and finally, in February, going into the world class recording studios at the School of Music in Piteå to record their new works, guided by Anders Åstrand and Evaristo Aguilar.

Finally, the festival arrived with percussionists from around the world converging on the small town. Four concerts were held throughout the week, the first of which was entitled, "The Arctic Connection" and featured a collaboration between Ensemble Evolution and Ensemble 64.8 from Fairbanks, Alaska. Each member of Evolution performed individually at, "Soloists Take the Stage", as well as in chamber groups for the closing concert, "A

NSW.

Christina later made her own visit to Piteå as a visiting artist in January 2012 to lead the undergraduate students at Piteå's 2 music schools in a Ragtime Xylophone workshop. She also performed a concert of cutting edge arrangements of Ragtime and early Jazz with Ensemble Evolution and soprano, Anna Larson.

Percussive pioneers William and Ruth Cahn visited in February to work with Ensemble Evolution and the other Masters students at the School of Music in Piteå on a collaborative improvisation project and performance of, "A Page of Madness" - a silent film by Teinosuke Kinugasa with music by William Cahn.

Also visiting Piteå was the RoseWind duo featuring marimbist Scott Herring and saxophonist Clifford Leaman who presented a masterclass and

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Smorgasbord of International Percussionists."

Throughout the week the ensemble also presented several sessions including an improvisation using both iPhones and live percussion instruments, and a new literature session featuring new works by the publishing company EditionSVITZER. Immediately following the festival the group travelled to Stockholm to present the "Arctic Connection" program at Capitol Theatre.

All of the concerts and sessions during the festival were broadcast live on the Internet, bringing the festival to a much broader audience that spanned the globe. The festival was received with much acclaim from those presenting, those in attendance, and those who watched online.

Over the northern hemisphere Summer, the group split into 2 parts. Maria and Jake pursued a commissioning project to generate music for percussion duo from a new generation of composers. Funded by the percussion community through Kickstarter, a crowd-funding web service, this project had its premiere concert in Piteå's Studio Acusticum in October and a tour in the US in November 2011.

Charles returned to Australia creating a duo with his long-time collaborator (and fiancée), Christina Hopgood. They performed "Norra Vinter", Charles' suite of works for percussion duo and iPhones inspired by the cold climate of Piteå and his work with Ensemble Evolution throughout the ACT and

concert in Studio Acusticum.

Most recently, the group visited Australia to collaborate with Anders Åstrand and the DRUMatiX percussion group at the Australian National University in Canberra as well as some of Australia's most creative percussionists in Sydney and Melbourne. On this tour, Ensemble Evolution presented their new "solstormen" (solar storm) program, including improvised and self-composed works for marimba, vibraphone, electronics, and an array of percussive sounds. This music reflects the natural forces that interact in the earth's atmosphere to create the aurora, a regular sight in northern Sweden and a continual inspiration for the trio.

The coming months will see Ensemble Evolution in residence at the Nordplus IP Music Laboratory THE PROCESS in Vilnius, Lithuania as well as holding a "midnight sun" festival of outdoor percussion performances in June.

During their 2-year residency at the University in Piteå, the trio not only underwent extensive musical and personal growth, they learned how to survive and succeed in a foreign culture, experienced the sociological elements that are in play when a chamber ensemble of strangers is formed, and produced an impressive amount of compositions, recordings, and events. In June, the 3 will part ways, but the ensemble will continue to work together and evolve well into the future.