



# SPEAK PERCUSSION

*In search of a common language*





By Mathew Lorenzon

Whether surrounded by an array of glass bowls, bells, and bulbs, gazing at a 110-foot blue canvas, or testing the sonorous properties of orecchiette pasta, 'Speak Percussion' have been looking beyond their home turf for over 10 years in search of inspiration, in exploration of a common language. The tireless efforts of founder and artistic director Eugene Ughetti have established Speak as one of the world's most innovative contemporary percussion ensembles by infecting the spiralling diversity of modern percussive instruments, styles, and performance practices with a fascination proper to ancient myth, computer games, and underground musical cultures.

Through an impish grin and pointed goatee Ughetti explained his exploratory approach to percussion at Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts. From 1974 to its amalgamation with the University of Melbourne School of Music in 2009 the VCA provided an unparalleled practice-based education for enterprising musicians like Ughetti, other core members of Speak, and the milieu of art music composers that came of age with the ensemble. It was not at the VCA, however, but from a linguist friend that Ughetti learnt the art of etymology and began to deconstruct his musical practice: "The word 'percussion' translates from Latin literally as 'hitting.' That doesn't really explain much about what percussion is. We scrape, we shake, we rattle, we drop, we do all kinds of things which are legitimately parts of the world of 'percussion.'"

The history of the word "percussion" is food enough for thought. "Kwēt" is thought to have meant "shake" to our linguistic ancestors of some 4,000 years ago, evolving via Ancient Greek into

"passein" ("sprinkle") and "pastos" (barley porridge), from which comes the Italian word "pasta." Through Classical Latin the same root gave rise to "quassare" ("shake violently") and later "percussion" as well as "discuss" ("to break apart"). As such, "percussion" can envelop any number of gestures and materials, touching even the realm of ideas and concepts through its relation to "discussion."

From their first concert in 2000, Speak have used percussion as a tool of discussion. The ensemble's name came from these first rehearsals wherein percussion became a way of overcoming a language barrier with an ensemble member. In 2001 the young ensemble discussed the boundaries of what makes an "Australian music" by playing the threads connecting Australia to South-East Asia. They performed works by Australian and Hong Kong-based composers Colin Bright and Clarence Mack to celebrate the centenary of the Federation of the Australian Colonies.

In other projects animated by Ughetti the percussion instruments themselves have been the topic of a vast musical conversation. The 2009 Glass Percussion Project was an ethereal and surreal experiment with hundreds of handmade glass instruments suspended and amplified in glass atriums. The resulting musical laboratory was staffed by angel-scientists performing their sonic chemistry in white uniforms and protective goggles.

The gestures and techniques of percussion have also driven Speak's musical debate. This was particularly the case in the adventurous 2010 concert 'Pasta Percussion', which explored



the gestural and cultural links between food and music, both topics close to Ughetti's heart. An informal antipasti was accompanied by an improvised prelude of wood chimes, cymbals, and bells. The bowed and rubbed aural palate conjured up those meanings that are etymologically and culinarily "anti-pasti" or "before pasta:" the crushing of a grain and the mixing of a paste. Conjuring the careful listening needed to apprehend the music of John Cage, Speak performed 3<sup>2</sup> for 3 percussionists on orecchiette ("little ears") pasta and ceramic bowls. The solo maracas and tape of Alvarez's *Temazcal* provided the etymological and cultural context for the audience's 'sprinkling' of garnish on their house smoked salmon and Tuscan bread salad. The connections came thick and fast, sometimes hinted at in the program, sometimes spontaneously discovered by the diner/audience member. My favourite dish was a radicchio and rocket salad with walnut dressing served to *Zeichnung* by Fritz Hauser, wherein one percussionist strikes a cymbal while the other dampens it. In Speak's performance the audience members uncannily imitated the gestures of the percussionists as they served each other salad.

With all of this experimentation it is important to remember that Speak have never lost sight of traditional percussion skills and instruments. The relationship between knowledge and experimentation is always one of growth and expansion. For instance in 2010 Speak mounted "Vibraphone" concerts in which they explored the sonority of Yamaha Vibraphones in Gamelan and Hawaiian folk music alongside works by Karlheinz Stockhausen and Warren Burt. Burt's "Vibraphone and Tuning Forks" provides a particularly enchanting example of how Speak's experimentalism continues from, rather than breaks with, traditional music making. The Vibraphone plunges the listener in a modal reverie while 39 micro-tonally adjusted tuning forks (the

difference is that between an equal tempered Vibraphone and tuning forks in just intonation, to be precise) create scintillating disturbances like ripples along the surface of a dream.

Speak's gargantuan 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary program at the 2011 MONA FOMA proved that the ensemble had grown from a small, local percussion group to an internationally significant ensemble capable of transfixing audiences from various backgrounds with virtuosic spectacles in diverse percussive languages. Speak shipped over 400 instruments and 15 performers to the Tasmanian festival to provide the audience with 2 nights of superbly interpreted masterworks and premieres Seated on a bean-bag amidst the interstellar echoes of Gerard Grisey's *Le noir d'étoile*, passed between 6 batteries of percussion instruments spaced throughout Hobart's Prince's Wharf, it was hard not to think that this was the beginning, rather than the end, of a period in Australian music history.

Beyond the spectacle of the event, it was Speak's sensitive interpretation of 2 very different percussion works by Australian composers that demonstrated their maturity as an ensemble. The ensemble accommodated two different percussive languages in the Anthony Pateras' driving *Refractions* and Liza Lim's nostalgic *City of Falling Angels*. In Pateras' piece, military-ceremonial simultaneity gives way to differing deployments of gestures. The effect is like hearing a Morse code signal being copied and retransmitted by an army of radio operators who gradually introduce errors into the message. Through the phrase's diffusion the materiality of the composition is laid bare. In Lim's "magic realist" style, events move throughout the ensemble like memories clattering through encumbered hallways of the mind In *Refractions* the exploration is inherently musical while the affect of Lim's composition hides its musical material.

There is something of both the enchanting Lim

and the experimental Pateras in Ughetti's own music. His solo percussion piece *Lady Cosmic Dream* explores a spiritual allegory while *Occult Tapestries* is an exploration of natural forms and patterns. This synthesis of fantasy and musical pattern is epitomised by the crossing of art music and computer games in Ughetti's *Frenetic Fantasy Etude* for snare and computer game soundtracks. It is the soundtrack of the tail end of Generation X, though it repeats a musical approach that might be traced back to the swollen orchestra-fuelled fantasies of Wagner. It is also, or so I believe, the driving energy of Speak's virtuosic spectacles almost since their inception.

One of Speak's latest projects, *City Jungle*, continues this fantastic-technical trajectory. In *City Jungle*, Drum and Bass and Jungle by Terminal Sound System and Noxious Aquatic are combined with live percussion by Sydney's Synergy Percussion and Speak Percussion. This mixing of underground appeal with the complexity of art music gives Speak Percussion its winning combination, its *joie de vivre*. This fantastic-technical approach has kept Speak on the forefront of musical exploration, imbuing them with a passion for music that contributed to Eugene Ughetti gaining the 2011 Freedman Fellowship, a \$15,000 career development prize. Ughetti intends to spearhead a recording milestone with the proceeds - a CD of solo works composed for him from Speak's inauguration to the present day. A winning combination is not exactly a common language, but it is a medium point that opens a conversation: a discussion through percussion.

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