German percussionist Leander Kaiser composed *Black Sphinx* for the 1997 Percussive Arts Society Composition Contest where it won first prize. Two main themes are presented in the opening Adagio. They, and an additional third theme, are developed in the second movement’s Allegro. The work makes extensive use of idiomatic marimba techniques and provides some interesting technical challenges. It is programmatic in its depiction of the Greek myth of the resurrection of the Sphinx.

Stuart Saunders Smith employs a highly unusual compositional methodology. He begins each work with a single pitch, which he listens to intensely. That pitch then tells him what the next pitch must be. When he has a series of pitches, they dictate their rhythm and he records it in the score. He listens for the composition to create itself. In Smith’s words,

> I do not compose by using any pre-compositional systems, quasi-scientific analogies, or engineering principles. I compose by ear—by personal taste. I hold that sound is not only energy, but intelligence—intelligence that can be tapped, divined, to shape a composition on a micro and macro level.

The first thing one notices upon examining a Stuart Saunders Smith score is the incredible rhythmic complexity. During the span of his career, he has developed a highly personal rhythmic style of great difficulty matched only by Brian Ferneyhough (though their styles couldn’t be more different philosophically, musically, and perceptually). Smith quickly grew tired of the ubiquitous duple rhythms of Western music and now favors odd groupings of beats including 5, 7, 9, 10, and 11, often appearing in partial groupings. While these rhythms are difficult enough to execute with precision, his later music becomes exponentially harder when he overlaps these odd divisions in a bizarre counterpoint. His scores are often notated on three or four staves to accommodate the rhythmic density. His vibraphone solos are notoriously treacherous combining any grouping with up to three of any other groupings. For example, the opening gesture of *Links No. 10* layers 2 against 3 against 5 against 8.

Significantly, Smith’s music rarely uses any repetition, which leads to the inevitable question, how is one to listen to music that is perceptually atonal and arrhythmic without even the aid of repetition to guide the listening experience? Sylvia Smith, Stuart’s wife and publisher, states it best when describing *Links No. 10*.

> It starts out with little events around a theme that is never stated. Then it takes off down a path. A deeply interior work. You get lost in it. Like pick-up-sticks, all connected and separate at the same time. Complicated and simple at the same time. Clear and not clear at the same time. No sense of return or recognition. Moment by moment. All the time you have the feeling of traveling far without going anywhere. When it is over, you can’t remember it. But something has been said.

Between 1974 and 1994, Smith composed a series of eleven vibraphone essays entitled *Links*. They are individual works, but can be performed together in sequence. *Links No. 10* presents a number of special performance and interpretive challenges. Aside from the usual rhythmic demands, the dynamic range is limited to **ppppp / pp**, with no specific indications by the composer. The performer is asked to compose the dynamics of their version by trial and error until the final interpretation presents itself. Very hard mallets are required as if to suggest the sparkle of ice. Finally, a successful performance requires the performer to delicately control the execution of each pitch in each chord so that the melodic lines may emerge from the web of the accompaniment. The score is written in such a way that the melodic line may move between any of the three staves, sometimes within the space of one beat. This must be carefully worked out long before the first rehearsal can begin.

Smith describes *Links No. 10* as “a hyperexpressive region within a narrow space—a pin-prick that at any time could burst into a volcano.” Of course the work never erupts, but the tension is always present. Always a deeply philosophical man, Smith includes two quotations, one as a subtitle by Henry David Thoreau, which reads,
“Where are we? What are we?” and one as a program note by Ludwig Wittgenstein: “And this is how it is if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered!”

Rande Sanderbeck’s Homage to Max is dedicated to the jazz legend Max Roach who has appeared on many famous jazz recordings as both a leader and a sideman with jazz greats such as Clifford Brown, Charlie Parker, and Bud Powell. He possesses an unusually lyrical style of soloing often introducing, developing, and varying melodic fragments. Roach solos can often be analyzed as a complete song form within the larger context of the jazz tune. Dr. Sanderbeck, professor of music at Eastern Tennessee State University, based his doctoral dissertation on the study of melodic elements in Max Roach solos, looking at form, motivic development, and melodic content. Homage to Max is the result of Sanderbeck’s extensive transcription and analysis and displays five original compositions incorporating Roach’s unique style of melodic soloing. Some movements deal with a recurring theme featuring variations and rhythmic augmentation and diminution while others feature somewhat freer development of a simple rhythmic idea. The work remains true to Roach’s combination of technical skill and subtlety. Although the work is derived from improvisations, it is completely composed, features no improvisation on the part of the performer, and is to be performed exactly as notated.

Significantly, Stuart Saunders Smith has written only three marimba works to date. Marimba has arguably become the preeminent concert instrument of solo percussion, but Smith instead prefers to write for vibraphone, xylophone, and orchestra bells. Good Night is a brief work that is atypical of Smith’s style for a number of reasons. It uses a standard ABA form, which implies repetition (though there are variances during the return of the A section). The most impressive feature of the work is a quotation from the popular song, Goodnight Irene, by the Weavers, a popular folk band during the 1940s through the 1960s. For a composer who doesn’t rely on any type of systematic composition, a quotation, from a popular song no less, is very surprising. The melody is hidden amongst Smith’s usual barrage of minor seconds, but it can be picked out because he has the performer hum the melody softly. Additionally, the performer ends the work by saying, ‘good night.’

The work has an extreme dynamic range from $p$$p$$p$$p$ to $f$$f$$f$$f$, often with rapid shifts mid-phrase. It is interesting in that it does not rely on idiomatic marimba techniques at all. With the majority of current marimba works being overly concerned with the technique of playing marimba, it is refreshing to find a work so completely foreign that the performer must completely rethink his or her approach to the instrument. In the score, Smith includes an excerpt from Zukofsky’s monumental, 800 page poem, A. It seems that, within the limited context of this particular excerpt, Smith is pondering the meaning of music from Bach’s time to the twentieth century as well as the thought that music is not created during the compositional process, but rather when, and every time, it is performed.

The Passion According to Matthew,  
Composed seventeen twenty-nine,  
Rendered at Carnegie Hall,  
Nineteen twenty-eight,  
Thursday evening, the Fifth of April  
The autos parked, honking.  
Louis Zukofsky from A-P  
(1904-1978)

Interplanetary Phase-Shifting Module was conceived as a combination of electronic jungle music with the live performance of drum set inspired by electronic artists such as Dillinja, Roni Size, Speedy J, and Squarepusher. Jungle music is derived from a style of electronic music called drum 'n bass, which is characterized by deep bass lines, driving drum sequences, and fast tempos ranging from 120 to more than 180 beats per minute. Jungle differs mostly in the treatment of the drums. Both use programmed drum tracks, but drum 'n bass tracks feature simpler beats with emphasis on beats 2 and 4. Jungle drum tracks feature a higher degree of complexity and
randomness. Drum parts found in jungle tracks are usually highly engineered and use a wide variety of sound manipulation tools allowing the producer a large number of drum sounds to create unique beat patterns. The composer is attempting to recreate the sound and feel of these programmed drum tracks live, all at the same time. To facilitate this, the work is performed on a drum set featuring multiple snare drums, with tuning extending over a broad range and a selection of cymbals. This allows the performer to create the effect of playing multiple drum sets at the same time.

The work was realized in the composer’s studio using Digidesign Pro Tools 7 on an Apple G5 and a variety of software instruments including Native Instruments Reaktor 5, Absynth 3, FM7, and Pro-53. All parts were played into the computer individually through a MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) keyboard. No pre-recorded samples or loops were used to create this work—it is entirely original. It was the composer’s wish to keep the electronic track completely synthetic, as software instruments that attempt to match the sounds of acoustic instruments are vastly inferior. If, for example, a saxophone is desired, there is no reason not to use a saxophone. The reason for using synthesizers is to create unusual sounds not found with traditional instruments. Though the electronic track is always the same for every performance, some sections feature improvisations performed during the compositional process.

Bela Bartok composed Sonata for two pianos and percussion in 1937, only one year after *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celeste*, both of which are considered to be amongst his finest work. Bartok had intended to compose a work for piano and percussion, but became convinced that a single piano could not balance the “sharp” sounds of the percussion, so an additional piano was added. He questioned the difficulty of the work and originally intended the assistance of a conductor and three or four percussionists. However, early rehearsals proved so successful that Bartok felt two percussionists to be sufficient without the aid of a conductor. The work was performed to great success by Bartok and his wife, Ditta throughout Europe and the United States. While the work is considered, today, to be very challenging, the percussion parts, at the time of composition, were thought to be nearly unplayable. The percussionists are required to play a variety of instruments with very little time to switch instruments. The timpani part contains many tuning changes placing enormous demands on the performer. Aside from technical difficulties, the largest challenge is ensemble playing. The pianists are often entangled in a dense canonic polyphony, making the rare unison passages difficult to coordinate.

The work is divided into three movements of unequal length, with the first movement’s duration exceeding the sum of the second two. The first movement is a sonata form with contrasting themes, the first using a more conventional rhythm and the second using a Bulgarian folk rhythm. The second movement is a small ternary form with a coda, which uses Bartok’s “night music” style. The third is a bright, fast-paced sonata rondo with fragmentation and development of the three themes.

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