

The Sympatico Percussion Group

The Sympatico Percussion Group is comprised of five like-minded individuals whose collective experience spans multiple decades as performers, composers, educators, and collaborators in the percussive arts. “Sympatico” is defined as “compatible; having shared attributes or interests,” and the Sympatico Percussion Group exhibits a true connection of musical backgrounds, aesthetics, and vision. Members Scott Herring, Joseph Krygier, Johnny Mendoza, Christopher Norton, and Susan Powell draw from their many years of performing with chamber groups, orchestras, military bands, and as soloists, in addition to considerable cumulative pedagogical experience holding college professorships.

Originating in 2008, relationships were initially formed through collegiate study, professional conference attendance/appearances, and, of course, a deep-seated respect and admiration for each other as individuals, musically and otherwise. What began as the Pendulum Duo (Krygier/Powell), expanded to the Shiraz Trio (Krygier/Powell/Herring), and eventually evolved to become the quintet Sympatico.

In many ways, the genesis of landing on five players for the group stemmed from the high esteem in which Sympatico holds the seminal percussion ensemble Nexus. The individuals in SPG have known and worked with members of Nexus in various settings and deeply appreciate their nuanced approach to sound and touch as well as their distinct

and diverse body of repertoire. Nexus's influence on Sympatico – both collectively and individually – is immense and has significantly impacted them as a chamber ensemble, and as solo performers, composers, and educators.

According to SPG member Susan Powell, “We’ve been highly inspired by music composed by and for Nexus, but over the years our members have contributed with original compositions written specifically for us, resulting in music that is truly unique to our individual tastes, skill sets, and artistic voices.” Sympatico’s current oeuvre is an eclectic mix of contemporary percussion works, world music infusion, electro-acoustic compositions, groove-based soundscapes, and selections in the novelty ragtime style.

PASIC REPERTOIRE

Sympatico was selected for PASIC 2020, but when the ongoing pandemic resulted in the necessity for a virtual convention, PAS graciously extended the invitation to 2021. With the gift of a year to plan, Sympatico capitalized upon the opportunity to pursue the creation of two new works via commission. Over multiple conversations many composers were considered, but two names were at the top of the group’s collective list: Mark Duggan and Russell Hartenberger. Through the generous support of the Ohio-based organization Johnstone Fund for New Music, both composers willingly agreed to compose new pieces specifically for Sympatico for their 2021–22 season.

The first of these works, “Zephyr” by

Russell Hartenberger, is a brilliantly constructed piece that explores a rich rhythmic landscape inspired by the music of West Africa. Hartenberger is well known as a founding member of both Nexus and Steve Reich and Musicians, and his compositions encompass an acute appreciation, sensibility and understanding of polyrhythmic activity. SPG member Joe Krygier shares, “Performing world music commands an honest level of respect and responsible treatment of culture and tradition; Russell’s writing delicately weaves both non-western traditions with those commonly associated with European art music, and the result is music that allows for both performer and audience appeal.”

About his new work, Hartenberger writes: “Sympatico’s approach to percussion playing is similar to that of my group, Nexus, so when I was asked to write a piece for them, I knew they would approach the music with the same awareness of sound and touch. Sympatico also is interested in exploring rhythmic ideas from non-Western music genres, so ‘Zephyr’ features melo-rhythms I created from two West African sources. One is the ubiquitous bell pattern used in much Ewe dance music. The other melo-rhythms are from a Dagomba dance called Damba as taught to me by Fante master drummer Abraham Adzenyah. I also include a reference to Steve Reich’s ‘Music for 18 Musicians.’ The fluctuating time flow in ‘Zephyr’ might be construed as shifting wind patterns.”

The second commission on the program, “time has no place here,” was com-

posed by Toronto-based composer and percussionist Mark Duggan. His compositions demonstrate a distinctive, engaging musical language, and its blend of classical and world percussion ideas is the perfect fit for the breadth of experience within SPG. As member Chris Norton describes, "Overall, Mark's works embody extraordinary structure with both diversity and unity such that a profound statement is made across the form of the entire composition." Duggan's mastery of percussion orchestration, attention to fine details of texture and timbre, and the manner in which he provides both stimulating technical and musical challenges for the ensemble results in music that offers layers upon layers of musical discoveries.

Duggan writes: "When Sympatico Percussion Group and I first discussed a new work for them, the members also referenced an earlier composition of mine from 1990, 'Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea,' which has been a staple of their repertoire for many years. Thinking about the origins of that work led me to consider the different ways I have experienced musical inspiration from year to year and decade to decade. In looking back even further, I recalled the

music which excited and intrigued me as an adolescent — progressive rock music of the 1960s and '70s with its raw energy, longer-form compositions, episodic structures, and use of multiple and complex time signatures. Thematically and conceptually, music in this genre often reflects an alternate perspective of temporal experience. With these influences, I began to construct a piece for Sympatico that attempts to exploit musical time as a way to convey a deeper layer of existential timelessness."

Rounding out Sympatico's PASIC program will be new works by Joseph Krygier, Christopher Norton, and Susan Powell. Krygier's piece, "Monkey Mind," is, in the words of SPG member Johnny Mendoza, "A fresh soundscape created by a labyrinth of complex rhythms and sonorities, both harmoniously unique and incredibly captivating!" Krygier has created a new aural environment through transforming a marimba into a "hybrid" instrument, one that incorporates small percussion instruments including jam blocks, tamborim, guiro, and castanets. Krygier shares, "In 'Monkey Mind,' the marimba becomes a vehicle for integrating multiple percussion into the keyboard layout itself, and I in effect

'prepare' the instrument with individual glockenspiel and crotales notes, as well as various sized rattles." Krygier's infusion of world music styles, including various hand percussion instruments and a pseudo-drum set, results in a palette of unexpected and engaging sound combinations.

Christopher Norton's contribution to the program is a buoyant jazz-inspired work titled "Caffeine Solution." "It's a privilege and delight to perform at PASIC with Sympatico," Norton said, "and I'm so pleased that we're doing an entire program of commissioned premieres; when I attend PASIC, one of my chief goals is discovering new repertoire. I was honored when my colleagues asked me to write something for the occasion, and I recall one member saying, 'How about a keyboard-centric work in the language of your solo marimba pieces like "November Evening" and "Forsythian Spring"?' That became the genesis of 'Caffeine Solution.'"

Book-ending the program will be two works by Susan Powell: first, an energetic, fast-paced work titled "Mako," and to conclude the program, an original piece composed in the style of novelty ragtime. "Mako" is named for the mako shark and is, in Powell's words, "intended to evoke the imagery of the incredibly quick, sleek, hydrodynamic nature of this oceanic apex predator." SPG member Scott Herring describes the piece this way: "The fast rhythmic figures combined with angular, passing accents yield an off-kilter, driving rhythmic landscape." Orchestrated for a mixture of drums and woods from multiple cultures, "Mako" conjures elements of tribal drumming, encapsulating both energetic forward momentum and a powerfully relentless primal drive. [PN](#)



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Friday, Noon