

## Syndicate for the New Arts: Rehearsing for the Rust Belt Tour

by Mike Telin



Summer is a time when many new music ensembles focus on the creation of new works. Some go off to out-of-the-way places such as Banff, Aspen, and even Columbia, Missouri to spend time putting the final touches on new compositions and projects.

Here in Cleveland, [The Syndicate for The New Arts](#) have been spending the past week at Historic St. John's

Episcopal Church in Ohio City learning six new pieces that were written especially for the Ensemble's upcoming seven-city [Rust Belt Tour](#). The Cleveland concert will be held on Sunday, July 16 at 7:00 pm in Historic St. John's.

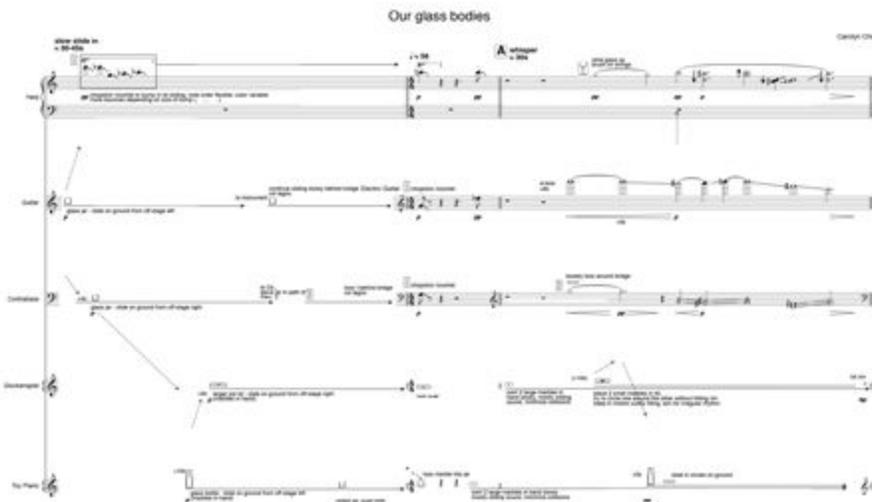
Great Lakes Coffee Fair Trade Organic Brazil  
for The Syndicate of the New Arts Christian M. James

When I arrived at the church on Saturday morning July 8, five Syndicate members were breaking down each measure of a section of Christian James' *Great Lakes Coffee Fair Trade Organic Brazil* — first clapping the rhythms, then singing the music, and finally playing it on their instruments while the composer offered suggestions and made minor corrections in the score.

“We’ve talked about doing a summer residency for a while,” Syndicate executive director and guitarist Joshua Rosner said during a rehearsal break. “The good part about us being in Cleveland is that we have space at St. John’s so it was just a matter of getting everybody in the same place for

an extended period.” Rosner noted that because of Cleveland’s central location, half of the composers were able to attend rehearsals. The Ensemble is also communicating with the other composers via Skype and by sending rehearsal sound files.

The tour repertoire will include music by Carolyn Chen, Jonah Haven, Christian James, Anthony Vine, Bethany Younge, and Carrie Zinn, all of whom answered the Syndicate’s first-ever [Call for Scores](#). A total of 55 applications from composers around the world were received.



When asked about the selection process, harpist Caitlin Mehtens shied away from calling it competitive. “A lot of our decisions were based on the application, which we tried to make a little different by asking people to tell us about themselves. Through that process we got to know the composers as well as

their music. It was interesting to learn about 55 people through their applications.”

Not surprisingly, the applicants chose to express who they are in a variety of ways. “People submitted some terrible jokes,” Rosner said. “One even sent a YouTube video of a shrimp running on a treadmill. But in the end it came down to whose music do we love and who do we want to have a beer with.”

The six selected works represent a number of compositional forms “Carolyn Chen’s *Our glass bodies*, is full of choreography,” percussionist Ben Rempel noted. “I feel like her piece is as much about the actions we’re doing as it is about the playing. But writing the moves out in the score the way that she does helps us coordinate everything.”

PERFORMANCE HINTS

ACCENTUATION  
 ♯ = SHORTER UPBOW ↓ = LONGER PULL ↓ = B.L. PULL (1<sup>st</sup> PULL)  
 ♯ ↓ (DOWN BOW) BEND SLIGHTLY DOWNWARD OR DOWNWARD

TONE  
 \*REARWARDS MOVEMENTS ARE PRECISE, BUT DOWNBOW AND CONTROLLING UP BOWING SHOULD NOT BE EXTREME (EX. A 2<sup>ND</sup> BOWING COULD BE 1<sup>ST</sup> AT 2<sup>ND</sup>, NOT UP 150° or 30°)

TEMPO  
 PLAY PANELS 1 - 6 CONSECUTIVELY IN NUMERICAL ORDER, WITH IN THE MATHS CHART AS NECESSARY WHEN NECESSARY

PHASES  
 IMPORTANT: WHEN TRANSITIONING FROM ONE BOW TO THE NEXT, ALWAYS LET THE NEXT BOW FROM THE PREVIOUS BAR ENTER THE OVERSWEET REAR, SO THE TRANSITION FROM ONE BOW TO THE NEXT IS ALWAYS SMOOTH AND EASY; NEVER ABRUPT!

NOTATION  
 EX. =   
 PLAY THE FOLLOWING PAGES IN ANY ORDER, DEPENDING ON DURATION AND DYNAMICS. KEEP REHEARSING UNTIL THE BOW/STRETCH POINTS

EX. →   
 PLAY THE PREVIOUS BOW AND ONE PAST THE DYNAMICAL CONTRAST POINTS

PERCUSSION 1  
 - MALLUCA  
 - DRUM CHINA OR CROCK  
 - TUBA

PERCUSSION 2  
 - CHORPLES  
 - (4 PLY TUBA) OR (MALLUCA)  
 - DRUM  
 - BASS

ENSEMBLE COVER  
 \*SEE VIDEO FOR INTERLUDES ON BLOWING AND TECHNIQUE  
 \*DELAY PULL + VALVE PEDAL  
 \*DIVERSE BASS → DRUM → PASTORAL/HARMONIC  
 - G HARMONICA → TUBA

Rempel said that Anthony Vine's *North* is a mixture of through-composed and indeterminate music. "He calls it improvisation because we are choosing which notes to play." But Rosner jumped in saying that it's more interactive than improvisatory, while Mehrtens said there are lots of fine lines between the definitions of the musical styles

*my heart my mother my heart my coming into being  
may there be nothing to resist me at my judgement*  
- *The Book of the Dead*

- In the recording, the text is repeated three times. There are large gaps of silence interspersed within each word or several words. In the third repetition, only the words "my heart my," "being," "be," and "at my judgement" sound.

The harpist must trigger the recorded text via a foot pedal. When the recording begins (where there is silence), the harpist must immediately begin playing.

The entrance of the words are notated within quotes above the measures. The score will specify when the harpist should play during the entrance of the word(s), in time with the word(s), or come to be silent with the entrance of a word(s).

Tempos and timings are completely to the taste of the musicians. It is absolutely essential, however, that the musicians are sensitive and attentive to one another as well as their relationship to the text.

SYMBOLS (sharp):

repeat gesture as fast as possible.

hands do not need to be in use, but the hands may move in similar or contrary directions.

hch. - high/low/both

the letters located below the grand staff of the harp indicate pedal changes; notes with a small star above or below affect the pitch of the sounding gesture, this is only indicated within the first page, since the pedal is integrated into the musical sound.

→ name/vibrate strings

→ repeat note as fast as possible

→ use tails    → no longer use tails

→ ticks

→ inverted glossolali - letters at the bottom of strings (p. 11), for some sounds

→ pedal bass

→ fast, upward arpeggio

Bethany Young's *My Heart My* includes a pre-recorded poem from *The Book of the Dead* and requires the players to react to the text, while Christian James' *Great Lakes Coffee Fair Trade Organic Brazil* is through-composed and fully notated, as is Carrie Zinn's *The Sacred Ossivores March Across a Distant Prismatic Hillside*.

"Jonah Haven's *Zafe* is for percussion duo, and we're playing on threaded pipes with washers," Rempel said. "The challenge is that the rhythms are tricky and if we were only playing with sticks it would be easy. Because we're coordinating the dragging of a washer over the pipe instead of just hitting it, we need to figure out how to get a dynamic shape."

In addition to Rosner, Mehrtens, and Rempel, our rehearsal break conversation also included bassist Noelle Marty. Percussionist Justin Gunter will also be joining them on the tour. In addition to Cleveland, the Ensemble will perform in Columbus, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, Kalamazoo, and Buffalo.

"Putting the tour together ourselves was a good learning experience," Rosner said. "Josh has a little experience in this, but Ben, Justin and I had a lot to learn about the process of managing a tour," Mehrtens said. I've never done anything like this before and there are so many details involved in the planning."

At each concert the Ensemble will also share the stage with local musicians. "There is a huge network of people in the Rustbelt who are interested in new music," Rosner said. "It's nice to know how many people there are in this region of the country that are doing interesting things. It will be exciting to hit the road and explore brand-new territory."

The Sacred Ossivores March  
Across a Distant Prismatic Hillside  
Carrie Zinn  
May 2017

♩ = 60

Drum

Cb

Hp

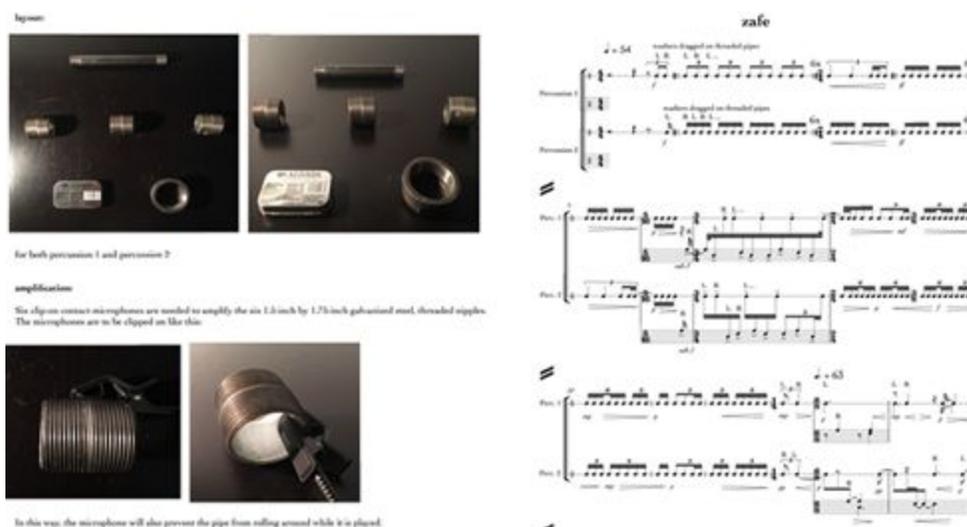
(Ds, Cs, Bs, Es, Fs, Gs, As)

arco

Ds, Cs

Wrapping up our conversation, I asked the group about their rehearsal techniques. They all agreed that these were things they learned while earning their degrees at Oberlin. “It’s combining the skills that you get from being part of the Contemporary Music Ensemble, and playing in chamber groups,” Marty said.

They also agreed that being part of Oberlin’s Performance & Improvisation (PI) program also taught them how to rehearse complicated rhythmic passages. “We owe a lot to Jamey Haddad,” Mehrstens said. “He was the one who helped us figure out how to dance sextuplets *and* do it together.”



Rempel added that the good thing about the extended tour rehearsals is that they have the time to break down the music. “We can go measure by measure, clapping rhythms and singing lines. Sometimes people are opposed to doing that in rehearsal — but I’m happy we are taking the time to rehearse this way.”

Composer Christian James, who also studied at Oberlin, said that he admires the Syndicate’s commitment to his music. “I’m thankful that I’ve had the opportunity to come down here and have the luxury to work with such great players.”

The following day I contacted James and asked him to share his thoughts about the challenge of composing for the somewhat unusual instrumentation.

“When I sat down to write for the group, I admit that I was enchanted by the possibilities for blend and contrast offered by their instruments,” James said by email. “The harp, guitar, and double bass function spectacularly as a chorus of plucked strings, yet each contains a distinct character of its own. In combination with the diversity of instrument

sounds producible by two percussionists, the possibilities for composition are seemingly endless,” he said.



This is not the first time he has written for an unusual combination of instruments. He has composed a work for baroque oboe, harmonium, tabla, percussion, and eight singers, as well as music for three guitars, log drum, and a collection of microtonally-tuned glass milk jugs.

But when it came to writing this piece, James said he wanted it to be more than a succession of beautiful sounds. “Composing music outside of canonical performance practice demands an interpersonal approach. Thinking back, my most successful compositions result when I compose with the skills and experiences of particular musicians in mind.”

James said he considered it a great privilege to collaborate directly with these performers. “Composing for musicians whom I know and respect has yielded not only music for interesting combinations of instruments, but also expressions of nuanced states, attitudes, and experiences that are incommunicable by other means.”

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