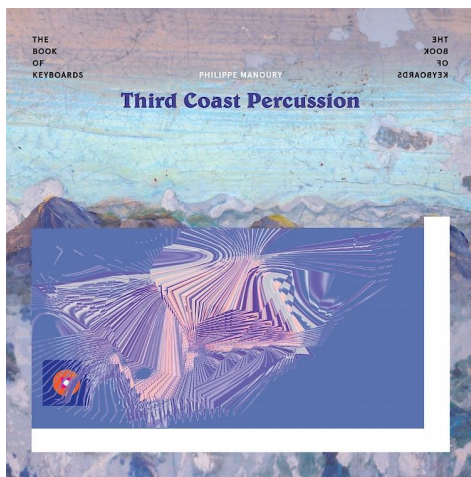


CD Review —
**Third Coast Percussion in
*The Book of Keyboards***

by Jarrett Hoffman



With their latest album, *The Book of Keyboards*, Chicago-based Third Coast Percussion drops you into another world. The inhabitants: six bafflingly good players, one revelatory composer in Philippe Manoury, a family of four tuned percussion instruments, and you — and after hearing this music there’s no going back.

In *Le Livre des Claviers*, which lends the recording its English title, Manoury stretches the definition of “keyboards” to include six low-pitched Thai gongs in the opening movement, along with marimbas. No

time for introductions — the message from the two mallet instruments is all steady urgency. At the end the gongs spill out their deep, murky resonance, a portal to step inside.

The composer alternates between short movements and long. The meatier “Marimba Duo” shows off his flexibility, from order to chaos and back in a flash. Influenced by Boulez, his vocabulary is complex and intense but feels instinctual rather than intellectual. It takes a *whole* lot of skill and musicality to pull off that balance, as Robert Dillon and David Skidmore do with zest, precision, and seeming ease.

A mysterious instrument makes its appearance next. Iannis Xenakis dreamed up ‘Sixxen’ for his sextet *Pleiades*, specifying sonic parameters but leaving no specific designs for the instrument, according to Third Coast’s liner notes. The group built theirs from scratch using different lengths of aluminum U-channel, an industrial construction material, and the result is delightfully clangy.

If the stellar compositions and performances weren't enough, it's fun just to hear the different colors of the keyboard family. Peter Martin takes things a step further in the solo vibraphone movement, drawing pillowy, radiant, and stubbed sounds from his single instrument. The performance is impressively varied, but Manoury's material here lacks some of its usual surprise, losing steam over the seven minutes. Making up for it is a special ending: Martin stacks a long arpeggio, then gradually dampens the lower notes until the one up top rings alone.

Thai gongs carve out their own space for a real dialogue with marimbas in a reprise of that combination. Gongs take the lead in the middle section, where Manoury's background in electroacoustic music comes through. The ensemble calls moments like these his "unimaginable sound worlds" — some underbelly of the earth you didn't know existed. Instead of opting for this powerful conclusion, the composer adds another movement of Sixxen.

Arriving on the heels of that finale, Manoury's meditative, 22-minute *Métal* for Sixxen is best heard after taking a quick breather for the ears. Here composer and musicians explore these aluminum creatures more deeply, including their microtonal elements. Each instrument is purposefully tuned slightly off from the others, creating a wonderfully warbled din when they all ring together on the "same" note.

Third Coast's kaleidoscope of articulations continues to impress. Here the performers summon venom for their most violent hits, dampen the instruments to make them croak, and somehow create the impression of chimes in the wind, grazing naturally and without purpose. Of course, the visual impact of these percussive gestures is missing on CD, but for that we'll just have to wait until [February](#), when the Grammy-winning ensemble comes to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Third Coast Percussion's The Book of Keyboards can be streamed on the group's [YouTube Channel](#) or through [Spotify](#), and is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).

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