

Mantra Percussion to bring *Timber* to Transformer Station

by Jarrett Hoffman



How do you describe the experience of hearing Michael Gordon's *Timber*, the hour-long percussion sextet played on amplified slabs of wood? One word might be 'transcendental.'

"Most times that we play this piece," said Michael McCurdy, co-founder and artistic director of Mantra Percussion, "more than one person from the audience comes up

afterwards and says, 'It seemed like 20 or 30 minutes — I can't believe that was an hour.' People transcend their sense of time and place as they're experiencing it."

Mantra Percussion — who co-commissioned *Timber* and delivered its U.S. premiere in 2011 — will bring the piece to Transformer Station this Friday, February 23 at 7:30 pm, as part of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series. Click [here](#) to watch the ensemble perform the piece.

"We've performed it all over the world, from South Korea to Ireland, Poland, Canada, and the United States," McCurdy said. "I've actually lost count of the number of times we've played it — I think we stopped keeping track at around 70 — but it's still a piece that surprises, it's still a journey. From the very first note it's like, 'Here we go.' We're on a bit of a ride."

One of the challenges of *Timber* is for the ensemble to line up complicated *polyrhythms*. "You're playing two different divisions of time at once between two hands, and each hand of each player is either doing a crescendo or decrescendo," McCurdy said. "And many times you're actually playing these polyrhythms on a higher level of a beat — playing polyrhythms on top of a polyrhythmic pulse. It's pretty intense to figure out and

execute as a sextet while still making the music — making something really beautiful and engaging out of something that doesn't seem like it *should* be.”

And about those instruments? They're known as *simantras* (also *semantrons*) — mounted or suspended 2x4s struck with a mallet, originating in Eastern Orthodox liturgical services. The instruments were introduced to classical music by composer Iannis Xenakis.

“They actually predate the use of bells in church,” McCurdy said. “In Orthodox liturgy, the monks intone these instruments at certain points during service. Some monks are pretty virtuosic on these pieces of wood — on [YouTube](#) you can see some of them with pretty sophisticated skills.”

But the instrument wasn't on Michael Gordon's radar at first. In his program notes, Gordon describes the concept of the piece, and how he came upon the simantra:

I had written many orchestral works over the decade...and I wanted to clear my mind of pitches and orchestration. For that reason, I decided early on that Timber would be for non-tuned percussion and that each percussionist would play one instrument only. I thought of composing this music as being like taking a trip out into the desert. I was counting on the stark palette and the challenge of survival to clear my brain and bring on visions.

I imagined that the six instruments would go from high to low, and that, through a shifting of dynamics from one instrument to the next, the group could make seamless and unified descending or ascending patterns. After working on rhythmic sketches with Mantra Percussion in early 2009, I went to Amsterdam in June to workshop my ideas with [fellow co-commissioner and percussion ensemble] Slagwerk Den Haag. I had the plan but I was searching for the right instruments.

After some experimentation, Slagwerk's Fedor Teunisse brought out a set of wooden simantras. These slabs of wood, which looked like standard building materials from a lumberyard to me, had a gorgeous sound. It was distinct enough so that the clarity of the percussive hits could be heard, and was also extremely resonant, producing a complex field of overtones.

“I think at that point,” McCurdy said, “it became clear that the name of the piece was *Timber* — because it's played on wood, and it's also a play on the word ‘timbre’ in music.”

McCurdy also emphasized the importance of the amplification. “Inside the pieces of wood are complicated vibrations, so we put a microphone onto the wood that picks them up. Then we use a mixing board to equalize them. We tune these vibrations and find ones that work with the space — no one space is the same — so it always takes a good bit of time, and part of the process of performing it is the soundcheck. These days a lot of places we go have very sophisticated software that analyzes sound. We can dial into, filter out, or raise and lower specific frequencies — try to find these sweet spots in the hall.

“When all of the vibrations come together as we’re playing, you get this unique sound in the space that almost creates a second piece of music. So a whole other layer of this piece is this angelic chorus of harmonics. A lot of people ask, ‘Where is the singing coming from?’ or ‘What are you processing all of this through?’ We don’t use anything besides amplification, and everything that people hear is coming from the wood itself.”

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