

**Fresh Perspectives to present
Ohio premiere of *Contralto***

by Mike Telin



What is a percussionist? What is a woman? These two questions will be examined on Friday, January 25 at Glo Cleveland, when [Fresh Perspectives](#) presents “I Am,” a celebration of identity through art and music. The evening will feature the music of percussionist/composer [Sarah Hennies](#), including the Ohio premiere of her groundbreaking work

Contralto, for video, strings, and percussion. The work features a cast of transgender women vocalizing over a live musical score.

The program will also include Hennies’ *Everything Else* for four or more performers and *Settle* for vibraphone (two players), performed by Hennies and Justin Gunter. Attendees can enjoy a new generative video installation by Brooklyn-based [Natalie Braginsky](#) and a poetry bar hosted by Cleveland-based poets, offering made-to-order poems you get to take home. Food and drinks are available. Tickets are available at the door on a sliding scale of \$5 to \$15. Doors open at 6:30 pm — 2460 Lakeside Avenue, Cleveland.

On her website, Hennies writes that [Contralto](#) — “defined in musical terms as ‘the lowest female singing voice’ — uses the sound of trans women’s voices to explore transfeminine identity from the inside and examines the intimate and peculiar relationship between gender and sound.” Click [here](#) to view a four-minute trailer.

Prior to its November 2017 premiere at Issue Project Room in New York, Hennies told Steve Smith from National Sawdust that “I was thinking about this idea of ‘what is a percussionist?’ The simplest definition is, a percussionist is a musician who hits things. Well, what about when you bow something? There’s all these things that percussionists do that fall outside of ‘one who hits things’... So I started thinking about this idea of ‘what is a percussionist?’ and that it very much ties into this idea of, well, what is a woman?” Click [here](#) to read a complete interview transcription.



Since its premiere, *Contralto* has been performed and screened at venues and festivals including Bent Frequency (Atlanta), La Sobilla (Verona), Monday Evening Concerts (Los Angeles), MOCA Tucson, Time-Based Art (Portland, OR), and the Toronto International Film Festival’s Bell Lightbox Theatre. I spoke with Sarah Hennies by telephone and began by asking her how audiences have reacted to *Contralto*.

Sarah Hennies: I think it has been overwhelmingly positive. I have heard reports of people not liking it, but generally those complaints tend to be along the line of ‘how come there’s no melody?’ The feedback I’ve received is that people think it is a powerful work — a common comment is that ‘it gave me a lot to think about.’

This was not exactly my intent, in that I don’t plan for audience reactions at all, but I was trying to insert a lot of layers of meaning and activity into the piece so that it wasn’t exactly clear that it was “about” any one thing.

Mike Telin: We'll get back to Contralto, but before we do, can you tell me about your other two pieces on the program?

SH: *Everything Else* was made specifically as a practice for *Contralto*. This is where I had been thinking a lot about the meaning of the word 'percussion' — how it's not clear what that word means when you view it through the lens of what percussionists are asked to do in contemporary classical music. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was no definition for percussionists in the same way that if you're a cellist, you can say 'I play the cello.'

For example, my friend Greg Stuart, who has done a lot of thinking and writing on this topic, years ago started playing music that almost exclusively involved bowing and dropping things. He said to me one day that he hadn't struck an instrument with a mallet in months, yet he was still a percussionist.

So, the title *Everything Else* kind of refers to this definition — percussion is everything that isn't already something else. Cellists are not percussionists, but bell-ringers, marimba players, and drum set players can all be called percussionists.

I feel like percussion is more of a spectrum, and I am making a connection between that and the sense that there is no concise definition of the word queer — it too is a spectrum in which you don't have to assign yourself any specific identity. And I think that is what is interesting about being a percussionist.

Everyone plays from the same score. And the idea of having a variable number of players means that the larger the space, the more performers the piece can accommodate. It's certainly not ambient music, but it is one of these things where you can pay attention to it or not pay attention to it.

MT: And Settle?

SH: I was about to say that it is an older piece, but it is only from 2010 and the recording was released in 2012. I had made a piece with solo percussion instruments where I was repeating one sound and gradually changing the way the sound was placed. And *Settle* was an outgrowth of that very rudimentary music. When I started using the vibraphone in this way, I realized that it had some sonic potential that I wasn't expecting.

For the past ten years, the work has become almost like a business card — when someone asks me what I do, I just play this piece.



MT: Back to Contralto, I decided to watch the trailer before I began reading about the piece and I got it right away. It made me want to know more.

SH: I was hoping it would do that — if you need to make a commercial for something, that is what you want.

MT: How have the women you featured in the video reacted to it?

SH: Five of these people live in Ithaca, where I live, and most of them are my friends. When I was making it, two of them lived in Baltimore and I have not heard from them, but I know that everyone else is positive about it.

My friend Anna, who is in it, said that she found it difficult to watch at first, but as she kept watching it she realized that it was a good thing. It is weird to put your friends in a movie and show it to other people, but as far as I know, everyone feels good about it.

MT: How have your thoughts changed?

SH: I feel about the same. I filmed everyone one at a time, and I didn't edit any of the film until I was finished. I just got the chills thinking about this — I know it sounds cheesy — but there was a moment early on when I started editing and I thought to

myself that this is something of importance. But it's definitely wearing me out to live with this piece.

A friend and fellow percussionist asked if it was hard for me to get up and talk about this all of the time, and yes it is, but I feel like what I get in return makes up for that. I am amazed and grateful for the response and the amount of interest in the piece. I did not expect this many requests to perform the work all over the world. It's been very rewarding but mentally exhausting.

MT: I'm sure that it is, but you have a wonderful way of bringing people into the subject.

SH: Thank you, and that was the goal from the beginning — to find a way to bring people in that was not putting emotional labor on trans people. Even before I knew what the piece was going to be, I knew I wanted to make something that was accessible to trans people in a way that it is not to other people. I'm not trying to educate people, but if there is a way that I can make a work of art that I like, and that does that, then that's really great to me.

Maybe this film is educational. I really don't know — I'm not sure what a cisgender person who doesn't know me might think of this film. But at the very least it is transwomen in an empathetic place, which is not something that is in the narrative of the media.

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