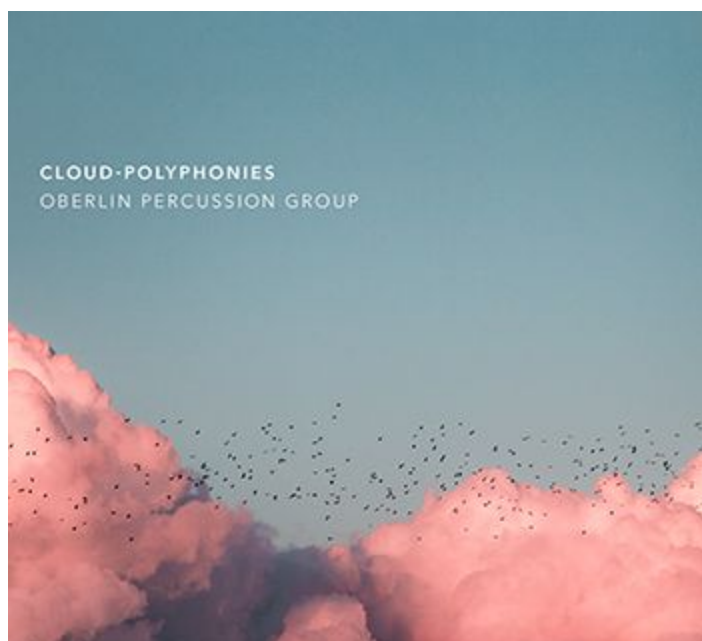


**CD Review—**  
***Cloud-Polyphonies***  
**Oberlin Percussion Group**

by Mike Telin



With the vast number of instruments at its disposal — guaranteeing a nearly limitless sound palette — the percussion ensemble might be the most musically versatile of all chamber music groups.

Although percussion music has existed since the beginning of time, it was the premiere of Edgar Varèse's *Ionisation* in 1933 that thrust the percussion ensemble into contemporary classical music. Since then, it is music for percussion sextet that has yielded some of the most memorable classics: John Cage's *First Construction in Metal*,

Carlos Chávez's *Tambuco*, and Iannis Xenakis' *Persephassa* and *Pléïades* (both of the Xenakis works were written for the venerable sextet Les Percussions de Strasbourg).

Joining that esteemed group of pieces is James Wood's *Cloud-Polyphonies*. Premiered on November 4, 2011 by the Oberlin Percussion Group — Edward Atkinson, Ben Bacon, Sean Dowgray, Isaac Fernandez Hernandez, Jake Harkins, and Neil Ruby under the direction of Michael Rosen — the work was recorded one week later in Clonick Hall. That recording has now been released on the Oberlin Music label.

The sextet was commissioned by Rosen on behalf of Oberlin Conservatory in 2009 when he and Wood were serving on the jury of the Geneva Competition. In addition to Oberlin, the project included more than a dozen co-commissioners including the Yale School of Music and the New England Conservatory.

Utilizing over 150 different instruments (click [here](#) for player instructions and composer notes), *Cloud-Polyphonies* immediately encapsulates nature with “Starlings.” Featuring marimbas and woodblocks, Wood’s music depicts the agile small birds as they gather and disperse, and Rosen and his players magically capture their nimble flights of fancy.

The second movement, “Clouds,” recalls the composer’s experience of taking a hot air balloon ride over the English countryside. In his notes, Wood says that the pilot explained that active clouds (cumulus, or cumulus congestus) build and become powerful and often dangerous, while passive clouds (cirrus) appear harmless but should be watched, as they could quickly become active. The music transitions seamlessly from one state to another and back again using an array of metal instruments along with prepared and bowed piano. Here Rosen’s astute pacing holds the listener’s attention throughout the movement’s 18-minute duration.

A total of 66 drums are needed for the concluding “Buffalo.” Again, the music captures nature as pounding hooves make their way across the North American plains. The Oberlin Percussion Group vividly brings the large animals to life. Chamber music at its best, *Cloud-Polyphonies* is a must-have for any percussion ensemble discography.

The album was produced, edited, mixed, and mastered by Paul Eachus, with audio engineering by Ryan Miller.

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