

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Forty Years of

nexus

By Daniel R. Smithiger



On May 22, 1971, Bill Cahn, Bob Becker, John Wyre, and Robin Engelman performed a concert of entirely improvised music at the Eastman School of Music. It is frequently cited as the first Nexus concert, even though they hadn't established a group or chosen a name. But it marked the formation of a group that would touch and entertain people of all levels of musical learning, in all genres of percussion music.

The current members of Nexus—Bob Becker, Bill Cahn, Russell Hartenberger and Garry Kvistad—are each virtuosos and bring elements of their knowledge and character to a distinct and powerful whole. They stand out in the contemporary music scene for the innovation and diversity of their programs, their impressive history of collaborations and commissions, their revival of 1920s novelty ragtime xylophone music, and their influential improvisatory ideas. Nexus' firm commitment to music education and a steady output of quality CD recordings and compositions by its members continues to enhance the role of percussion in the 21st century.

The group represents innovation, originality and diversity. Nexus continues to explore the world of percussion with elegant performances and teaching. Their music has made dynamic impacts on our culture, and their personalities have enlightened thousands over the years. They have galvanized the percussion ensemble genre since 1971, presenting hundreds of memorable performances, including their first PASIC performance in 1977 (Knoxville, Tennessee) and a performance at the 100th Anniversary of Carnegie Hall.

Forty years is one point on the continuum, and this interview with the members of Nexus is about where they've been, where they are, and where they are going.

In the accomplishments and history of Nexus, what are you most proud of?

Bob Becker: I generally don't view pride as a virtue, but I think Nexus has accomplished some significant things. The group began as an improvising ensemble, using an extremely personal and unusual collection of sound

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—Bill Cahn



sources. The way "repertoire" began to be incorporated into our concerts was also not traditional, since for several years we did not plan our concert routines. Nevertheless, pieces sometimes appeared during the course of an evening's improvisation, and this naturally led to our very eclectic approach to programming, which continues to the present time. This kind of thing was new in the small world of western percussion ensembles during the 1970s and '80s, and it opened conceptual doors for the many groups that have followed us.

Nexus did a great deal of international touring during the 1980s, and I know for a fact that our approach inspired a number of fledgling European percussion groups who have gone on to major international careers. In a way, we parented an approach to presenting percussion performance and repertoire that is still used as a paradigm around the world.

Bill Cahn: Rather than use the word "proud" to describe how I feel about my forty years of involvement with Nexus, I would prefer to say "lucky" or "grateful," because there were plenty of important factors beyond our control that played a part in determining the path that Nexus followed. For example, the fact that we each had other sources of income in the formative years of Nexus made it possible for us to make decisions based purely on musical interests rather than on financial or marketing concerns. The fact that we shared a desire to make our own music, and that in addition, we all shared a classical music aesthetic, was

completely fortuitous. But most important was that we were all interested in exploring new outlets for musical expression, and we were all willing to support each other's ideas. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make this happen; it either does or doesn't happen as a result of the personalities, which are already fashioned out of individual experiences.

When Nexus formed in 1971, the "percussion ensemble" as a musical vehicle was still incubating in music schools and was not clearly defined. On the one hand, there were the John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Edgar Varèse experiments from the 1920s, '30s and '40s in the art music world, which in the late 1960s were largely unrecognized in academe, and on the other hand there were the novelty "hi-fi percussion pops" recordings of Dick Schory, Harry Breuer, and others. There was plenty of room for new ideas to blossom, and the cultural atmosphere in North America, and particularly in Toronto, in the early 1970s was one of openness to new ideas and willingness—even a desire—of performers and audiences to experiment with new ideas.

Also, the early 1970s witnessed the first signs of a new "globalism"—an accelerating worldwide flow of ideas—through increased access to non-Western percussion instruments and audio recordings due to increasing global trade, and an increased ability to travel due to the new commercial jet airplanes, making it possible for musicians to travel to new markets, and for travelers to hear unfamiliar music performed in home settings.

The marketing term "world music" hadn't even been conceived yet, and it played absolutely no part in a percussionist's education. Nexus was exposed to non-western musical ideas primarily through Bob Becker's and Russell Hartenberger's studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Eventually Nexus played a major role in giving the North American percussion community its first exposure to such ideas, mainly through the Percussive Arts Society's International Conventions, which also came into existence in the 1970s. It was very fortunate that several of the

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members of Nexus were also members of symphony orchestras, which enabled long-standing personal relationships to be formed with many composers and conductors. In addition, the symphony connections provided many opportunities for orchestral works composed by members of Nexus to get performances with major orchestras. Otherwise, the doorways to orchestra performances would have mostly been closed—as in many ways they still are. Nexus was lucky to be a beneficiary of these forces, even though they were largely beyond our control, and I am extremely grateful to have had the friendship and support of Bob, Robin, Russell, John, Garry, and Ray [Dillard] over so many years.

Garry Kvistad: While I have been working with the members of Nexus for nearly thirty years, I joined the group in 2002. The ensemble is a wonderful example of what can be done when people sharing passions get together and establish long-term goals. Everyone in the group is fiercely independent, which, in this case, works to the advantage of the group. And yet there is an acceptable tolerance which has allowed the group to survive for forty years. Nexus has set a high bar, not only for other percussion groups, but chamber music in general. The innovations the group manifest in performances and recordings are significant and range from early direct-to-disc recordings to expanding percussion repertoire from free improvisations to novelty ragtime compositions. Works written by members of Nexus are now important standards in the percussion literature repertoire. Commissions by important composers have had a profound impact on the world of percussion and include works by Steve Reich, Toru Takemitsu, Eric Ewazen, Peter Schickele and Ellen Taffe-Zwillich. For me, reaching as wide an audience as possible has been rewarding in the effort to expose general audiences to the beauty and diversity of percussion through great, great music and soulful performances.

How has your playing “grown” in the past ten to fifteen years?

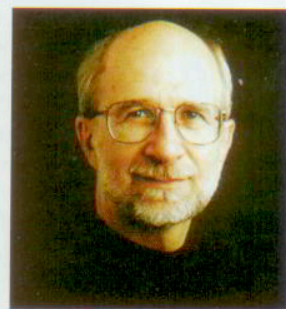
Russell Hartenberger: Performing with the great musicians in Nexus has been a life-long source of inspiration to me. Each member of Nexus is continually exploring new aspects of percussion/music and bringing new ideas to us all. I think this is one of the keys to the longevity of our group.

Cahn: The biggest period of growth occurred early-on in Nexus. First there was the notion of making our own music. This was something that really wasn't taught to us in our schooling; our schooling certainly gave us the basic tools, but it was our challenge to apply

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Each encounter I had with John Cage caused me to reflect on music in a new way.

— Russell Hartenberger



them. Since we all shared a fascination with sound and an interest in non-western percussion instruments, we were motivated to create our own improvised music.

Another early major growth in our approach to making music occurred when Michael Craden (1941–1982) joined Nexus. His unschooled but totally engaging musician-ship enabled us to broaden our own musical conceptions. Performing the drum ensemble music of Ghana also occurred in the early years of Nexus. The growth resulted from relating to composed music aurally, rather than visually. Of course, our improvised music was mainly aural, but it did not require giving attention to structural elements as well.

Approaching music purely aurally was a wonderful addition to our music making in more formal western musical genres—for example, the music of John Cage and of novelty ragtime. Garry Kvistad certainly brought a heightened sense of newness to Nexus when he joined. Growth is still ongoing in our constant effort to embrace each other's ideas. Relationships—musical and otherwise—are strongest between people who value and respect each other's differences, and in Nexus there are and always have been plenty of differences. We have also changed individually, but change is a normal part of growth. We have usually decided to accept such change, rather than view it as a threat.

Kvistad: I am always trying to expand my skills and experience as a musician. Nexus has reinforced my past while opening new opportunities for growth. Each of us brings something unique to the table, and my contribution has been using new instrumental resources. The other members of Nexus have been very encouraging in my exploring these perimeters. I have incorporated a few sculptural instruments made by the Baschet Brothers of France. I have also made some unique instruments myself that Nexus has used.

I hadn't had too much experience playing African-style music until joining the group in 2002, and I have enjoyed the experience of playing pieces that have been in the repertoire for years. My world music experience

has been playing Balinese gamelan music for the past twenty-five years, but it's not easy to incorporate this style into Nexus performances because it requires a large ensemble of exotic instruments and many players and dancers. Playing music with influences from cultures such as Indonesia in compositions commissioned or written by Nexus has been a welcomed challenge.

Where do you see the art form of percussion ensemble heading?

Hartenberger: Percussion ensemble music is incorporating many other influences, just as are other forms of music. The open-minded approach to music that most percussionists have will allow percussion music in general to develop wide-ranging styles and a varied repertoire.

Cahn: The percussion ensemble of today is developing along diverging aesthetic paths. Some examples: 1. Art music—the compositions of Steve Reich, Xenakis, etc. 2. Conservatory music—works created for college percussion ensembles. 3. Theatrical music such as *Stomp* and *Blue Man Group*. 4. Field music—drum corps, “Brass Theater.” 5. Ethnic music—African, Brazilian, Japanese, Korean, etc. 6. Transcriptions/arrangements of widely-known classical and popular music.

One major difference between the values held by Nexus and the values found today in all of the genres above is that Nexus has largely been motivated by a fascination with acoustic sound, whereas the prevailing motivators in today's percussion music are a combination of technical achievement and showmanship. In my view, the fascination with technical accomplishments will continue to grow.

The role of art music in North America has changed. Its function in the Twentieth Century was largely to challenge the existing order through an intellectual and emotional engagement with sound. Today, the challenges and engagement occur through technology—computers, texting, video/audio data files, the Internet. As another form of “technology” I would include new technical achieve-

ments that will engage audiences, critics, and, consequently, composers and performers.

Becker: Several years ago Lindsay Haughton asked me in an interview: "Where do you think music is heading?" I replied, "Prophecy is the surest way to appear foolish in the future. However, I see the human species, and therefore all of its endeavors including the arts, to be approaching a transformative leap in this century. There is a logical and inevitable evolutionary step to take when technology reaches a certain critical level of development, and it is non-Darwinian in the sense that it is not based on mutation and selection, but rather on conscious choices made by the species itself. I can't predict exactly what choices will be made, but I'm certain that human beings will ultimately internalize, or be internalized by, digital technologies, which are currently represented by things like the World Wide Web and personal computers. All of the ways technology is used by people at present involve interfaces—headphones, keyboards, monitors, musical instruments, etc.—and the use of interfaces, no matter how sophisticated, is part of the continuum of ancient history. In the not-too-distant future, music will probably be created and experienced purely in an electronic domain, and will be communicated directly from mind to mind, whether these minds are contained in human brains or in intelligent, and possibly conscious, machines."

Kvistad: It appears that audiences are looking for mixed media where live music and visual performance meet. The success of *Stomp*, *The Lion King*, and *Blast*, for example, has prompted many performers to take this route. There is no doubt that percussion is following the universal path of world culture and that many styles from around the world are influencing each other. Seeing a Balinese composer add western instruments and compositional ideas to gamelan music is in harmony with a western composer incorporating gamelan influences into a composition. I imagine this

will continue to develop as time goes on until there is somewhat of a world music with many different components and not so many distinct styles. Hopefully this standardization won't kill indigenous musics that are so beautiful and unique.

Nexus has performed much music by John Cage. Please talk about his significance to Nexus and percussion in general.

Hartenberger: Each encounter I had with John Cage caused me to reflect on music in a new way. His thoughts and words inevitably made me think about music differently. Cage's early percussion music still provides new ideas and inspiration.

Cahn: Cage's "Third Construction" is one of the great masterpieces of Twentieth Century art music. Nexus has performed it dozens of times, including a half-dozen performances with Cage himself in the audience. It is always totally engaging to perform this work, and it continues to reveal new surprises; these are the signatures of a masterpiece. And yet, when this "masterpiece" case is made to non-percussionist musicians, musicologists, and music historians unfamiliar with the work, the response is raised eyebrows and stares of disbelief. Unfortunately for "Third Construction," it's not an opera or a work for orchestra or string quartet; it's a work for four percussionists, and consequently, it's totally invisible to the cognoscenti in the art music world. But fortunately for percussionists, it is one among only a handful of such important works in the genre. One of the most "constructive" things that percussionists can do is to expose the rest of the world to "Third Construction."

Becker: I think it's interesting that percussionists now, in 2010, can say that Cage's percussion pieces are significant in our history. That was hardly the case in the 1970s. Most of the great American work from the 1930s and '40s was not in the libraries and not on the percussion radar in the 1960s—at least not where we were studying. Even "Ionisation" was consid-

ered a novelty by many of us; we only knew it because it was in the Goldenberg book.

I had found and performed John Cage and Lou Harrison's "Double Music" in 1970, but when I first heard Cage's "Third Construction" in 1976 on a bootleg Blackearth Percussion Group tape recording, I was shocked. Where had something like this been hiding? For that matter, I could have said the same thing about every one of George Hamilton Green's xylophone compositions. In fact, I *did* say that about Green's music, and I spent several years tracking down all of it.

After hearing that Blackearth recording—on which Garry Kvistad was playing, even though I didn't know him at the time—I pushed for Nexus to learn and play the piece. In fact, it took some prodding, but finally it became one of the most performed pieces in our repertoire. It's probably difficult for any university percussion student to imagine a major work like "Third Construction" being virtually unknown thirty-five years after it was written, but that was the atmosphere in most of the classical percussion world at the time.

Kvistad: Cage is one of the preeminent composers of our time who just happened to have the vision to use percussion as a significant voice in his work. His early statement about the future of music and the importance of percussion within that future was prophetic. I had the privilege of working with him a number of times many years ago, and Nexus collaborated with him often before I joined the group. Ironically, the group I started around the same time as Nexus, the Blackearth Percussion Group, began playing the "Third Construction" in the early 1970s, and Nexus members were inspired to add it to their concerts as a result of hearing a tape of one of our performances.

One of the beautiful aspects of percussion is that different performers can interpret the same work in much different ways than, say, different string quartets would within their standard repertoire. This is mainly due to the openness of instrumentation. The "Third Construction" can sound very different depending on instrument choices, and the choices made by Blackearth and Nexus were quite contrasting.

Blackearth also performed Cage's "Amores" in the 1970s often, thanks to the wonderful ability of Allen Otte to play the prepared piano part. Since joining Nexus, I have been enamored by Cage's "Credo in US," "Dance Music for Elfride Ide," and "Chess Pieces," which are all in the current Nexus repertoire. Cage opened not only the ears of audiences to the sounds around us, but he even stretched the awareness of professionals who thought they had "heard it all."

STOMP Percussion ensemble concertos, particularly for a quintet, can quickly become logistical and acoustic nightmares because of the proliferation of instruments.

—Bob Becker



"Eternal Dance of Life" (2008) by Eric Ewazen was premiered at PASIC 2008 by Nexus and the Meadows Wind Ensemble. It is an amazing piece, with an amazing landscape of sounds, colors, combined with virtuosity. The premiere performance was outstanding. Can each of you comment on your particular contribution, experience of preparing, and performance of the piece?

Kvistad: We always try to work with composers while they are writing pieces for the group to discuss instruments and techniques. Percussion is a very complicated group of instruments with many styles and techniques associated with them. It's impossible for any composer to know everything, and it's important to collaborate during the process. Eric Ewazen is a special breed of composer who looks to expand the horizon and is open to new instruments and ideas. In my case, Eric wrote for one of the Baschet musical sculptures he heard me play in an improvisation with Nexus. While some composers would be worried that this would limit performances, Eric was more concerned with the special timbre that this instrument brought to the mix. While a bowed vibraphone would be a suitable substitute for those performers not in the possession of a Baschet "Cristal," Eric wanted the magical sound of this rare instrument. I adapted the Cristal by tuning it to the scale requirement of Eric's piece.

Becker: I was the Nexus liaison to get a work from Eric, and our initial agreement was for a concerto for percussion and wind ensemble, with the idea that the solo percussion parts would not include keyboards, chimes, or timpani. The plan was for any of those instruments to be given to the band's percussion section in the back, so that Nexus could make a tight ensemble in front of the conductor

using relatively compact and economical setups. Percussion ensemble concertos, particularly for a quintet, can quickly become logistical and acoustic nightmares because of the proliferation of instruments. Performers spread out across the entire stage may not hear each other well, and because the audience can't see the band or orchestra, the "soloists" may even be placed behind the accompanying ensemble to avoid huge delays in setting up and breaking down the equipment. I wanted to avoid all of that with this piece. I failed!

It's very difficult to reign in the creative force of a good composer. Eric is brilliant at writing for wind instruments and also percussion instruments. He just couldn't help himself.

Hartenberger: Eric visited our rehearsal space and got to know us a bit prior to writing the work. During the preparation of the piece we all made suggestions about changes that we thought would make the composition work better for us. Eric was very receptive to our suggestions and incorporated most of them into the final version of the work.

Cahn: "The Eternal Dance of Life" is a beautiful piece and a great addition to the repertoire for percussion quintet and wind ensemble. Ewazen has also provided Nexus with a version of two of the movements for percussion quintet alone, without wind ensemble accompaniment. The music reflects Ewazen's preference for a tonal musical vocabulary, making his music very accessible to general audiences. Nexus consulted regularly with Mr. Ewazen about instrumentation and performance details during the composing process. It was mutually agreed that the work would be playable by most college-level percussion sections, thereby making more potential

performances possible. The piece has a wonderful sense of reverence that the composer intentionally did not want to tarnish by having passages in the piece solely for the purpose of irrelevant technical displays. I would encourage anyone considering programming the work with their college wind ensemble to do so.

What would you want future percussionists to gain from your experiences in that collaboration?

Becker: Be ready for anything, always try to make the music sound even better than the composer wrote, and have a good road manager.

Cahn: I would hope that percussionists—and all musicians, all listeners—would try to be open to all forms of musical expression, not just "loud and fast," and be curious to understand the sources of musical beauty contained therein.

Hartenberger: We often discuss the instrument situation with composers before they write pieces for us. There are certain instruments with which we normally travel, instruments that make touring expensive because of their size, and, in some cases, instrument preferences for individual members. In certain cases, composers write for specific instruments we have. Practicality is a major issue for any kind of percussion composition.

Kvistad: Performers working closely with the composer is a critical component to the success of a work. No matter how knowledgeable a composer is about percussion, a percussionist has a unique perspective of the potential of instruments and techniques. While percussion is perhaps the oldest group of instruments on the planet, it is still evolving. The collaboration between performer and composer is key to this process.

What goals do you have for yourself, in terms of "playing," for the future?

Hartenberger: I look forward to making discoveries I have not yet contemplated.

Becker: Not to be glib about this question, but for any performer my age—I'm 62—a primary goal is to not get too much worse every year. It's probably difficult for any mature artist to set grand, long-term kinds of goals. The management of time and energy within a performance career is difficult enough from day to day, let alone over more extended periods, and so the luxury of exploring and developing new concepts and ideas becomes increasingly rare.

The great percussionist Alan Abel once told me about the "career triangle"—the three elements necessary for a financially successful life in music: the symphony job, the college



Photo by Brian Stone

Premiere performance of Eric Ewazen's "Eternal Dance of Life," Nov. 4, 2008, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. Meadows Wind Ensemble, conducted by Jack Delaney

For comments by Nexus members on their influences and for comments from longtime Nexus business manager and producer Ray Dillard visit www.pas.org/publications/july2010webextras.aspx

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teaching position, and the instrument/mallet manufacturing or music-publication association. For most musicians of Mr. Abel's generation, that equation also included a home and family. In my own life, I have tried to maintain a commitment to time for personal reflection, experimentation, and composition. In a practical sense, this requires limiting activities that are creatively draining such as teaching, managing a business, or administrating. The result is available time, but then also constraints on financial security, capital and personal relationships.

As a recent example, I wanted to understand the mathematical principles underlying the organization of patterns that are used for stickings, rhythmic groupings, and polyrhythms. I invested quite a lot of time in study and research over two years. Certain things required technical practice, and I also focused on composing eight etudes incorporating what were, for me, some new concepts. The whole endeavor took on a life of its own, and the outcome was a 200-page book, *Rudimental Arithmetic*. No one asked me to write a book like that, and no one paid me for my time. Nevertheless, the result was both conceptual and technical growth for me, and perhaps a useful, possibly inspiring, source of information for others. It's unlikely I could have completed a project like that while balancing a performing career, teaching position, manufacturing connection, and a traditional family life.

Cahn: For me, the possibility of continuing to perform Takemitsu's "From me flows what you call Time" and Ellen Zwilich's "Rituals" with orchestras is exciting. I also hope we can continue to include free, improvised music in our performances, because I believe that Nexus does this in a profoundly engaging way for audiences. The newly commissioned works by Eric Ewazen ["Eternal Dance of Life"], Steve Reich, and others will also have a place in Nexus' future.

Kvistad: I am very excited about pursuing more commissions for the group and developing new instruments to create new textures. The

members of Nexus have always been keenly aware of sound and especially the "pitches" of so-called "non-pitched" percussion. All instruments have pitches and percussion instruments that are often labeled as "non-pitched"—woodblocks, tam-tams, etc.—are actually multi-pitched. The members of Nexus take this into consideration and choose instruments that work well in a piece or improvisation based in part on the dominant pitches of these types of instruments. I want to continue this practice and add different tuning systems to the mix. Terry Riley, Wendy Carlos, La Monte Young, Lou Harrison, Steve Reich and Harry Partch are all influences for me in this area.

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