

Chapter 4



Diverse Interests

Music is not about proving yourself, it's about finding yourself
and sharing your discovery.¹

John Wyre

The music of Nexus developed in much the same way as the ensemble itself—through exploration, friendship, and a fascination for improvisation and sound. Unlike many chamber ensembles, the members of Nexus adopted an intuitive approach to the group's development, designing no career path nor predetermining its repertoire.² Instead, they continued to explore improvisation on their collection of musical instruments and embraced any opportunities that came their way. As each member brought his own musical interests to the group, an expansive repertoire emerged comprising diverse styles and musical traditions. This repertoire developed over many years and has become a defining characteristic of Nexus. By tracing the development of selected areas of Nexus' repertoire—improvisation, novelty ragtime, world music, rope drumming, and silent film accompaniment—we can gain some insight into how individual members of Nexus became involved in these musical traditions and how they brought them to the attention of the others in the group. Tracing Nexus' transition from improvisation to notated works shows how Nexus integrated its experience of different traditions into its performance of contemporary music. Furthermore, examining selected works by the members of Nexus throws light on how certain aspects of these musical traditions have been integrated into their own compositions.

Before discussing the music of Nexus, though, it is worth taking a brief look at the development of the percussion ensemble in the United States prior to the formation of Nexus—from its origins in the early twentieth century to the emergence of a number of professional ensembles in the 1960s and '70s.

¹ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 58.

² Nexus' approach was markedly different to that of the Blackearth Percussion Group, for instance, which was formed by five percussionists in 1972. Blackearth was formed partly as a reaction to the political and musical climate in the United States at that time, and was comprised of percussionists who were disenchanted with the orchestral scene and were seeking a more egalitarian way of making music. Although the members of Nexus and Blackearth shared similar ideologies, unlike Nexus the members of Blackearth embarked on a rigorous rehearsal schedule from the start. They created a mission statement whereby their primary objective was to raise the performance standards of contemporary percussion music, and disseminate this music to as many people as possible. Blackearth focused on contemporary compositions and performed twenty-five concerts during its first season with a repertoire consisting of eighteen works of which seven were premieres. The group disbanded in 1979, at which time Allen Otte went on to form the Percussion Group Cincinnati, and Richard Kvistad co-founded the San Francisco Percussion Group. Garry Kvistad, who joined Nexus in 2002, was a founding member of Blackearth and remained with the group until 1979. For more information about Blackearth, see Garry Kvistad, 'A non-academic look at the perils and exhilaration of an American percussion group of the 1970s: The Blackearth experience,' *Contemporary Music Review*, 7 (1), 1992, pp. 15-26; and Karl Leopold Reiss, 'The history of the Blackearth Percussion Group and their influence on percussion ensemble literature, performance, and pedagogy,' Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1987. Note that Reiss (p. 29) erroneously states that Nexus formed in 1972 instead of 1971.

Brief history of the percussion ensemble

The Western percussion ensemble evolved during the first half of the twentieth century when composers began actively exploring the variety of sounds offered by percussion instruments. Some composers used percussion instruments to expand the expressive possibilities of orchestral and chamber music, while others were more interested in the exploration of the intrinsic nature of sound itself. This period of exploration eventually paved the way for the use of percussion instruments as an autonomous chamber ensemble.

Although percussion instruments have been used in orchestral works for centuries, it was during the twentieth century that these instruments came to prominence.³ The first few decades saw compositions such as Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* (1913) feature percussion in a way that had not been done so before. Many composers also began including percussion in chamber music settings, and works such as Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* (1918) and Béla Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937) are two prominent examples. In these contexts, percussion instruments were used to extend the ensemble's timbral and rhythmic possibilities.

In contrast to this approach, composers affiliated with the futurist movement were inclined to explore percussion instruments for their noise value. The futurist movement was conceived by poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, and although founded in Italy had widespread ramifications throughout the artistic world. The Italian painter, Luigi Russolo, was part of the movement and strongly advocated the inclusion of noise into musical compositions. His 'futuristic orchestra' included six families of noises, including explosions, hisses, rustlings, and other environmental and man-made sounds.⁴ According to Larry Vanlandingham, by 'suppressing melodic instruments and granting a monopoly to percussion, futurism stressed the significance of rhythm and revealed the possibilities of timbre inherent in percussive devices.'⁵ Due to the radical nature of the music, futurist concerts received widespread publicity, and this brought percussion to the attention of composers and the general public.⁶

In the 1920s and '30s, the remnants of futurism were seen in compositions employing machines, such as aeroplane propellers and other devices. Of importance here are George Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* (1923-25), Sergey Prokofiev's *Le pas d'acier* (1927), and Carlos Chávez's *HP* (1927). Edgar Varèse's *Ionization* (1931), which employs sirens, was one of the first chamber works dedicated solely to percussion. The piece includes thirteen musicians playing thirty-nine instruments, some of which are borrowed from Latin American music. Amadeo Roldán's *Ritmicas V* and *VI* (1930), which incorporate many Cuban percussion instruments, were also among the first compositions written for percussion ensemble.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, musicians in the United States began exploring percussion instruments and musical styles from distant cultures. Particularly influential in this respect were the collective efforts of a group of composers called the Pacific Coast group. A number of its members, including John Cage and Lou Harrison, had attended Henry Cowell's lectures on 'Music of the World's Peoples,' which Cowell began teaching in New York and other parts of the United States in the late 1920s. Cowell had grown up

³ For information about the history of percussion instruments and how they have been used in orchestras over the years, see James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and Their History*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984.

⁴ For a list of the noises in these six categories, see Larry Dean Vanlandingham, 'The percussion ensemble: 1930-1945,' Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1971, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

listening to Appalachian, Tahitian, Chinese, Japanese, and Irish music, and in the early 1930s studied comparative musicology with Erich von Hornbostel in Berlin, as well as gamelan and Carnatic theory.⁷ He was thus well versed in non-Western music, and inspired a generation of composers and musicians to search outside their own culture for inspiration. The Pacific Coast group emerged from Cowell's influence, and it was instrumental in developing the percussion ensemble in the United States. The group was led largely by Cage and Harrison, and included other composers such as Gerald Strang, Johanna Beyer, and Ray Green. These composers shared an interest in percussion and were engaged in writing music for dance.⁸

One influential moment that had long-term ramifications for the development of percussion in the United States occurred in 1936 when Cage was working with filmmaker Oscar Fischinger. During the course of their work, Fischinger made an observation that '[e]verything in the world has its own spirit, and this spirit becomes audible by setting it into vibration.'⁹ Cage later recalled that the comment 'set me on fire. . . . He started me on a path of exploration of the world around me which has never stopped—of hitting and stretching and scraping and rubbing everything. . . . I was not inclined towards spiritualism, . . . but I began to tap everything I saw.'¹⁰

Cage had begun writing for percussion in 1935, and this experience with Fischinger led him to explore percussion further.¹¹ He and the others in the Pacific Coast group assembled an array of percussion instruments and found objects such as brake drums, spring coils, and hubcaps for their compositions.¹² Cage said that choosing instruments from junkyards was as much an issue of poverty as experimentation, as nobody in his household had any money in those days.¹³ In 1938, Cage established what is considered to be the first percussion ensemble in the United States.¹⁴ It was established within the dance community at Cornish School in Seattle. Many of the players were dancers, and along with Cage and Harrison had no percussion technique. Consequently, the works they composed for the ensemble did not contain rolls and rudiments generally associated with drumming.

There were a few major differences in the approach to sound that Cage embraced that had a long-lasting influence on percussion in the United States, and ultimately on Nexus. Whereas the composers working within the orchestral tradition, such as Stravinsky and Bartók, included extensive parts for percussion in their works, the percussion instruments and the way they were used remained largely within the European orchestral tradition. Roldán's introduction of Cuban elements extended the percussion section and gave it more rhythmic vitality, but it did not necessarily free the instruments or the music from the Western musical tradition. Cage was striving for something else, as he explains below:

What I appreciate about Varèse is obviously his freedom in choosing timbre. He, along with Henry Cowell, has very greatly contributed to getting us used to the idea of a

⁷ David Nicholls, 'Henry Cowell,' *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, (Accessed 14 April 2006), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁸ Reiss, 'The history of the Blackearth Percussion Group,' p. 23.

⁹ David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage: A Life*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992, p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* Cage's first percussion ensemble work was *Quartet* (1935) followed by *Trio* (1936).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Barry Michael Williams, 'The early percussion music of John Cage, 1935-1943,' Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1990, p. 1.

limitless tonal universe. . . . Nevertheless, there is still in Varèse a prejudice towards controlling sounds or noises. He tries to bend sounds to his will, to his imagination. And that is what very quickly bothered us. We knew that he wouldn't let sound be entirely free. What we were looking for was in a way more humble: sounds, pure and simple.¹⁵

In this respect, lacking technical expertise in playing percussion gave Cage a certain freedom to let his instruments sound naturally rather than impose the conventions of rolls and rudiments on them. This in turn gave focus to the sounds themselves, rather than the techniques used to produce these sounds. Cage had become sensitive to the vibrations of all objects through his experience with Fischinger, and thus included both found objects and instruments from different cultures in his works.¹⁶ The musicians in the ensemble were open to innovation as many of them were dancers and so not concerned with the conventions of music. It was in this creative and reasonably free environment that the foundation of the percussion ensemble originated in the United States, and Cage's influence in this regard is widely acknowledged by many percussionists.

When Cage moved to Chicago and then on to New York in 1942, he continued his engagement with percussion by continuing to write for the instrument and arranging percussion ensemble performances. His ensemble's final performance was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1943, and it was so successful that it 'established his reputation as a leading figure in experimental music.'¹⁷ Over the years, Cage had generated interest from other composers to write for percussion ensemble.¹⁸ Between 1935 and 1943, he composed fifteen works for percussion, and his ensemble performed thirty-two different compositions, including works by Cowell, Harrison, Roldán, and William Russell, among others.¹⁹ Unfortunately, a lot of this music was put aside when Cage moved away from percussion to compose for prepared piano in 1943.

During the Second World War, the development of the percussion ensemble in the United States was largely stunted; however, interest grew again during the 1950s and '60s when percussionists began drawing on compositions from earlier decades. Of particular importance here is Paul Price, who revived the percussion works of Cage and other composers. In 1950, Price established the first accredited courses for percussion ensemble in the United States at the University of Illinois. He premiered over three hundred works for percussion ensemble, and published many of these through his publishing company, Paul Price Publications.²⁰ Also important in the early 1950s was Warren Benson, who established one of the first touring percussion ensembles at Ithaca College in the 1950s. Benson commissioned composers to write for his ensemble, thus generating more percussion repertoire.

The interest in educational circles arose because musical educators began to realize the value of the percussion ensemble as a teaching medium. Percussion ensembles could incorporate a variety of musical styles, from the experimental music of the 1930s and '40s to transcriptions

¹⁵ Cage, *For the Birds: In Conversation with Daniel Charles*. London: Marion Boyers, 1981. Quoted in Williams, 'The early percussion music of John Cage,' p. 202.

¹⁶ For a list of percussion instruments owned by Cage in 1940, see Williams, 'The early percussion music of John Cage,' p. 217.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁸ For more information about Cage's and other composers' works for percussion ensemble during this time, see Williams, 'The early percussion music of John Cage,' and Don Russell Baker, 'The percussion-ensemble music of Lou Harrison: 1939-1942,' Unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁹ For the list of these works, see Williams, 'The early percussion music of John Cage,' pp. 193-194.

²⁰ Stephen L. Barnhart, *Percussionists: A Biographical Dictionary*. London: Greenwood Press, 2000, p. 301.

of classical works or popular music. This proved to be beneficial to both students and institutions, and during the 1960s percussion programs were adopted by many music schools throughout the United States. This in turn generated a new percussion industry as compositions were commissioned and published, percussion companies designed new and more durable instruments, and educators shared their thoughts on the developments through music journals. As an outgrowth of this activity, the Percussive Arts Society was founded in 1962 to provide support and resources to the percussion community.

During the 1960s and '70s professional percussion ensembles began to emerge in the United States and overseas. One of the first to gain an international reputation was Les percussions de Strasbourg, which toured widely and produced a number of recordings of mostly European avant-garde music. It was established in 1961, followed by the Poznan Percussion Ensemble, a Polish group formed in 1965, and Copenhagen Percussion Ensemble. Also formed in 1965 was the New Percussion Quartet from Buffalo, New York, which focused primarily on the performance of new music. This group held an international competition to generate new works for the ensemble, and it received seventy-nine percussion quartets from thirteen different countries. The group disbanded in 1968, however, after performing only a few of the pieces. In the early 1970s Garry Kvistad found the competition music while working in Buffalo and decided to create the Blackearth Percussion Group, which he formed with four other percussionists in 1972. Other groups formed in the 1970s include Batterie from Philadelphia (1973), the Repercussion Unit on the West Coast (1976), the San Francisco Percussion Group (1979), and Percussion Group Cincinnati (1979).²¹ Prominent ensembles formed outside the United States during this period include the Australian ensemble Synergy (1975), the Swedish group Kroumata (1978), and the Canadian ensemble Répercussion (1978), among others.

The majority of these groups were interested in the performance of new music, although many of them later diversified along the lines of Nexus. Amongst all these ensembles, and many others which emerged in later years, Nexus stands out as unique as it was founded on improvisation rather than on the realization of music through scores. Other distinguishing features of Nexus include its use of non-Western musical instruments, and its integration of diverse musical traditions into its music making. Although in the twenty-first century these characteristics are shared by many percussion ensembles, Nexus was one of the first to develop in this direction.

Whereas Paul Price revived the music of Cage and other composers from the early part of the twentieth century by integrating this music into the education system, the members of Nexus revived the exploratory and aesthetic side of the music of this period. By discarding standard percussion instruments, listening and responding to the vibrations of the world around them, and composing their own music, they continued where Cage and others had left off in the 1940s. Like Cage, Harrison, and Cowell, the members of Nexus were open to external influences and were not content with defining music in narrow terms. They were interested in sound, pure and simple, and having picked up the threads of earlier explorations, they made the exploration of sound and music the focus of a journey which continues to this day.

²¹ For more about the ensembles mentioned here, see Reiss, 'The history of the Blackearth Percussion Group,' pp. 27-28.

Improvisation

For the first few years, the members of Nexus improvised most of their performances. It was through improvisation that Nexus created its unique sound, internal dialogue, and spontaneous approach to music making. Nexus often collaborated with other instrumentalists and artists from different media. This encouraged the group to develop its music making through external influences. The significance of outside stimuli is an important part of the ensemble's personality, and this can be seen, to use Bakhtin's term, as a 'centrifugal' process of musical development and social awareness; that is, a heteroglossic mix of different external and internal voices. The ensemble could have developed a more insular approach, being influenced solely by fellow members. Although their previous experiences would have still affected the music they made, their overall music would have developed differently. Thus, their willingness to allow outsiders to participate in, and in some cases even lead their performances, can be seen to be a 'dialogic' decision. As Bakhtin said, we must 'forever seek what is outside the self.'²²

Benson described one such performance in which he participated with Nexus accompanying the renowned Canadian poet Earle Birney: 'he [Birney] was reading one [poem]. . . . And right in the middle of it, without a cue . . . we're all playing *My Fair Lady* in different parts.'²³ The members were so open to ideas and sounds around them that it was almost as though their different minds thought for a moment as one.²⁴ Dialogic theorists would argue that it is impossible for this to happen, as Bakhtin's concept of the uniqueness of the individual's worldview contradicts this idea. 'A given philosophical principle cannot mean the same thing to more than one person, or even the same thing to the same person at different times or in different circumstances.'²⁵ However, the centrifugal direction of the ensemble, brought about through the members' decision to improvise, and do so with outsiders, is very much a dialogic move.

Thus, Nexus' music making has been influenced in varying degrees by the external parties the members have collaborated with during performances. Improvisation was the framework through which they were able to musically grow and develop. Ingrid Monson argues that 'an eighteenth-century score . . . is far more like a novel in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) sense than a conversation . . . [as] transformation of the notation into sound includes multiple participants, but in Western classical music performers are generally not allowed to alter or . . . even embellish this musical notation.'²⁶ This is in contrast, according to Monson, to improvised work, where the music and those who make it are much closer. Improvised music is created by the musicians; notated works are often written by one party and performed by another. In dialogic terms, how can Western musicians play the music exactly as the author would want? The Bakhtinian answer is that they cannot; much as an actor cannot perfectly represent a scriptwriter's meaning. Therefore, through the medium of improvisation, Nexus was closer to

²² Richard Holt, *Dialogue on the Internet: Language, Civic Identity, and Computer-Mediated Communication*, London: Praeger, 2004, p. 62.

²³ Benson, Interview with author, 16 August 2000. The performance with Birney took place in March 1973 in the Burton Auditorium at York University in Toronto. Benson introduced Nexus to Birney, whom he had met in 1962 through a friend in Mexico, and suggested they collaborate.

²⁴ In another account of the performance with Nexus and Birney, Benson says, 'everybody, at the same time, just started to play the big tune from "My Fair Lady"—it just came roaring out of these four marimbas. (Udow, 'An interview with Warren Benson,' p. 46).

²⁵ Holt, *Dialogue on the Internet*, p. 57.

²⁶ Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996, p. 81.

its music; its sound belonged to the members because they made and performed it simultaneously. Arguably, therefore, the music was uniquely theirs, even though arising through centrifugal processes, because the sound was made and heard together at the same time. Authorship and performance were part of the same process and context.

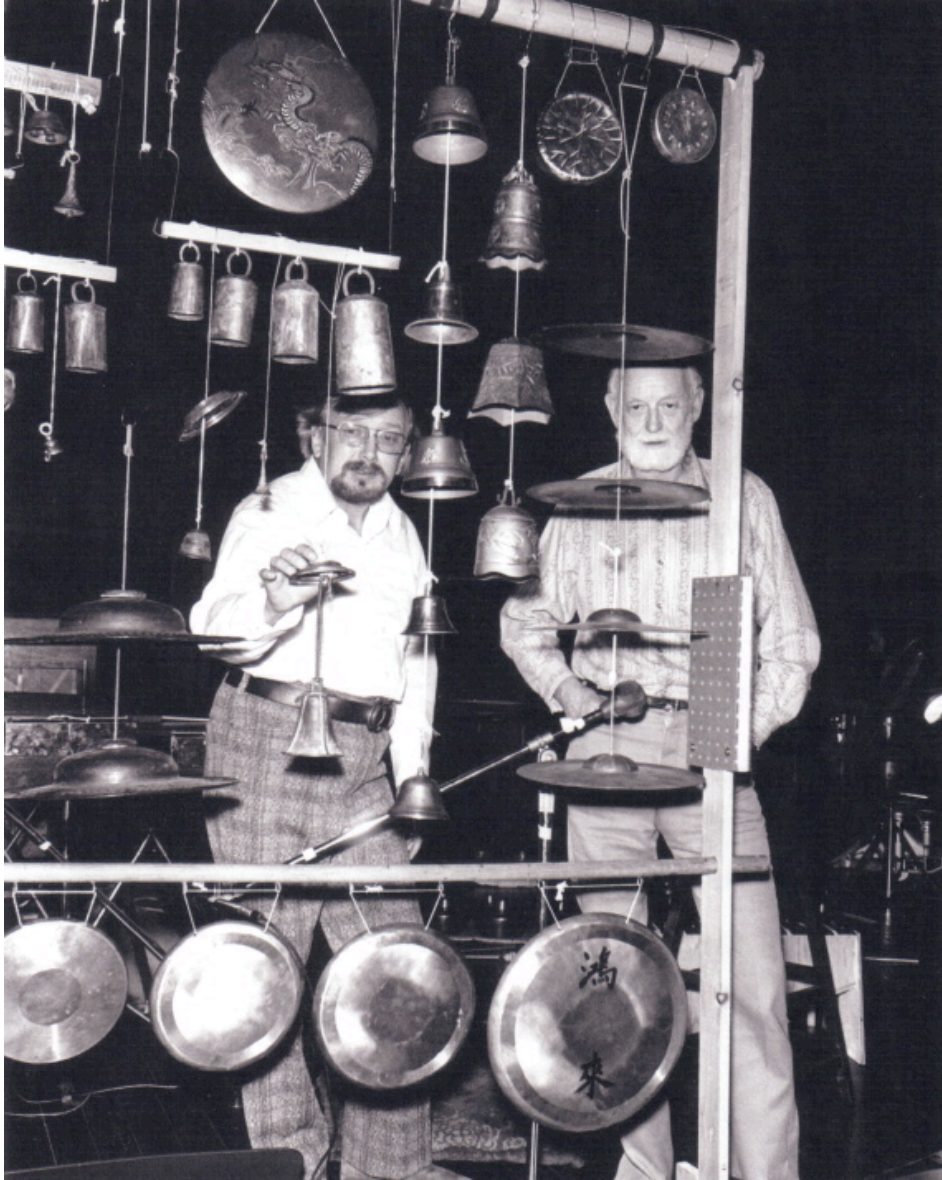


Figure 14. Warren Benson (left) with Earle Birney at the Burton Auditorium, York University, 31 March 1973. Courtesy of The Globe and Mail.

Returning to the idea of speech and, more specifically, conversation, brings us to the most significant aspect of Nexus' way of working. Monson describes improvisation metaphorically as a 'conversation' between players, and the members of Nexus themselves view their improvised performances in much the same way. This music cannot be said to be unique in general terms, as improvisation has been used as a mode of expression for centuries, yet it is a relatively unique stance to take for musicians coming from a Western classical music background which emphasizes the realization of music through a score. Improvisation allowed Nexus to sidestep many of the conventions associated with playing notated music, such as rehearsals, learning repertoire, and perfecting this repertoire for performance. Along

with being free of these duties, Nexus experienced the freedom of no wrong notes, no missed cues, and no specific expectations.²⁷ During their performances, the members focused primarily on creating music through interacting spontaneously with each other and the audience.

This type of musical interaction established the performance style of Nexus from the outset. As each member of Nexus has a highly individual character, the musical dialogue between the members is often intense. During performances, they frequently challenge, tease, provoke, or joke with each other, and as they play each note as though it were their last, a full range of emotions is often present.²⁸ Everyone in the ensemble is free to contribute to the music as he seems fit, and these musical ideas are either supported or challenged by the others. In the case of a negative response, a member often has the choice of letting the idea go or, as Wyre suggests, playing it 'twice as hard.'²⁹ Nexus' performances are often a mixture of challenge and compromise, all determined by the mood of the performers and by their listening intently to each other. During the early years of improvisation, the members of Nexus became intimately acquainted with each other's performance style, and this formed the foundation of their collective musicianship.³⁰

Paul Berliner describes how jazz musicians acquire and develop improvisational expertise through interaction with an ever-changing community of musicians functioning as a learning environment, and this interaction is referred to, by both musicians and academics, metaphorically as 'conversation.'³¹ The members of an improvisational ensemble have to listen to what the other members have to 'say,' then they can choose how to, and if they want to, respond to it. There has to be an element of coherence and cohesion in the performance. This is, arguably, the crux of improvisation, the ability of individual members to communicate with each other. Ralph Peterson stresses the interpersonal, face-to-face quality of improvisation:

A lot of times when you get into a musical conversation one person in the group will state an idea or the beginning of an idea, and another person *complete* the idea or their interpretation of the same idea, how they hear it. So the conversation happens in fragments and comes from different parts, different voices.³²

This is exactly what happens in Nexus, as Becker observes: 'We have experiences where you finish playing one instrument, you turn your head, and you see the right instrument(s). You strike it, and someone else thirty-feet away has found an almost identical lick on another instrument.' Wyre supports this by adding: 'Sometimes this occurs at exactly the same moment and we've experienced some of the most bizarre unisons you can imagine—totally unplanned.'³³

No one member of an ensemble can possibly know exactly how the piece will develop, as it is the combined views, moods, and beliefs that determine the flow of ideas and the reactions to

²⁷ Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' pp. 34-35.

²⁸ Engelman suggested that there is a certain intensity in Nexus' performances as each member plays each note as though it is their last. (Engelman, Interview with author, 9 August 1999).

²⁹ Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 31.

³⁰ Wyre says: 'Improvisation was a good foundation for our sense of ensemble. It taught us to listen to each other in a way that's different than listening to see if your part fits (the written notes) with the other parts.' (Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 30).

³¹ Paul Berliner quoted in Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 73.

³² Peterson quoted in Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 78.

³³ Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 33.

them. Cecil McBee demonstrates this point: 'You're not going to play what you practised ... something else is going to happen.'³⁴ Monson points to this spontaneity being 'absolutely central in the ... improvisational aesthetic.'³⁵ Nexus' music, therefore, through its members' decision to improvise, is characterised by a metaphorical conversational style, and this distinguishes it from percussion ensembles which focus purely on the realization of composers' intentions indicated through musical scores.

Nevertheless, how Nexus' 'conversation' develops comes down to the individual members, through both their performances (what they want to 'say') and, perhaps more importantly, through the interpersonal relationships of the group members (why they want to 'say' it). An improvisational performance allows the audience a glimpse at many different human emotions, characteristics, and behaviours: bravado, arrogance, and inferiority and superiority complexes to name a few. Nexus' performances follow this idea, giving the audience a musical insight into its members' personalities and interpersonal relationships. This said, an improvisational ensemble has to work together, and has to know how each individual works (as much as is possible, considering that each has an individual viewpoint in Bakhtinian terms). 'The interdependence of the members of the ensemble ensures that each individual must adjust to the presence and activities of other members.'³⁶ Nexus' music is thus influenced by individual relationships within the ensemble at the time of performance, as the free nature of improvisation is reliant on emotion, the 'feeling' of each individual, and in turn, the emotion and feeling within each relationship.³⁷ There is a fine balance, however, between a lively relationship and negative feelings towards another member. It is vitally important to have some affinity with the other members of the group, and this affinity is evident in Nexus.

Taking the metaphor of conversation philosophically, this gives further credence to the assertion that Nexus' improvisational style is dialogic because of its openness, diversity, its spontaneity, and the influence of many factors on the group's sound. Bakhtin refers to the diversity found within language styles as *heteroglossia*. If improvisation is a form of conversation, then we can say that Nexus' sound has both centripetal and centrifugal forces and tendencies—'Every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces).' Sometimes, the members may play together, in a unitary fashion, all following the same idea, but equally there may be performances when their music making is decentralized and competitive. Nexus' music, therefore, cannot be described in Western classical terms because, by the very nature of improvisation, the performance of each member is highly personalized, individual, and affected by many internal and external factors.

As an improvisational ensemble, the music the group makes and the group's dynamic are almost entirely interlinked. The music is personalised by the group because it is made and performed simultaneously. As also previously mentioned, the interpersonal relationships of the group can and do affect the music the ensemble makes in any particular performance. Thus, the factors that contribute to the nature of Nexus' music—external influences, the individual members' backgrounds, and the relationships between members—jointly affect the group dynamic.

The members of Nexus maintained their own personalities, and these became an important element in their improvisational performances. However, this was in effect building layers of

³⁴ Cecil Bee quoted in Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 84.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 90

³⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

individual sound to create an integrated group sound. Thus, the group dynamic was very important—many individual 'voices' together are seen as more effective than one voice alone or, conversely, as many voices all saying the same thing.

The group dynamic was also influenced by the musical instruments which each member brought to their improvisations. As most of these instruments were of a non-Western origin, the overall sound of the ensemble was somewhat 'exotic' for the times. During their early improvisations, the members of Nexus surrounded themselves with their instruments, which were often hanging from racks or assembled on the floor. During performances, they would move from one set of instruments to another, but after a while they gave up this practice and stayed with their own setups.³⁸ As the members of Nexus became more acquainted with their instruments and with improvisation, they gradually reduced the number of instruments used in their performances. During their first few years, the wide range of instruments were in a sense a form of security as they offered many options to keep the musical dialogues going, however, as they became more skilled with improvisation, they could say more with less resources.



Figure 15. Nexus improvising on an amadinda at Manta Sound recording studio in Toronto around the mid-1970s. The members are recording a sound track by Harry Somers for a C.B.C. Radio Show which was part of the *Image of Canada* series. Courtesy of Robin Engelman.

³⁸ Hartenberger notes that this practice unexpectedly stopped one day: 'I can remember one incident in fairly early days. Nexus had been doing only improvisation. We would just set up instruments on a stage; everybody would bring whatever they wanted to. During the course of the improvisation, each member of Nexus would wander around the stage from setup to setup playing on not only his own instruments, but also everyone else's instruments. Then, all of a sudden, in a concert just outside Kingston, Ontario, for some inexplicable reason, almost as if everyone knew that was the thing to do, we stayed in our own setups and didn't go play each other's instruments. I don't know why it happened; I never talked to anybody about it.' (Garry Kvistad, 'Russell Hartenberger,' *Percussive Notes*, 34 (4), 1996, p. 16).

The characteristic sound of Nexus was forged during their early improvisational years. Unlike many chamber ensembles, which strive for a homogeneous sound, Nexus left the different characters of its individual playing untouched. Engelman once likened the sound of Nexus to a Welsh choir where all the individual voices could be heard. He compared this musical aesthetic to the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, where the individual voices have blended into a whole. In Nexus, each member's distinctive sound can be heard when the ensemble plays.³⁹

All Nexus' improvisations were not entirely spontaneous, as decisions were sometime made in advance. Such is the case when Nexus recorded its first album in collaboration with jazz flutist Paul Horn.⁴⁰ Horn and Nexus met the day before the recording to discuss their improvisations, and in so doing sketched out instruments, overall styles, and general outlines for each work. Horn used alto and bass flute, piccolo, clarinet, alto saxophone, and flute, and Nexus used a wide range of instruments from its collection as well as drumset and vibraphone, played by Wyre and Craden respectively. Despite a few decisions being made beforehand, the music still retained its improvisational quality. Horn describes his duo with Craden, for instance, as 'a fantastic, one-take, free-form improvised piece, with a lot of telepathy and intuitive understanding.'⁴¹ Craden and Horn had known each other for years, and had extensive experience improvising together. They were thus able to capture this intimacy in their musical interaction.

The group dynamic thus changed many times because of the transferral of power. Each member was encouraged to be an individual, and embrace and develop his own personal influences and interests. However, in effect a different 'leader' came with the introduction of each new influence.

The performance of notated works is not necessarily at odds with the theory of improvisation, as Nexus shows that both styles of music making can work together. This is the centripetal and centrifugal forces at work simultaneously again, and this amalgamation could be seen as unique, bringing two different processes together. Although Nexus gradually added notated works to its repertoire, the members felt an overall reluctance to move in this direction as Craden could not read music. The first compositions therefore tended to be improvisational in nature, as Becker recalls:

We started playing a couple of different types of tunes that we knew within the improvs. I remember a beautiful Spanish lullaby that Robin had learned, which made its way into our improvs and would reappear on successive concerts as a little vignette. I started injecting some of the old xylophone solos that I had learned. At that point, you would hear the solo xylophone lines in accompaniment with gongs, Chinese cymbals and woodblocks. A weird sort of tune would materialize. Those things kept coming up at concerts. . . .

I was also becoming more and more interested in George Hamilton Green's music. I decided to start arranging some of those tunes for Nexus. I arranged one of them to try in a performance with the Hamilton Philharmonic. This tune was called 'Rainbow Ripples,' and it was really a lot of fun. So I decided to continue making arrangements of those tunes, and we started to feature them.⁴²

³⁹ Engelman, Interview with author, 9 August 1999.

⁴⁰ *The altitude of the sun: Paul Horn featuring Egberto Gismonti and Nexus*, Black Sun 15002-2.

⁴¹ Liner notes for *The altitude of the sun: Paul Horn featuring Egberto Gismonti and Nexus*, Black Sun 15002-2.

⁴² Mattingly, 'Nexus,' pp. 9-10.

Becker led Nexus in this direction through his interest and research into the ragtime novelty music of George Hamilton Green. Even though this appears to be a return to notated scores, the music retains many improvisational features. As will be discussed in the following section, Becker gained his knowledge of this genre mostly through recordings. In a sense, his knowledge was acquired in much the same way as jazz musicians, who seek their knowledge mostly from recordings and interaction with other musicians. Interestingly enough, Becker did not pursue this knowledge alone, as he and Cahn collected recordings together and both became versed in this style. Becker brought this music to the others in Nexus, however, mostly through notated scores. The score, though, was largely his, as he had made arrangements of the works. One could argue that the solo line at least was fixed by the pen of Green. This was not the case, however, as in jazz, the melodic line was more of a sketch, which the soloist used as a basis for his improvisations. Even the accompanying parts which Becker notated were only used as sketches. The members of Nexus continually played around with these notes, reacting to or provoking each other during the course of the performance. Becker indicated that sometimes it is like being caught in the middle of a crossfire, not knowing which party to follow as the other members of Nexus continued their dialogue in this way.

Although Nexus began moving towards notated works, these works were from the popular and vernacular musical traditions, rather than from Western classical music. This allowed for creative input on the part of the performers, as the parts were more sketches of the musical lines than inflexible scores. The move to notated music perhaps takes away from the ensemble's uniqueness, and thus poses a challenge to Hartenberger and Wyre's assertion that they 'established a tradition.' However, it can be argued that this move is in some ways even more original because it mixes two genres usually assumed to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. It is this integration of musical traditions that makes Nexus unique.

Thus, Nexus developed a highly personal approach to music through improvisation. The members made no attempt to fit into any mould and trusted their intuition for direction. They were committed to individuality and freedom of expression, and established their group on egalitarian principles, appointing no leader as a guide. They were guided solely by their musical instincts, and wherever these led, they followed. After Nexus began exploring other musical avenues, fragments of known repertoire crept into the members' improvisations. They began slowly gravitating towards notated works, but integrated their improvisational skills into the performance of this music too. Adopting an attitude of spontaneity towards all music, they continued to place emphasis on musical interaction rather than technical perfection. Music was their means of communication, both among themselves and with their audience. Furthermore, having themselves experienced the depth of communication that can be achieved through improvisation, they strove to preserve this element in the performance of all works.

The music of Nexus, therefore, has several dialogic qualities to it. The group dynamic affected the overall music making and repertoire of Nexus, while the encouragement of the individual continued its dialogic approach. Nexus' performances were evidently influenced by external players included in its performances, but it was also influenced by their shared histories. As Monson notes, 'playing a particular composition can also immediately point to a prior performance.'⁴³ Nexus' music making was affected by what the members had heard before, wherever they had heard it. This is evident when they suddenly began to play excerpts from *My Fair Lady* whilst accompanying Birney. This indicates that to some degree, they

⁴³ Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 98.

have a shared history, a shared knowledge base from which to draw their music. Throughout the history of Nexus, this knowledge base has been continually expanded through the individual interests of its members.

A comparison of the group's inaugural concert in Kilbourn Hall with its recording with Horn shows the musical growth in Nexus since its early stages. The Kilbourn Hall concert featured two extended free-flowing improvisations exploring the sounds of the members' mostly non-Western instruments. The Horn recording, on the other hand, clearly demonstrates how, in the intervening years, some of the members of Nexus had become immersed in the musical traditions of other cultures, as many of their improvisations are based on African or Indian rhythmic and melodic structures. Although this music may have been interpreted in different ways to the original music, this suggests that Nexus recycled fragments of 'old' or existing traditions to create something 'new.' Many of these traditions stemmed from a collective interest in world music, another genre that helped to make Nexus what it has become. Regardless of where their material came from, the members of Nexus learnt how to converse and communicate through the sounds they produced. They learnt how to use their instruments to convey meaning to each other and the audience, and by expanding their knowledge of the music of different traditions, they simultaneously expanded the depth of their improvisational language.

Novelty ragtime

Becker's interest in the music of George Hamilton Green stems back to his Eastman days when his percussion teacher, William Street, gave him a stack of sheet music after retiring from Eastman in the spring of 1967. Becker featured some of this music (including old arrangements of overtures for xylophone, Harry Breuer tunes, Leroy Anderson's *Fiddle Faddle*, and Felix Arndt's *Nola*) in a duo concert with Tim Ferchen at Kilbourn Hall during his third year at Eastman. Becker and Tim were accompanied by fellow Eastman students, drummer Steve Gadd, bassist Tony Levin, and pianist Michael Holmes. Becker later formed a quartet with Gadd, Levin, and Holmes to explore this music further and the group became known as Xylophonia.⁴⁴

The music that Becker received from Street included original publications of *George Hamilton Green's Jazz Classics for the Xylophone* and other works of Green. Although Becker was aware of some of Green's music, he had never seen any of his novelty ragtime music before. As Becker says: 'The ragtime music really clicked. I thought there's something that is really special. It didn't sound like anything I'd ever heard before; it was interesting harmonically, rhythmically, [and] technically . . .'⁴⁵

Becker began arranging some of Green's novelty ragtime tunes for concerts given by his quartet in Rochester and later in the Connecticut region during his first year at Wesleyan. After a while, however, he was no longer able to hire the musicians for his quartet, as their individual careers were expanding. He therefore began arranging some of the music for Nexus.⁴⁶

Becker's first arrangement for Nexus was Green's *Rainbow Ripples* which the group tried out in a concert with the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in the early 1970s. Becker played solo marimba while Cahn, Engelman, Hartenberger, and Wyre covered the piano part on two

⁴⁴ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁴⁵ Becker, Interview with author, 13 March 2001.

⁴⁶ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

marimbas. Craden improvised on traps. Up to then, Becker had performed all the solo parts on marimba and it was not until Emil Richards sent him a copy of some of Green's recordings that he realized the part was best suited for xylophone.⁴⁷ As Becker explains: 'That was a revelation to me to hear a xylophone playing it, to hear how Green played, I had no idea.'⁴⁸ 'Suddenly it all made sense – the solo part floating on top of the accompaniment instead of buried inside it, and of course Green's incredible technique and style.'⁴⁹

Becker began researching the music of Green by collecting xylophone recordings from the early part of the twentieth century. Green had recorded with his brothers, Joseph and Lewis Green, and with numerous bands of various configurations between 1917 and 1940, and as a consequence had hundreds of recordings to his name.⁵⁰ Becker acquired many of these recordings from antique stores and record collectors.⁵¹ He also searched for Green's music from various sources including The Library of Congress, US military band libraries, and Green's students, colleagues, and acquaintances.⁵² In time, Becker amassed a large collection of recordings, sheet music, instruction manuals, photographs, and stories from the era and was able to piece together the performance practice of Green and his colleagues. He then focused on bringing the music to life through performance.⁵³

An important step in this direction was his acquisition of a xylophone which he found at Drum City whilst on tour to Los Angeles. It was a three-and-a-half-octave Deagan Artist's Special, and although Becker was unfamiliar with Artist's Special models at the time, he realized it was more 'authentic' than the narrow-keyed orchestral xylophones he had previously played. Paying approximately US\$500 for the instrument, Becker had it shipped back to Connecticut where he embarked on the process of learning to play on a xylophone instead of a marimba.⁵⁴ As Becker says: 'For a long time it didn't go very well. I couldn't find mallets that felt or sounded good and everything I played seemed out of control – I mean playing legato on any percussion instrument is a challenge, but [on] the xylophone is just ridiculous. My salvation turned out to be the hundreds of recordings that George Green and a handful of other great players made during the 20s and early 30s. These recordings became my teachers'⁵⁵

The recordings gave Becker access to a musical tradition that by the 1970s had long vanished from the performance stage. He could now hear Green, considered one of the greatest xylophonists of the twentieth century, at work performing novelty ragtime tunes and arrangements from the classical repertoire. By listening to the recordings, Becker was able to

⁴⁷ Ibid. Emil Richards had heard that Nexus was playing some George Hamilton Green's music and he sent to Becker via Craden a copy of one side of *The Xylophone Genius of George Hamilton Green* (Conservatory #7101M), a limited-edition LP reissue of old 78 records which George Hamilton Green's brother, Lewis Green, had remastered in 1971. The other side of the album featured transcriptions of violin and orchestral repertoire etc. (Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Becker, 'About playing the xylophone,' Masterclass given at PASIC 1995, 2 November 1995, Phoenix, Arizona. Transcript available on Nexus website at www.nexuspercussion.com.

⁵⁰ Barry Bridwell & Scott Lyons, 'A salute to George Hamilton Green, Xylophone Genius,' *Percussive Notes* 25 (5), Summer 1987, p. 55.

⁵¹ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁵² Becker, 'About playing the xylophone.'

⁵³ Ibid.; Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999. At one point, Becker considered using this research for his dissertation at Wesleyan, but eventually decided to write on the *tabla* instead (Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999).

⁵⁴ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Becker, 'About playing the xylophone.'

emulate the distinctive style of Green and gain insight into his approach to improvisation, concept of sound, technique, articulation, phrasing, rhythmic feel, and sense of ensemble and orchestration. Coupled with instruction materials in which Green had provided a comprehensive commentary on the development of xylophone technique and improvisational skills, Becker had ample material from which to get to know this style of music intimately. Furthermore, given his ability as a virtuoso keyboard player, Becker was also able to bring this music to life in a way that had not been heard on the stage for several decades.

Inspired by the positive audience response to Nexus' performance of *Rainbow Ripples* in Hamilton, Ontario, Becker continued to arrange more of Green's music including most of his *Jazz Classics* series. Cahn added some of his own arrangements by Spike Jones, Harry Breuer, and Red Norvo (Kenneth Norville) and also some Russian and Mexican folk tunes. Cahn used the same instrumental format as had Becker in his arrangements with four players performing on two marimbas in addition to solo xylophone and traps. In time, Nexus acquired enough material for a whole program of keyboard percussion music and began presenting ragtime concerts and workshops.⁵⁶ In 1974, Nexus played ragtime concerts during the members' residencies at the Chautauqua Institution, New York, and the Courtenay Youth Music Camp in British Columbia. It also performed ragtime programs in Toronto at the University of Toronto, the Bohemian Embassy, and A-Space.

At the invitation of Toru Takemitsu, Nexus toured Japan in the summer of 1976 under the auspices of the Canadian Department of External Affairs. Nexus performed ragtime music during the opening concert at the Music Today Festival in Tokyo and had subsequent performances in Ohtsu and Osaka. After receiving rave reviews for their performances in Japan, on their return to Canada, the members recorded some of their ragtime music on the Umbrella label. Using Soundstage Recording Studio and JAMF in Toronto, Nexus produced a limited-edition direct-to-disc album featuring Becker and Cahn's arrangements of the music of George Hamilton Green, Joseph Green, Felix Arndt, and Charles Johnson.⁵⁷ Although Nexus chose direct-to-disc recording for its superior sound quality, it was somewhat reminiscent of the recording techniques used by George Hamilton Green and his colleagues in the 1920s. As the recording signal was cut directly onto the disc, there were no chances to edit the material, which produced the feeling of a live performance.

In the summer of 1977, Cahn also became actively involved in researching xylophone music after finding an old Victor recording featuring George Hamilton Green in an antique store in Rochester. Over the next few years, Cahn collected thousands of xylophone recordings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁸ He also gathered a variety of old phonographs to play these recordings on. Like Becker, Cahn gained an intimate knowledge of the performance practice of this period through the recordings and was able to use this knowledge in his performance of the music and arrangements for Nexus. Cahn documented his research in a book entitled *The Xylophone in Acoustic Recordings (1877 to 1929)* which he published in 1979. The book includes an extensive discography listing thousands of xylophone recordings from the era, a compact disc or tape with a selection of fourteen of these recordings, as well as historical notes on the performers and record companies. Cahn also conducted extensive research into Green's second career as a cartoonist after he retired

⁵⁶ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999. Even though some of the works were not ragtime, Nexus generally used the ragtime title for their concerts.

⁵⁷ *Nexus Ragtyme*, Umbrella UMBDD2, 1976. The album was reissued on compact disc in 1991 as *Nexus Ragtime Concert*, Nexus 10284.

⁵⁸ William L. Cahn, *The Xylophone in Acoustic Recordings (1877 to 1929)*, 2nd ed. Bloomfield, New York: William L. Cahn, 1996, p. 1.

from music in 1946. Cahn published a book containing many of Green's cartoons collected from the *Collier's Weekly: An Illustrated Journal*.⁵⁹

Nexus' performances of novelty ragtime music coincided with the ragtime revival of the 1970s. As Scott Joplin became a household name during these years, partly due to the success of the Hollywood movie *The Sting* (1973), ragtime music was once again in vogue after decades of silence. Audience appeal was evident as the music was light-hearted and contrasted greatly to the heavily intellectual art music of the previous decades. As ragtime was classified in revivalist terms, it achieved a status that justified its presence on the concert hall stage. Improvisation accompanied ragtime to centre stage where audiences often marvelled at the virtuosity of the performers.

In the case of Nexus, Becker's exploration of the sheet music that William Street had given him in the late 1960s led to the revival not only of a body of repertoire composed specifically for the xylophone by one of the greatest xylophonists of the last century, but also to the revival of interest in the instrument itself. By the 1970s, the xylophone had become a virtual non-entity in the Western world of percussion as the marimba had more or less subsumed its place. The only times percussionists generally played xylophone was in orchestras, percussion ensembles, or military bands where the solo xylophone tradition had been kept alive. As Becker comments: 'I don't remember a single practice room at Eastman when I was there that had a xylophone in it. The only time we ever saw one was when we actually had to play one of those [xylophone] excerpts in the orchestra. And then I never felt comfortable playing on those skinny little bars with plastic mallets.'⁶⁰

By listening to the recordings of Green and his contemporaries, Becker became aware of the xylophone sound that was prevalent in North America in the early part of the twentieth century. The xylophone sound was quite different to the sound produced by modern day instruments, and this encouraged Becker to find instruments from that era. He thus acquired four Deagan Artist's Special xylophones including a 3½-octave, two 4-octaves, and a 5-octave.⁶¹ He later collaborated with his friend and fellow Eastman graduate, Leigh Howard Stevens, on the design of a new xylophone that offered a similar sound aesthetic to the old Deagans but had the convenience of improved portability and tuneable resonators.⁶² By experimenting with different mallets, Becker refined the sound of the instrument to his taste.⁶³ As Nexus' recordings and performances of novelty ragtime music gradually reached a wider international audience, more percussionists began to show an interest in playing the xylophone and instrument makers began incorporating some of the older sound aesthetics into their modern instruments.

Novelty ragtime music gradually became an integral part of Nexus' music making, as it was a style of music that gave the members of Nexus the liberty to improvise at will, have fun, and interact spontaneously with each other during performances. Ragtime perfectly suited the personalities in the group, providing a platform for Becker to display his musicianship and

⁵⁹ William L. Cahn, *Collier's Cartoons of George Hamilton Green*, Rochester, New York: W. L. Cahn, 1979. The book contains cartoons from 1937 to 1951. Green retired from music suddenly in the middle of a radio broadcast in 1946 and turned his attention to working as a cartoonist, illustrator and commercial artist. He sold his cartoons to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *This Week*, *American*, *Life*, *Argosy*, *Look*, *Collier's Weekly: An Illustrated Journal*, and others.

⁶⁰ Becker, 'About playing the xylophone.'

⁶¹ Stevens, 'Bob Becker,' p. 9.

⁶² Malletech Becker model (BBX4.0).

⁶³ Stevens, 'Bob Becker,' p. 9. Malletech Becker Blues (BB34) and Malletech Becker two-tone xylophone mallets (BB32).

virtuosity as a xylophone soloist, for Cahn's sense of humour to come alive, and for Wyre to groove on the bass line. Ragtime also gave Nexus an opportunity to explore improvisation within the constraints of a Western art form where instrumentation, form, and harmonic structure were all predetermined. In this music, improvisation was generally restricted to embellishing the melodic and harmonic lines in the solo xylophone and accompanying marimba parts, and adding rhythmic drive and humour on the traps. Although this style of improvisation was of a more restrictive nature than the free form improvisation that Nexus was founded on, it was by no means simple, especially in the solo xylophone part. One of the elements that initially drew Becker to the novelty ragtime music of George Hamilton Green was the music's complexity.⁶⁴ Compared to earlier styles of ragtime, novelty ragtime was generally played at a faster tempo, was technically more demanding, and used more elaborate rhythms, as Becker indicates:

I remember actually being kind of surprised by the elaborateness of some of the cross-rhythmic writing in Green's solos because my knowledge of ragtime initially was only of . . . the earlier piano rag style. . . . I'm not sure I'd heard any of the ragtime styles of the '20s, the dance styles based on [the] charleston and fox-trot, those really up-tempo things. So when I saw those solos . . . it was surprising and it was fun because it was challenging. I hadn't seen that elaborateness of rhythms in say Scott Joplin's music. Similar idea of syncopation but . . . it was taken to a more extreme level in Green's music.⁶⁵

Although ragtime was performed on Western musical instruments using Western harmony and form, its roots lay in African music where cross rhythms and the spontaneous elaboration of parts were standard.⁶⁶ This was particularly appealing to Becker as his interest in Green's music coincided with his studies of world music, initially through a summer course in *tabla* and then through the ethnomusicology program at Wesleyan University. Studying North Indian *tabla*, South Indian *mrdangam*, West African drumming, and Javanese gamelan at Wesleyan had given Becker a deep appreciation for rhythm and its use in improvisation. Some of the improvisational styles used in these musical traditions were similar to those of novelty ragtime music. Improvisation on the *tabla*, for instance, generally involves learning a repertoire of rhythmical patterns and spontaneously combining these in different ways against a metrical cycle. This process was similar to learning a range of melodic and rhythmic ragtime patterns and spontaneously selecting them to embellish a musical line against a fixed meter. With the *tabla* player and xylophone soloist both assuming a virtuosic role, the players often selected patterns at lightning speed. The novelty ragtime music therefore offered Becker a rich repertoire where he could combine his training in non-Western musical traditions with his expertise in Western music. It also enabled Nexus to move towards notated music without losing its freedom of expression as improvisation was an integral part of this music.

World music

Becker was not the only one in Nexus who formally studied the music of other cultures, as Hartenberger had enrolled in the ethnomusicology program at Wesleyan the year before him. Both Hartenberger and Becker studied with teachers from India, Ghana, and Java during their four-year program at Wesleyan. Over the years, they shared this knowledge with the other

⁶⁴ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

members of Nexus and gradually the ensemble included some of the repertoire from these cultures in its performances.

Hartenberger began his studies at Wesleyan in the fall of 1970 and Becker joined him there in the fall of 1971.⁶⁷ Both Hartenberger and Becker studied Javanese gamelan with Prawotosaputro, *mrdangam* with Ramnad Raghavan, *tabla* with Sharda Sahai, and West African drumming with Abraham Adzenyah. Becker also studied Javanese gamelan with Sumarsam and African drumming with Freeman Kwadzo Donkor. During their studies, Hartenberger and Becker became immersed in a multicultural community where their background as Western classically-trained musicians was the exception rather than the norm.⁶⁸ Not only did the social environment at Wesleyan greatly contrast to that of their previous schools, but the approach to learning music was entirely different as well. Studying the music of Africa, India, and Indonesia required learning aurally by rote with a focus on rhythm and texture rather than melody or harmony. The student-teacher relationship was also different, particularly in the case of their Indian music studies where they were expected to become disciples of their teachers. Both Hartenberger and Becker dealt with these expectations in slightly different ways—Hartenberger maintained some distance from this commitment while studying with Ramnad Raghavan, whereas Becker fully embraced the teacher-disciple relationship with Sahai, a relationship that lasts to this day.

Whilst at Wesleyan, Hartenberger specialized in the *mrdangam* and had lessons with Ramnad Raghavan on a daily basis during the course of writing his Ph.D. dissertation.⁶⁹ He gained an intimate knowledge of the *mrdangam* and produced a five-volume dissertation introducing the instrument and South Indian rhythm to Western musicians. His dissertation, *Mrdangam manual: A guidebook to South Indian rhythm for Western musicians*, gives a general overview of South Indian rhythmic theory, analyzes his lessons with Raghavan, and includes many of the compositions learnt during these lessons in both *mrdangam* and Western notation. A recording of his lessons with Raghavan is also available at Wesleyan University for review.⁷⁰

For the Western musical notation, Hartenberger made use of a multiple-percussion setup with different drums imitating the various sounds of the *mrdangam*. Hartenberger's adaptation of the music to Western percussion instruments makes it easy for percussionists to get an insight into the music without having to learn the *mrdangam* itself. Hartenberger explains his rationale for choosing this approach:

I think my idea was that I would never become a professional *mrdangam* player but I thought it was valuable to know that information and I thought this might be a way of making it more accessible to Western musicians without having to actually learn the instrument because it's such a difficult technique. You spend years before you actually . . . play well enough to get into more sophisticated material. So it's just kind of a bridge.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Becker's first year at Wesleyan was as a special student after which he joined the Ph.D. program (Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999).

⁶⁸ Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.

⁶⁹ For six months, Hartenberger went to Ramnad Raghavan's house early each morning to have coffee and a lesson, which he taped. He then spent the rest of the day transcribing the music and writing his dissertation. According to Hartenberger, Ramnad Raghavan was very enthusiastic about this arrangement and would call him if he was late. (Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.)

⁷⁰ John Russell Hartenberger, 'Mrdangam manual: A guidebook to South Indian rhythm for Western musicians,' Vol. 1 Rhythmic theory, Vol. 2 Analysis of *mrdangam* lessons, Vol. 3 *Mrdangam* lessons in *mrdangam* notation, Vol. 4 *Mrdangam* lessons in Western staff notation, Vol. 5 Tape recordings of *Mrdangam* lessons, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1974. Note that Vol. 4 is not available from UMI.

Although Hartenberger was intensely involved in learning the *mrdangam* at Wesleyan, after he moved to Toronto in the fall of 1974 to take over Wyre's position as percussion instructor at the University of Toronto, he chose not to pursue the *mrdangam* any more. This decision came about after Hartenberger met Trichy Sankaran, a *mrdangam* and kanjira virtuoso who had immigrated to Toronto from Madras in 1971 to take up the position of Special Lecturer at York University.⁷¹ Hartenberger describes the impact Sankaran had on his interest in pursuing the *mrdangam*: 'When I got to Toronto and heard Sankaran play and saw what he was into and saw that he was this . . . intellectual, educated guy that could talk about it himself, I realized that it was senseless for me to keep doing this kind of thing. He could do it much better. He's the real thing so I quickly lost interest in taking it any further.'⁷²

Becker, on the other hand, chose to continue his *tabla* studies after moving to Toronto in the fall of 1975. Becker became a close disciple of Sahai during his Wesleyan years and was later accepted as a member of his family.⁷³ Becker acquired an intimate knowledge of the Benares style of *tabla* playing from Sahai and this eventually discouraged him from writing his Ph.D. dissertation on the subject. As Becker explains: 'Ultimately, it was more of an issue of not being able to divulge some performance material that I was given in confidence by my teacher [Sharda Sahai]. In order to support any sorts of analyses I would do, I would have to produce the material I was using as the basis for it, and I couldn't do that.'⁷⁴

Becker also experienced some practical obstacles regarding his dissertation when he tried to get a student visa to conduct primary research on the Benares tradition in India. After receiving a Rockefeller grant to study in Benares with Sahai, he was denied a student visa unless he chose to study with a *tabla* player recommended by the Indian Department of Immigration. As this player was not part of the Benares tradition, Becker rejected the offer and tried a second time to obtain a visa with a revised proposal. In the interim, he had resigned from all the groups he was playing in thinking he would be going to India in a matter of months. After waiting for over a year, he eventually gave up any hope of obtaining a visa, so he left Wesleyan and moved to Toronto to take over Engelman's percussion teaching position at York University.⁷⁵ Becker was the fifth member of Nexus to move to Toronto, with Cahn being the only one remaining in the United States.

Both Hartenberger and Becker maintained a professional working relationship with Sahai and Adzenyah after they left Wesleyan as both performed with Nexus over the years. Adzenyah's first performance with Nexus was in March 1973 when Nexus participated in a one-week residency at Wesleyan. During the residency, Nexus was involved in workshops, masterclasses, and concerts with Adzenyah, Sumarsam, Ramnad Raghavan, and Peter Plotsky. During this period, Adzenyah took the opportunity to teach the members of Nexus *Gahu*, a recreational dance of the Ewe people of southeastern Ghana, and they performed the work together on their concert there. *Gahu* gradually became a part of Nexus' repertoire, although the members adapted the music to their own style by adding improvised winds and other parts which varied with each performance. When Nexus performed the work with Adzenyah, it used the title *Gahu*, but when the members performed it without him, they

⁷¹ Trichy Sankaran was a Special Lecturer at York University from 1971-1975, Assistant Professor of Music from 1975-1988, Associate Professor of Music from 1988-1996, and from 1997 to the present day is Professor of Music, Graduate/Undergraduate Faculty.

⁷² Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.

⁷³ Becker, Interview with author, 13 March 2001.

⁷⁴ Becker, Interview with author, 10 August 1999.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

changed the name to *Kobina*.⁷⁶ As Engelman notes: 'We didn't want to give anyone the impression that we were giving a literal representation of a Ghanian [sic] composition.'⁷⁷

After a while, Nexus began to include African drumming in its ragtime concerts and would often devote one half of the program to African drumming and the other half to ragtime. Three of the concerts in Japan during Nexus' 1976 tour marked the beginning of this practice. During an interview in Japan, Cahn explained Nexus' approach to African music: 'To put it simply, we've decided to do folkloric music. The percussion instruments we use may be the same as those used in African music, but our music is not African music. What comes from us is our music. I can't explain or analyse it.'⁷⁸

One explanation may be that up to that point, Nexus was still greatly immersed in improvisation. Although by the mid-1970s, Nexus was embracing a wider range of music, the group was gravitating towards music that was not set in stone and allowed them some freedom of expression. West African drumming is highly interactive as a strong dialogue exists between the master drummer and the supporting parts. As Wyre explains: 'With African music, it was the aspect of conversation that really enchanted me. You hear conversation in jazz, but in African drumming, the repartee between the master drummer and the other voices is so clear and beautiful.'⁷⁹ This dialogue between the parts enabled the members of Nexus to interact with one another in a spontaneous manner during their performances. And as they had no intention of presenting the music in its original context, they felt free to draw upon their large instrument collection to improvise over the rhythmic patterns with flutes, conch shells, or whatever other instruments caught their imaginations.

By 1982, Nexus was performing a wide range of African music as the program for the St. Lawrence Centre concert attests. The performance began with *Gahu*, which was played on the standard Ewe instruments consisting of *atsimevu* (master drum), *kagan* (high drum), *kidi* (medium drum), *sogo* (low drum), *axatse* (gourd rattle), and *gankogui* (double iron bell). This was followed by *Kundum*, a traditional dance which forms part of the annual Kundum harvest festival celebrated by the Nzemas and Ashantas of Ghana. Another Ewe piece, *Adzida Interlude*, featured iron bells of various pitches entwined in rhythms representing the songs of frogs. *Bambaya*, a popular social dance of the Dagbani people of Northern Ghana, came next followed by Hartenberger's arrangement of Atenteben flute ensemble music under the title of *African Funeral Song*, played on marimbas, bells, and rattles. *Akom*, music used to release fetish priests from trance among the Akan people of Ghana, was followed by a recreational dance of the Frafras of northern Ghana, *Bima Damba Song* then provided a prelude to *Boboobo*, a social dance of the Ewes of the Volta region of Ghana. *Mbira* featured a Zimbabwean melody played by Becker on a 22-keyed Shona mbira known as *Mbira dza Vadzimu (Mbira of the Ancestral Spirits)* which was followed by *Adowa*, a popular social dance among the Twi, Fante, and Ga people of Ghana. *Amadinda Music* featured a twelve-keyed xylophone played by the Baganda people of Uganda and the concert ended with *High-Life*, comprising popular West African recreational dances.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Kobina means 'Tuesday' and is Adzenyah's middle name as he was born on a Tuesday. Adzenyah uses two different spellings of this name—Kobina and Kobena. The same applies to Adzenyah's last name which sometimes appears as Adzenyah and at other times as Adzinyah.

⁷⁷ Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 31.

⁷⁸ Murakami Mutsuko, 'Interview,' *Gekijo*, 11, Parco Publishing, 1976, p. 52.

⁷⁹ Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 12.

⁸⁰ The concert was reviewed by the following: John Kraglund, 'Dazzling musical feast marks Nexus birthday,' *The Globe and Mail*, 15 March 1982, p. 18, and Ronald Hambleton, 'Nexus and Ghanian guest transport audience to Africa,' *The Toronto Star*, 15 March 1982.

Adzenyah danced, played, and sang his way through the performance with Nexus accompanying on an assortment of instruments. Adzenyah was an accomplished dancer and master drummer who had worked with the Ghanaian drumming and dancing ensemble for many years before immigrating to the United States in 1969. He was eager to share his knowledge of West African music with the members of Nexus and they were equally enthusiastic about learning. However, during the final rehearsal for another African music concert in Toronto, Nexus drew a line as to how far it would go when presenting this music to the public. During the rehearsal, Adzenyah invited the members to sing and dance in traditional costumes for a war piece he was teaching them, which raised some concern among them, as Cahn explains:

Abraham Adzinyah has a physique akin to that of an athlete. In the short pants required for the war piece he looked fantastic. He also moves his body with the flow and supreme confidence of a professional dancer. It is a monumental tribute to him that he was able to see the rest of us in our Ghana short pants, with our pale white stick legs moving in insecure angular spasms while singing at the top of our lungs and firing our weapons, and yet, give not the slightest bare-bones hint to us that we were producing anything less than he wanted. In fact, when Robin and I finally approached him on that subject after the rehearsal, he seemed completely destroyed by our concerns, and he resisted our reservations and even managed to pep-talk us into committing ourselves to that night's performance.⁸¹

During the course of dinner that evening, the matter was resolved and the war piece was finally dropped from the program. The members of Nexus had established their limit as to how far they were willing to embrace the tradition of another culture. It was the music that interested them and they were somewhat reluctant to go beyond this to take on other areas such as dancing in traditional costumes in ways that would make them feel conspicuous and awkward.

Here the members of Nexus were caught in one of those ironic, postcolonial moments that ensembles of world music inevitably experience. Adzenyah, on the one hand, expected the members of Nexus to wear the costumes in fulfillment of the tradition that he bore, no doubt as a sign of respect for that tradition. The members of Nexus, on the other hand, regarded the donning of African garb in its entirety as running the risk of feeling alienated from their normal selves.

The study and performance of African music is particularly problematic in the United States because of its history of African slavery and uneasy race relations. Yet African music is undeniably popular in society at large as well as in the music academy. The process of studying and performing African music necessarily raises the difficult issues of race, globalization, and Orientalism. And as the members of Nexus adapted Ghanaian music to their own style, the concomitant issues of cultural ownership and appropriation arose.

The year before in March 1981, Nexus recorded an LP entitled *Music of Nexus* which featured its version of *Gahu* under the name of *Kobina*.⁸² In the liner notes of the album, Nexus gives special thanks to 'Abraham Adzenyah, for sharing with us, on many occasions, his deep knowledge of West African music, in particular the Ewe dance music *Gahu*, on

⁸¹ Cahn, 'NEXUS - On tour,' pp. 46, 48.

⁸² *Music of NEXUS, Nexus NE 01, 1981*. In Wyre's book, *Touched by Sound* (p. 138), the recording date is mistakenly given as 1980 rather than 1981. Wyre also refers to the title of the album as *The Music of NEXUS* rather than *Music of NEXUS*, as printed on the album.

which *Kobina* is very freely based.' At the time of the recording, the members of Nexus were unaware that they were infringing upon the traditional protocols of the Ewe people that prohibited any recording or commercialization of their music. Nexus found this out in 1982 when Adzenyah phoned Wyre to explain that his Ewe friends had threatened him after hearing the album. Wyre wrote to Adzenyah's friends apologizing for Nexus' actions and explained that Adzenyah was not responsible in any way. He also included a live recording of a concert featuring African music performed by Nexus and Adzenyah in Toronto at the St. Lawrence Centre Town Hall in March 1982.⁸³ When Wyre later asked Adzenyah about his friends' reaction to the tape, Adzenyah 'said that they had cried and told him to bring Nexus to Ghana to help them teach their children.'⁸⁴

Nexus' study of non-Western music, and the decision to include certain aspects of it in their performances, can be seen as an enlightened move, one that appears apolitical or otherwise part of wider efforts to foster international goodwill, respect, and harmony. At the same time, the issues of global relations of power, representation, and appropriation lurk below the surface of such humanistic ideals and actions. Clearly, Nexus had genuine respect for the African musicians and music they learnt from, and the African musicians they learnt from had respect for them. Nevertheless appropriation, particularly by a Western ensemble, is controversial, as demonstrated by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism*: 'the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything . . . My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence—in which I do not for a moment believe—but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting.'⁸⁵ Said is very sceptical of the West's desire to appropriate any part of Eastern culture, believing that it is incapable of fully understanding it or representing it truly, mainly because of the imperialist past of the West.

'How does one *represent* other cultures? What is *another* culture?'⁸⁶ Said argues that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for Europe and America's colonial and imperial ambitions, and that the history of European colonial rule and political domination over the East distorts the writings of even the most knowledgeable, well-meaning, and sympathetic Western 'Orientalists.' He argues that their claims to objective knowledge of the Orient are simply claims to power. Thus, according to Said, Nexus' appropriation of non-Western music must be regarded either as a move to show its superiority over the source of music, or as an interpretation of the music that will always have a Western bias because of the members' Western backgrounds.

The performance of African music, or any 'other' music for that matter, by elite groups such as Nexus can underline the structures that maintain inequitable power relations; yet it can also counteract them. While Said argues that the Orientalist writer is exterior to the culture that he is representing, in both existential and moral terms, performance in the context of this discussion can be thought of as located somewhere in between cultures. When the members

⁸³ The concert was the first of three concerts celebrating Nexus' tenth anniversary season. William Littler gives a preview of the tenth anniversary concerts in: William Littler, 'Nexus drums up a worldwide reputation: Toronto percussion group use their "magic mallets" to open audiences' ears,' *The Toronto Star*, 7 March 1982, C11.

⁸⁴ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, pp. 138-139. Wyre records the year for the tenth anniversary concerts at the St. Lawrence Centre as 1981. These concerts occurred during the 1981/1982 season but the concerts took place in 1982.

⁸⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 272-273.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

of Nexus perform African music they are not speaking on behalf of their teacher, rather they are enacting what they have learnt from their teacher; their performance is a consequence of the dialogue with their teacher. They are responsible to their teacher and aim to communicate the information they have learnt as accurately and convincingly as possible. This is akin to a commitment to ethnographic truth, one that overrides the strivance for representational coherence that Said accuses the Orientalist of prioritizing.

As suggested above, it could also be argued that Nexus was trying to break down the barriers of different cultures and countries. This rather utopian view of the involvement of world music in the repertoire of Western musicians has been asserted as a defence against the criticisms of scholars such as Said. The concern of many scholars has been to establish kinship between the East and West rather than to create 'difference,' and frequently they made discoveries which would provide the foundations for anti-colonial nationalism. Many musicians from Ghana and India were coming to the United States around that time, thus increasing the cultural exchanges between North America and those countries. Ravi Shankar and Kwasi Adounum, for example, received a Western education in their home country, and sought to expand their musical horizons overseas. Said himself was in many ways similar to this as he had been educated in a private school in Egypt and then spent his adult life in the United States. Yet he felt that he was not Western and so was entitled to comment on the negative aspects of Western appropriation of the East. He argues that 'any and all representations . . . are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer . . . [and are] interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth," which is itself a representation.'⁸⁷ Yet by arguing this, Said appears to almost contradict himself. He was an Anglophile living in a Western culture; thus, if we follow his argument, no individual's representation of anything can be entirely 'true.'

The members of Nexus explored the instruments of other cultures not just out of respect and understanding for those cultures, but also as a way of freeing themselves from the constraints of Western musical expectations and as a means of expanding their sound palette beyond standard Western percussion instruments. For the most part, when the members of Nexus began playing the music of other cultures, they made no attempt to strictly follow the associated musical traditions, but rather tried to bring the music to life in their own way. As Becker says: 'Nexus elaborates on traditional music and makes it into something of its own rather than playing in a traditional manner.'⁸⁸

This attitude is evident in the mbira music which Nexus began playing in the mid-1970s. Whilst at Wesleyan, Becker studied mbira with Paul Berliner, who at that time was a fellow student researching the music of the Shona people from Zimbabwe. Berliner had been researching this music for many years and was deeply involved in the traditional culture associated with it. As Becker began performing some of the mbira music with Nexus, a conflict arose between Berliner and Becker over the issue of cultural knowledge. According to Becker, Berliner felt that Nexus should not perform this music as the members did not have a deep cultural understanding of it. Becker, on the other hand, maintained that it was the music that interested them, and they were making no attempt to represent their adaptations of the music as authentic. Becker and Berliner were unable to resolve their differences over this issue and eventually parted ways.⁸⁹ This dispute arose after Berliner himself had performed on the mbira with Nexus during a residency at York University in Toronto. On 1 August

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

⁸⁸ Pamela Margles, 'NEXUS: Five masters of percussion,' *Music Magazine*, September/October 1983, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Becker, Conversation with author, 14 August 2000.

1973, Nexus presented a concert at York with Berliner billed as the guest artist featuring the mbira. It would seem that Berliner was motivated by the issues of cultural representation and authenticity, and considered the possession of related cultural knowledge as a prerequisite to performing mbira music outside of its cultural context. Becker, on the other hand, was primarily motivated by the potential of adapting mbira music for creating his own art. He saw no ethical problem in adapting the music for creative purposes.

Although there have been critics of Nexus' philosophy of music, the members of Nexus have never let criticism dampen their curiosity about the world and its music. This curiosity initially manifested itself in their collecting instruments from different countries, and then as they had the opportunity to learn from musicians from some of these cultures, they embraced the repertoire as well. But facing issues of appropriation and authenticity, the members of Nexus have maintained that they have no intention of presenting this music in a traditional context or authentically. As Wyre says: 'Nexus has never presented the music of other cultures with any assumption of authenticity, and often we add new and different voices to the music as our imaginations are inspired to participate.'⁹⁰

Nexus established itself outside the Western percussion ensemble model, which in the early 1970s generally involved playing notated works mostly on Western percussion instruments. Discarding this tradition, the members of Nexus opened their ears to the world of music, and through travel and education embraced a broader perspective on music and sound in general. As the individual members of Nexus encountered music or instruments that interested them, they introduced these to the other members of the group. Over the years, Nexus' repertoire gradually expanded as it integrated the music of different traditions. Although some of the members of Nexus spent years studying and researching the music of other traditions, there was never any attempt by the group to present this music in its original context. The music and instruments were personal expressions of their individual musical interests and were divorced from their original contexts. The music and instruments were transported to a new context within the confines of Nexus' performance practice.

Sometimes, it was the music that drew the members of Nexus to another tradition; at other times, it was the instrument itself. Becker, for instance, was drawn to novelty ragtime by the music of George Hamilton Green, whereas the sound of the *tabla* led him to North Indian music.⁹¹ As Becker says:

I'm very interested in North Indian tabla drumming, and it was definitely the instrument that attracted me. I heard a record of tabla drumming back in the late '60s. The sound of the instrument overwhelmed me. A year later, when I had the opportunity to study with a professional, I jumped at the chance. I really wanted to find out how to make those sounds and was interested in getting good drums. After that, as I studied the music, I got involved with the structures and the repertoire a great deal.⁹²

For Wyre, it was initially the look and then the sound of the darabuka that began his lifelong association with that instrument. Travelling in Turkey in 1985, he came across the largest

⁹⁰ Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, p. 138.

⁹¹ Becker says: 'It's funny how we become drawn to music and musical instruments. My first instrument was the marimba, and I still love that sound. The first time I heard tabla on a recording back in 1969 I was totally knocked-out by the sound of the instrument. I couldn't understand what was going on in the music at all - it was the sound alone that got me involved. On the other hand, the sound of the xylophone still gives me fits. What initially drew me into the ragtime musical style and repertoire was the music itself, not the sound of the instrument.' (PASIC talk in Phoenix, Arizona, 1995).

⁹² Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 12.

darabuka he had ever seen displayed in a shop window. Upon entering the store, he asked to play the instrument and after hearing the sound, realized that it was for him. After much negotiation, the shop owner finally sold the instrument to him and Wyre immediately began to explore it.⁹³ Over the years, Wyre experimented with the design of the instrument and working with a craftsman living in the United States, eventually came up with a hybrid wooden instrument called a djembuka, a mix of a darbuka and a djembe. The instrument has become an integral part of Wyre's musical expression and has found a new role in Nexus far distant from the traditional music of the Middle East.

Engelman was also attracted to a wide range of musical instruments by their sounds, as his following comments indicate:

The instruments I found in Indonesia, China, and the Philippines, etc., I chose because there was something about the sound that captivated me. The same holds true about my rope drum, my old Ludwig SuperSensitive, a pair of cymbals I picked out in Meductic from Sabian. Like John, for me there was never the idea of presenting the instruments in a truly authentic context, I don't think NEXUS has ever chosen to be anything else other than what we are.⁹⁴

While the members of Nexus have been pulled in many directions as a result of the instruments and music they have encountered, their pursuit of these sounds and musical traditions has greatly enriched their ensemble. Led by an insatiable curiosity, they have looked not only to other cultures for inspiration but also to their own roots where past traditions have revealed a wealth of knowledge. As I have shown, Becker's exploration of novelty ragtime, for instance, led to the discovery of a rich repertoire for an instrument that had long ago lost its popularity. In a similar vein, Engelman's brief encounter with a rope drum in 1976 led to thirty years' research into the performance practice and history of rudimental drumming and music for fifes and drums.

Rope drumming

Rope drumming refers to the military drum beatings Nexus plays on its collection of rope-tensioned drums. The members of Nexus generally use the term 'rope drums' when referring to these instruments. According to Engelman, the drums could be more precisely described as '16th to 18th-century replicas of large (18" to 22" deep by 16" to 22" in diameter) rope-tensioned military field drums constructed of wood and having rather slack, soft parchment (animal skin) heads and gut snares that produce a deep, resonant sound. They are carried at the player's side and today are common to Fife and Drum Corps. Those characteristics distinguish them from modern, smaller (16" deep by 14" in diameter) mechanically-tensioned drums constructed of metal and having tight, hard heads made of plastic and wire snares that produce a high, nonresonant sound. They are carried in front of the player and are common to Drum and Bugle Corps.'⁹⁵

Nexus first performed music for fifes and drums at a concert and workshop on 21 March 1975 at York University in Toronto.⁹⁶ At that time, Engelman knew a few rudimental tunes and he invited Robert Aitken and Elizabeth Birney to perform on fifes, while the members of Nexus

⁹³ See Wyre, *Touched by Sound*, pp. 123-127 for a full account of Wyre's discovery of the darbuka.

⁹⁴ Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 31.

⁹⁵ Engelman, Interview with author, 11 October 2004; Engelman, Email to author, 27 January 2005.

⁹⁶ The concert was presented by the Department of Music and was held in the Strong College Junior Common Room. Admission was free.

played drums.⁹⁷ Engelman also invited Pat Pritchard, a champion highland dancer and dance student at York University, to perform with them. Engelman described Pritchard as a 'sensational dancer' who, along with Patrick Cooperman (see below) 'captivated and inspired' his 'interest in this folk idiom.'⁹⁸ Later that year, Nexus included music for fifes and drums in its concert at CBC Camp Fortune '75.⁹⁹ Nexus performed the French Revolutionary song *Ça Ira* on the program, this time using xylophone to play the fife part.¹⁰⁰

Engelman's interest in music for fifes and drums intensified after he met Cooperman in New York in 1976. Cooperman introduced him to his rope drums, which he had been making for some time. Engelman explains how this meeting came about and how he shared his interest with the rest of Nexus:

The rope drumming came about, for me, simply because Russell had been to New York City and seen Ben Harms, who had this big rope drum. Russell came back to Toronto and said to me casually, 'You know, Ben Harms had a beautiful drum.' He described it and said, 'There's a guy named Patrick Cooperman who puts these drums together.' It just so happened that I was going to be in New York with the Toronto Symphony. I called Patrick and went up to his home. He was living in Mount Vernon, New York, at that time. . . .

I went up to Patrick's house and he put together a drum for me. I bought some sticks and I also got a drum for Bill Cahn. Literally, for the next year I played that drum every day. It was an unbelievable experience. At this point, I was in my late 30's [sic], and it was almost like discovering what drumming was for the first time—slowing down and letting the sticks and the drum do the work. I'd never played on a drum that size before. I started using it in the symphony. Then I started getting interested in the history of the instrument and the music. I went to Williamsburg, Virginia, and got in touch with rudimental drummers who had books for sale. I started buying the old method books. I discovered that those tunes that were in Haskell Harr's book—those solos that I worked on in college like 'The Downfall of Paris,' etc.—actually had melodies. Then Bill Cahn did some research at the library at Eastman and found one of the earliest printed versions of that tune, which was originally called 'Ça Ira' [It Will Happen]. . . .

So, besides playing, we were learning all this history. And then we put together a suite of these tunes. Bob played the melodies on xylophone and/or glockenspiel. All of us eventually got rope drums. So that all happened through a very intense experience by a couple of people in the group.¹⁰¹

Engelman's visit to Cooperman began an ongoing investigation into a musical tradition that was still practiced in the United States and Canada, but in limited circles. Although Engelman had studied rudimental drumming at Ithaca College, and had as one of his treasured music books John Pratt's 1959 publication of *14 Modern Contest Solos*, his career as an orchestral percussionist required that he follow the orchestral, rather than the rudimental, drumming tradition. Engelman's visit to Cooperman's house changed all that as he walked away with his

⁹⁷ According to Engelman, Elizabeth Birney was no relation to the Canadian poet, Earle Birney (Engelman, Email to author, 21 August 2002).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The concert was held at 8:30pm on 14 July 1975 in Ottawa.

¹⁰⁰ Burf Kay, 'Nexus plays subtle sounds, textures,' *The Ottawa Journal*, 15 July 1975, p. 33.

¹⁰¹ Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 11.

own Eames rope drum, some heavy drum sticks, and a list of books about the history and performance practice of the instrument.¹⁰²

Engelman was so enticed by the rope drum that he played it for hours every day on his farm in King City, Ontario. As he adapted to the large resonance of the drum, which reflected its size, wood shell, and calf heads, Engelman gradually replaced his orchestral technique with a rudimental approach. In doing so, he found that all the trouble he was having playing loud buzz rolls evaporated as he achieved the same effect with open rolls. Engelman used the rope drum and his new technique in his orchestral and operatic work and found that both worked extremely well in these contexts.¹⁰³

Along with devoting many hours to learning to play the instrument, Engelman also engaged in researching music for fife and drums. This opened up a whole new world for him as he made contact with rudimental drummers still actively practicing the art form. Most of these drummers were connected with the US and Canadian military bands or associated organizations, and Engelman acquired a wealth of knowledge about playing rudimental music from them.¹⁰⁴ He also made contact with historians and other researchers of military drumming and brought this knowledge to his own performance practice and to Nexus.¹⁰⁵



Figure 16. Nexus playing *Ancient Military Aires* at the Leadmill, Sheffield.

From left to right: John Wyre, Robin Engelman, Bill Cahn, Russell Hartenberger, Bob Becker.

Photo by Phil Robinson. From Nexus 1984 International Tour program.

¹⁰² Engelman, Interview with author, 20 May 2002.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The groups that Engelman made contact with include The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps of the 3rd United States Infantry at Fort Meyer, Virginia, the United States Air Force Band in Washington, D.C., the United States Marine Army Band at West Point, New York, and CADRE (Canadian Associates Drumming Rudimental Excellence).

¹⁰⁵ Engelman, Interview with author, 20 May 2002.

Nexus arranged a suite of old drumming tunes including *The Three Camps*, *Ça Ira*, and *Hell on the Wabash* for performances.¹⁰⁶ In this suite, entitled *Ancient Military Aires*, Engelman, Cahn, and Hartenberger played rope drums; Wyre played bass drum; and Becker played the melody on a keyboard percussion instrument (see Figure 15).¹⁰⁷ By this time, Becker and Hartenberger had also bought their own rope drums and Hartenberger had acquired a bass drum, all made by Cooperman.¹⁰⁸ Engelman also had an 1896 Walberg and Auge Civil War drum with 16 single-tension metal rods. In keeping with their individual styles of playing, all the members of Nexus tuned their drums differently with Engelman's calf head the slackest and Becker's the tightest. They all played with traditional grip, however, as the drums were slung over their shoulders in the traditional military fashion.

As Engelman continued his research into the history of rudimental drumming, he became more familiar with the older musical aesthetic of calf heads and larger drums made mostly of wood. Although rudimental drumming forms the foundation of most drummers' technique, musical aesthetics shifted in the late twentieth century in North America towards playing on smaller drums with tight plastic heads using match grip. This style is particularly promoted by the Drum Corps International where stick height, evenness between the hands, and conformity among players is highly regulated. The rope drumming gave Engelman an avenue to explore an older style of drumming where the different sounds of each hand and each drum were appreciated. It reconfirmed Engelman's commitment to traditional grip as he believes the different sounds produced by each hand are an important characteristic of the music as they enhance the natural phrasing of the lines.¹⁰⁹ Rope drumming also opened up another avenue for composing as the sticking patterns for many of the older tunes were not notated, in contrast to the fife parts. Engelman began writing his own sticking patterns for some of these tunes and made arrangements of them for Nexus to perform in concerts.

Silent films

In 1982, through the interests of Cahn, accompanying silent films was added to Nexus' repertoire. During the 1970s, Cahn had come across an old library of music belonging to the Lyceum Theater while searching for instruments in an antique store in Rochester.¹¹⁰ The Lyceum Theater was one of the more prestigious theatres operating in Rochester during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and featured drama, Broadway plays, melodramas, comic operas, vaudeville, and motion pictures. It opened in 1888 and for many years had a resident orchestra consisting of thirteen players. Cahn paid US\$100 for the music library, which included several hundred arrangements of music for accompanying silent films. The arrangements consisted of classical and popular works, dance and novelty pieces, and generic music used to create specific moods for the films.¹¹¹

An opportunity arose to use this music in the late 1970s when Cahn created a film score for a silent movie shown at the George Eastman House for patrons and board members of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. Cahn had volunteered to prepare a special program for this event, and with the help of the staff at Eastman House he selected Mack Sennett's *Teddy*

¹⁰⁶ CBC Camp Fortune '75 was part of Festival Canada.

¹⁰⁷ Craden did not play in this music and did not acquire a rope drum (Engelman, Email to author, 21 August 2002).

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Cooperman had by this time moved to Connecticut and set up his own drum making business.

¹⁰⁹ Engelman, Conversation with author.

¹¹⁰ Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹¹¹ Ibid.; Rick MacMillan, 'Nexus triumphs in Britain: "Bewitching virtuosity",' *The Music Scene*, 332, 1983, p. 4.

at the *Throttle* (1916) as the feature film.¹¹² This film was one of thousands of motion pictures dating from 1894 to the present day preserved at the International Museum of Photography and Film at Eastman House in Rochester.¹¹³ The museum staff recommended *Teddy at the Throttle* for the Rochester Philharmonic event, and after viewing the film Cahn selected music from his library to create an orchestral accompaniment to it. The success of the project inspired Cahn to source two of his own copies of the film and he subsequently arranged a score for Nexus using exactly the same material. This gave Cahn the option of screening the film with Nexus, with orchestra, or with Nexus and orchestra combined.¹¹⁴

Nexus presented *Teddy at the Throttle* for the first time in the final concert of its tenth anniversary series at the St. Lawrence Centre Town Hall in May 1982. Cahn's film score included Victor Herbert's *The Wizard of the Nile* (1896), Max C. Eugene's *Cupid's Garden* (1901), Charlotte Blake's *Dainty Dames* (1915), George J. Trinkhaus' *Zephyr* (1916), Ernest Luz's generic music *Photoplay Dramatic Sets* (1916), and George Hamilton Green's *Fluffy Ruffles* (1918).¹¹⁵ Numerous sound effects were added to portray the drama of Teddy the dog coming to the rescue of his owner, played by the famous Gloria Swanson, who was about to be run over by a train. The audience response was ecstatic as Ronald Hambleton notes in his *Toronto Star* review:

Only Nexus could begin an evening of music with J. S. Bach, make a detour through India and Bali, then turn the whole thing into Saturday night at the movies. . . .

Few in the audience could have suspected what was scheduled to follow these traditional Nexus aperitifs, even though the program did list 'a Mack Sennett film.' In fact, it was a riot of nostalgia spiked with sparkling Nexus music.

Nexus next screened the film the following year during a performance at The Royal Conservatory of Music *Sounds of Summer* series held in Walter Hall at the University of Toronto. After another mixed program, *Teddy at the Throttle* completed the evening in what *Toronto Star* critic, Gaynor Jones, described as an 'uproarious finale.'¹¹⁶ On 6th and 7th January 1984, Nexus performed *Teddy* with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra at the Eastman Theatre on a program conducted by Cahn. For this occasion, Nexus used the theatre's wind machine which was used during the silent film era at Eastman Theatre during the 1920s.¹¹⁷ Another silent movie, Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), was featured on these concerts but Nexus did not play in this work.¹¹⁸ Cahn's orchestral arrangements for this film included music by Liszt, Roussel, Saint-Saens, and Verdi.¹¹⁹ Cahn later acquired two more silent movies, *Choose Your Weapons* and Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which were presented as part of a collaborative effort between the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and the Eastman Kodak Company. By this time, Cahn's music library

¹¹² Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹¹³ See www.eastman.org for more information about George Eastman House and the International Museum of Photography and Film.

¹¹⁴ Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹¹⁵ Program notes from *TAP Music Magazine*, 7 (43), 5 May 1982. The program is dated incorrectly as the concert took place on Saturday 8 May 1982.

¹¹⁶ Gaynor Jones, 'Nexus triumphant once again,' *The Toronto Star*, 10 June 1983. The concert was held on 9 June 1983.

¹¹⁷ Edward Charbonneau, 'Nexus bringing silent movie music—and more—to Eastman,' *Brighton Pittsford Post*, 4 Jan 1984, p. 2B.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹¹⁹ Robert V. Palmer, 'Music from whatchamacallits,' *Democrat and Chronicle*, 5 Jan 1984, p. 1C.

had grown to approximately one thousand arrangements of music for silent films.¹²⁰

Teddy at the Throttle became a permanent part of Nexus' repertoire and was performed numerous times over the years. Cahn added another silent movie to Nexus' repertoire in September 2001 with a performance of Teinosuke Kinugasa's 1926 film, *A Page of Madness* (*Kurutta Ippei*), at the Dryden Theatre, George Eastman House.¹²¹ Cahn describes how this performance came about:

A Page of Madness came about (in 2000) as the result of another meeting at the George Eastman House. They were looking for ideas for their silent film series, and had invited me to meet with them. At the end of the meeting, a passing comment was made about a new acquisition for the museum's collection, and it piqued my interest because it was a Japanese silent film. I asked if I could screen it and they agreed. The ultimate outcome was the NEXUS performance last season. I am now seeking a copy of the film to purchase.¹²²

A Page of Madness is of a much more serious tone than *Teddy at the Throttle* as its story revolves around the struggles of a janitor trying to communicate with his insane wife inside an asylum. The film is seventy minutes long, compared to *Teddy's* eighteen minutes, and is scored for five multiple percussion setups with portable computers linking the players to the screen. The performance was part of Dryden Theatre's ongoing screening of a diverse range of movies.¹²³

Cahn's involvement with silent films was partly due to his continued residency in Rochester and his exposure to the medium through his employment with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1972, as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the orchestra and the Eastman School of Music, Cahn was involved in a gala performance which recreated an early Eastman Theatre program. A silent movie, *Peter Pan*, was featured on this concert and as principal percussionist of the orchestra, Cahn was responsible for all the sound effects.¹²⁴ His own teacher, William Street, had assumed a similar role during his early career as principal percussionist of the same orchestra. By the time Cahn began studying with Street at the Eastman School in 1964, however, this era was long gone and Street did not mention this aspect of his career to him. As Cahn says: 'My only exposure to that genre was to have a peek into his instrument closet in his studio at School and to see some of the old sound effects (which he never discussed).'¹²⁵

Nevertheless, having been involved in the performance of a silent movie through the Rochester Philharmonic concert in 1972, Cahn continued his exploration of this medium, and after acquiring the Lyceum Theater music library, brought this interest to Nexus. As the members of Nexus embraced musical traditions from their own cultural heritage and from afar, the group gradually moved away from being a purely improvisatory group. In the process, they simultaneously went in many directions and presented this diversity of music to

¹²⁰ Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹²¹ The performance took place on 29 September 2001.

¹²² Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹²³ In September 2001, for instance, there were twenty-four different programs scheduled for screening at the Dryden Theatre at George Eastman House. The programs included silent movies with piano accompaniment, a Russian movie from 1912, as well as contemporary films from Hong Kong and the United States. (Film, George Eastman House, 7 (5) September/October 2001). For more information on the range of films presented at this venue, see www.eastman.com.

¹²⁴ Cahn, Email to author, 17 August 2002.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

their audiences. They also absorbed many of these traditions into their own compositional style and over time contributed a wide range of original works to their repertoire.

Composing

Nexus acquired a lot of its notated repertoire by arranging music for its ragtime concerts, rudimental drumming performances, and silent films. In keeping with the aural tradition, its arrangements of the music of other cultures were not notated, with the exception of *African Funeral Song*. As all the members of Nexus are composers as well as performers, it was only a matter of time before each would present his ideas to the others via a musical score. As Cahn says: 'A lot of the music that Nexus plays came about as a result of our writing the music ourselves because *we* knew us, as it were. We had such an affinity for each other that it just seemed natural, and everybody in the group has brought pieces in for everyone else to play.'¹²⁶

The first Nexus composition to be introduced into the group was Wyre's *Bells*, composed prior to the formation of Nexus. Premiered by the Japan Philharmonic at Expo '70, *Bells* received its North American première with the Toronto Symphony under Seiji Ozawa in 1972. *Bells* was later featured on a Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra concert with Boris Brott conducting during Nexus' residency at the Chautauqua Institution, New York, in August 1974. Nexus played an improvisation in the first half of the concert and *Bells* was featured in the second half.¹²⁷ The score was notated in bright colors on a large circular disk which was rotated by the conductor as the piece progressed. On the original score for the Japanese performance, three Buddhas were drawn in the centre of the circle superimposed on a cross representing, in Wyre's words, 'the resolution, the coming together of all religions.'¹²⁸ As Hartenberger notes, Wyre was at his spiritual peak around the time of composing this work:

John was a mystical figure at the time. He would walk through the grounds of Marlboro, it was like, well at least St. Peter, maybe Jesus Christ. (laughs) It was almost like people would bow down in front of him. He just had this aura about him. At the time he had a long beard and long hair and he's tall. So it was at the peak of his spiritual powers at the time. And most people fell under his spell.

And he was collecting instruments, these weird things most of us had never seen before. Because he's already been to Japan I guess, I can't remember, but for some reason he had these instruments at some point. And I remember we went over to Rudolph Serkin's house [at Marlboro] one night and he had a bunch of stuff. And he'd written this score to *Bells* I think which is his first piece. It was a big circle, a circular piece of cardboard with magic markers colors, which is pretty, well you know, very weird at that time. And just kind of opening [sic] up new worlds of percussion to all of us.¹²⁹

When Wyre revised the score for the Toronto Symphony performance, the religious symbolism was replaced with two geometric forms, but the spiritual significance of bells remained an integral part of the piece.¹³⁰ As Wyre comments: 'Bells . . . have been a part of most of the world's religious disciplines, in one form or another. The Buddhists have beautiful bowls which they use in meditation. When struck, they ring for 30, 40 seconds. Your mind

¹²⁶ Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 11.

¹²⁷ From program, courtesy of Cahn.

¹²⁸ Michael Schulman, 'A soothing thing: Bells both realistic and mystical to percussionist.' *The Music Scene*, 272, 1973, p. 9.

¹²⁹ Hartenberger, Interview with author, 22 August 2000.

¹³⁰ Schulman, 'A soothing thing,' p. 9.

dissolves. When you hit a bell, the sound diminishes. If I follow the sound, I feel much *wholer*, it brings me to *now*.' 'Sound is a spiritual discipline for me. Sound teaches—all you have to do is hear it.'¹³¹ Unfortunately, at the end of the performance of *Bells* at Chautauqua, the audience and music critic, Bill Flynn, failed to share Wyre's enthusiasm for listening to the decay of sound. Flynn comments in his review of *Bells*: 'Incredibly, the piece threatened to last forever as the delicate tinkling continued almost inaudibly for three or so minutes that seemed much longer. The audience grew restless, unsure whether it was waiting for silence or for Mr. Brott to give his score a final spin, and finally declared an end by applauding.'¹³²

Not discouraged by the audience's response to this performance, Wyre kept composing. His next work, *Utau Kane Nowa (No Wa) [Singing Bell Cycle]*, written for Nexus and The Festival Singers of Canada, was premiered in November 1975. The work was conducted by Elmer Iseler and commissioned by the Festival Singers. In this piece, Nexus played mostly metallic percussion instruments with the singers humming and chanting their parts. In 1976, Nexus performed the work with a Japanese choir at the Music Today Festival in Tokyo and again with The Festival Singers at the Metropolitan United Church in Toronto.

In April 1978, another of Wyre's works, *Connexus*, was premiered by the Toronto Symphony conducted by Andrew Davis. The name, chosen by Davis, linked Nexus to the Toronto Symphony as Wyre was still timpanist with the orchestra at the time.¹³³ In this work, Wyre integrated the rich sonorities of Nexus' instruments with the symphony achieving a depth of orchestration uncommon at the time in percussion music. He also featured the musical interests of Nexus including improvised sections and parts for favourite instruments such as Engelman's rope drum and his own darabuka. The work was favourably received by the audience as the Toronto Star's music critic, William Littler, indicates:

Toronto Symphony audiences don't ordinarily give standing ovations to new pieces of music. When they stand it's usually to leave before the new piece begins.

But last night in Massey Hall a few people, all of them significantly young, actually rose to their feet at the end of John Wyre's *Connexus* and let fly with the odd cheer.

They had reason. *Connexus*, a CBC-Radio commission being given its premiere, is no masterpiece. But it represents a badly needed effort to loosen the white tie of formality strangling the symphony orchestra and its literature. . . .

Though his [Wyre's] is a musical approach flagrantly in defiance of the symphonic tradition, it may be something the tradition could use as a counterbalance to two centuries of structural manipulation.

Wyre's music, with its succession of clearly defined episodes of vividly colored textures, may be simplistic. His standard route to a climax involves a basic crescendo and his orchestral scoring seldom assigns individual sections more than rudimentary, repeated figures to play.

But those colors! Those shimmering, almost Debussian textures that open *Connexus*, the improvisory cadenzas by Nexus, unleashing a barrage of drumming or a gamelan

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Bill Flynn, 'Chautauqua Scene: Concert in Review,' n.d. p. 10. Also see Cahn, 'NEXUS - On tour,' p. 48 for further comments on the audience's reaction to this performance.

¹³³ William Littler, 'New composition raises cheers,' *The Toronto Star*, 26 April 1978.

full of cymbals and gongs! These are sounds to remind us all that music begins as a sensual experience.¹³⁴

With *Connexus*, Wyre successfully integrated the characteristic soundscape of Nexus with the orchestra. Working with the diverse range of instruments that each member had brought to Nexus over the years, Wyre was able to transfer this accumulated sound to a notated work. This reflects Cahn's comment above that the members of Nexus wrote music for themselves because they knew themselves.¹³⁵ By the time this work was composed, Nexus had spent many years getting to know not only their individual instruments and styles of playing, but also how these instruments blended with each other. Wyre created a piece that highlighted Nexus' intimate knowledge of sound, and the audience responded accordingly.

In contrast to the style of composition that Wyre brought to Nexus, most of Becker's works reflect his interest in Indian music. Beginning with *Lahara* (1977), Becker integrated his knowledge of Western and Hindustani music to create his own style. *Lahara*, a solo for snare drum, tom tom, or remo pad with instrumental backing, uses traditional rudimental drumming as a means of exploring *tabla* compositions. As Becker says: 'My aim in writing this music was to reproduce the rhythmic and formal structures of actual *tabla* compositions in a form that would be immediately comprehensible, both rhythmically and aesthetically, to a western percussionist with or without a special knowledge of Indian music. In order to do this I used the most universal and traditional medium in the American percussion repertoire – rudimental snare drum.'¹³⁶ In a similar way to Hartenberger's transcriptions of *mrdangam* compositions in his Ph.D. dissertation, *Lahara* provides an avenue for Western percussionists to explore *tabla* music without spending years studying the instrument.

Lahara is dedicated to Becker's teacher, Sharda Sahai, a direct descendant of Pandit Ram Sahai, founder of the Benares *gharana* in India.¹³⁷ The piece features a variety of compositional forms, some of them unique to the Benares *tabla* playing tradition. These compositions are presented in traditional order with the expected increase in complexity and speed. The compositions are in *tin tal*, which Becker has represented as sixteen measures of cut time. The *lahara*, or melody, marks this sixteen-bar cycle and is repeated throughout the work adding tension and relief to the rhythmic patterns of the solo part. No instrument is specified for playing the *lahara*, although Becker indicates on the score that marimba, vibraphone, or another sustaining instrument may be a suitable substitute for the traditional *sarangi*. Likewise, marimba may be used for playing the drone, traditionally sounded on the *tambura*.¹³⁸ The solo drum should be tuned to the tonic pitch of the melody, which may be transposed to accommodate the natural resonance of the instrument.¹³⁹ If suitable instruments or additional players are not available, the metric cycle may be marked by the traditional claps and waves of the hands.¹⁴⁰

In this piece, Becker has presented the rhythms of selected *tabla* compositions in the form of a rudimental drum solo. As Becker says, he has tried 'to reproduce the feelings in the *tabla*

¹³⁴ Ibid. Also see Cahn's comments about this performance in Cahn, 'NEXUS - On tour,' pp. 48-49.

¹³⁵ '... a lot of the music that Nexus plays came about as a result of our writing the music ourselves because we knew us, as it were. We had such an affinity for each other that it just seemed natural, and everybody in the group has brought pieces in for everyone else to play.' (Cahn's comments in Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 11).

¹³⁶ Bob Becker, *Lahara*, 1977, p. i.

¹³⁷ Pandit Ram Sahai is Sharda Sahai's great-great-grandfather.

¹³⁸ Becker, *Lahara*, p. ii.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. v.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. ii.

pieces by means of traditional rudimental techniques.¹⁴¹ He has achieved this by using rudiments and sticking patterns to highlight the phrasing and accents of the *tabla* part, but has avoided strictly imitating the alternation of hands on the *tabla*. The solo uses open measured rolls characteristic of rudimental drumming.

With *Lahara*, Becker has successfully integrated the *tabla* and rudimental drumming traditions and established a middle ground between the two.¹⁴² By taking the *tabla* music out of its original context and placing it at the centre of another drumming tradition, the sound, aesthetics, expectations, and context of the Hindustani music have been altered. The exact forms, rhythms, and sequence of compositions of a *tabla* solo are present in the work, but the characteristic sound of the *tabla* is missing and the length of performance has been somewhat shortened. The rudimental style has likewise been altered. Although a number of rudiments are present in the solo, such as flams, drags, paradiddles, flamacues, ratamacues, and open rolls of various lengths, the context in which these rudiments appear is different. For instance, the rudimental solo is presented against a cyclical form of sixteen beats where anticipation is resolved with the sounding of *sam* (beat one of the cycle). The drum is tuned to the tonic of the *lahara*, which is quite a digression from traditional rudimental drumming practice where the drum is considered non-pitched. The work also gradually increases in tempo and intensity. This is unlike traditional rudimental drum music where a steady beat is generally maintained.

In the introduction to the score of *Lahara*, Becker states that 'in some ways the rudimental aspects of this piece are indebted to the ideas of Charley Wilcoxon and George L. Stone, whose music I have enjoyed playing for years.'¹⁴³ Both Charles Wilcoxon and George Lawrence Stone were influential drummers, teachers, and composers in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁴ This was the era when the National Association of Rudimental Drummers (N.A.R.D.) was formed to promote rudimental drumming and bring some standardization into the notation of the rudiments.¹⁴⁵ The founders of N.A.R.D., which included eminent drummers in the commercial, military, and educational fields, selected thirteen out of the 26 American drum rudiments which they deemed 'the thirteen essential rudiments of drumming.'¹⁴⁶ Earlier attempts at standardization of the rudiments can be found in John Philip Sousa's educational publication of 1886, *The Trumpet and Drum*, where his objective was to 'raise the teaching of field music from the depths of rote learning.'¹⁴⁷ This book was the first manual for bugle and drum, a new corps which was added to the U.S. Marine Band in the late 1800s.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. i.

¹⁴² For a comparison between the two in the context of *Lahara*, see Geary Larrick's comments on pp. 202-204 of his book *Analytical and Biographical Writings in Percussion Music*, New York: Peter Lang, 1989.

¹⁴³ Becker, *Lahara*.

¹⁴⁴ Their rudimental solos and instruction books are still widely used today.

¹⁴⁵ N.A.R.D. was originally known as the Thirteen Club and was formed by thirteen drummers, including George Lawrence Stone, Roy Knapp, and William F. Ludwig, in 1933. The successful execution of the thirteen rudiments was required for membership. Composition was encouraged and in 1934 Ludwig and Ludwig published *America's N.A.R.D. Drum Solos* containing 150 rudimental solos by its members. This was the 'first large library of rudimental drum solos ever printed and published under one cover.'

¹⁴⁶ Stone was one of the founding members of the Thirteen Club which predated N.A.R.D.

¹⁴⁷ John Philip Sousa, *The Trumpet and Drum*, Fischer, 1886.

¹⁴⁸ The rudiments had previously been notated in George B. Bruce and Daniel D. Emmett's 1862 publication, *The Drummer's and Fifer's Guide*, and before that in Charles Stewart Ashworth's 1812 publication, *A New Useful and Complete System of Drum Beating*. The rudiments themselves originated in Switzerland and came to North America with the English regiment prior to the American Revolution.

Although rudimental drumming is derived from the calls and signals used by the military, it has remained the foundation on which the technique of most drummers and percussionists is based. Becker's choice of this medium as a means of conveying the rhythmic intricacies and compositional concepts of *tabla* music guaranteed that *Lahara* would be accessible to many musicians. But the shift away from rudimental expectations makes the work quite difficult to play and sometimes understand. There are bound to be different interpretations regarding the structural and aesthetic aspects of a work when two diverse traditions, such as *tabla* and rudimental drumming, have been integrated.

Although Becker premiered *Lahara* with Nexus at the Music Gallery in Toronto in 1977, the work has since been performed by many other percussionists. Becker once remarked how strange it was to hear this work performed on the tight-tensioned drums used by present-day drums corps, where the emphasis is placed on exact stick height and evenness between the hands. This aesthetic differs fundamentally from the older rudimental style of playing where the evenness of the hands is not an issue and playing on calf skins, rather than tight plastic heads, produces a more mellow sound. With reference to Wilcoxon and Stone in his introduction to *Lahara*, Becker places himself within the older tradition and it is through this style of playing that more subtle nuances of the *tabla* compositions can be realized.

Collaborating and interpreting

In January 1982, just prior to Nexus' tenth anniversary concert series at the St. Lawrence Centre Town Hall in Toronto, Michael Craden died of cancer. The loss of Craden had a significant impact on Nexus. As Craden could not read music, Nexus had remained up to that point largely an improvisational ensemble embracing only notated works that they had composed themselves or with which they had a special connection. Hartenberger reflects on some of the changes that happened after Craden's death:

I think there was one incident though that changed things quite a bit, and that was when Michael Craden died in January of '82. Michael didn't read music, so up to that point there was that free, improvisational element in everything we programmed. We allowed for that. After he died, we began a period when we progressed into more structural [sic] pieces.¹⁴⁹

Nexus gradually expanded its repertoire to include the works of a wide range of composers from North America, Asia, and Europe. Many of these works were composed by friends or people with whom Nexus had interacted in some way or another. Scores sent to the ensemble from unfamiliar composers rarely make their way into Nexus' repertoire, as the logistical problems of setting up the instruments, learning the parts, and coordinating all the players' schedules for rehearsals is paramount. Once a work has been adopted by the group, however, it often remains in its repertoire for years, or even decades. Engelman comments as follows on Nexus' approach to its repertoire:

We don't have a set plan. We operate as things happen. I think the things that happen to us are as important as the things that we make happen. So the amount of repertoire that we ingest as a group is, perhaps in relation to some other contemporary music ensembles, rather small. But I would have to say that the music we do play comes to us by such a natural process that usually we play it over and over again.

¹⁴⁹ Hartenberger's comments in Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' pp. 30-31.

This situation has, I think, two positive points in its favor. One is that audiences that hear us play contemporary music usually like what we play, because we know it so well. They're hearing really intimate performances, but yet they have not lost the improvisatory nature, which I think is important. The other positive aspect of assimilating repertoire that way is that, by playing pieces you really like repeatedly, you experience something in the performance of music which is lost to many groups that only play a piece once. I am speaking as a resident of Canada, where that situation is very common. In Canada, where you have tremendous governmental support for the arts, it can become a way of life for ensembles to continually want to do world premieres. So orchestras and chamber groups are continually commissioning composers. This is healthy for the composers; it provides them with work. But I would guess, just off the top of my head, that 99% of those pieces are rarely, if ever, played again. So the emphasis is on doing something new, and getting the impact of the publicity of doing a world premiere. So I think that's really important in relation to Nexus. We don't actively seek music, but rather we are very content to wait until something hits us. Usually when that happens, it happens for a good reason. And so it's something that we want to do.¹⁵⁰

One of the earliest notated works that Nexus performed was Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*. As both Hartenberger and Becker played in Reich's ensemble, they were very familiar with this work and would sometimes insert it into a Nexus improvisation, as Hartenberger explains:

We did a piece originally written for two pianos on two marimbas. We actually first started playing that as part of an improv, or we would play it with people accompanying on other instruments but it didn't work very well. So eventually, it just became programmed as a separate piece. Since then, we've done other Steve Reich pieces on our concerts.¹⁵¹

Piano Phase was a natural move away from improvisation as it had many elements that allowed Becker and Hartenberger freedom to move within the work. When composing *Piano Phase*, Reich had been concerned with setting a process in motion and the phasing technique allowed him to do this. Once the musical material was decided upon, the process of phasing established the structure of the work. This compositional technique allowed the performers to take an active part in the musical process by determining the number of repetitions of a pattern and the rate of phasing. The performers were also free of notation as the patterns were easily memorized and they could therefore become totally immersed in the musical material. This type of involvement simulated some of the qualities of improvisation but, because of the established boundaries, it could not truly be classified as such.¹⁵² In one Nexus performance of *Piano Phase*, Becker and Hartenberger became so immersed in the process of phasing that the work extended from the usual twenty minutes or so to approximately forty-five minutes. Hartenberger said that they became so involved in the phasing process that they had simply forgotten about the audience.¹⁵³

Nexus later added Reich's *Drumming* (1971), *Music for Pieces of Wood* (1973), and *Sextet* (1984, rev. 1985) to their repertoire. Hartenberger had been involved in the year-long preparation of the premiere of Reich's *Drumming* and so was intimately familiar with the work. Like *Piano Phase*, performers of this work also had a certain measure of liberty, as

¹⁵⁰ Engelman's comments in Mattingly, 'Nexus,' pp. 10-11.

¹⁵¹ Hartenberger's comments in Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 10.

¹⁵² Steve Reich, *Writings About Music*, New York: New York University Press, 1974, pp. 51-52.

¹⁵³ Generally this work lasts for about twenty minutes.

improvisation constitutes an important and integral part of the piece. In *Drumming*, several performers listen to the composite rhythms and melodies produced by other players, and are then free to highlight whatever patterns they hear. The length of this exploration, or any other part of the composition for that matter, is not fixed. This allows performers the freedom to enjoy listening and exploring without the pressure of having to move forward. This aspect of the work is similar to many non-Western musical traditions where cycles are repeated at the discretion of the performer. Becker reflects on playing Reich's work:

I find the music physical and I really like it from that point of view. I got involved with it when I was just getting to know something about West African music. I found similarities in the way I had to hear to play both of those kinds of music successfully, and it was something that I found very enlightening.¹⁵⁴

Music for Pieces of Wood is written for five claves of specified pitch, four of which play the rhythm while the fifth keeps time by beating quarter notes. Patterns are constructed against identical patterns displaced in time and a canon effect is clearly audible. This piece has become a staple work in Nexus' repertoire; perhaps because of the minimal numbers of instruments involved, the group often use it to open a program. *Sextet* was co-commissioned by Nexus and the Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians with funding from the French government.¹⁵⁵ Nexus originally requested a quintet, but as Reich always groups his instruments in pairs, Nexus received a sextet instead.¹⁵⁶ Nexus premiered the work with Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians in Paris in December 1984. Reich and Musicians premiered the concert version the following year.

Integrating musical traditions

Although Nexus was initially formed as an improvisatory ensemble, the group gradually embraced other forms of music as the members shared their musical interests with each other. Nexus' inclusion of novelty ragtime music, silent movies, and rope drumming in its performances reflects the members' research into their own cultural traditions. Nexus added world music to its concerts by adapting traditional music from Ghana and Zimbabwe, and by performing with their teachers from India, Indonesia, and Ghana. Taking this influence a little further, some of the members of Nexus began composing works based on their experience of the music of other cultures. Compositions such as Becker's *Lahara* illustrate the blending of two diverse drumming traditions, namely that of the North Indian *tabla* and the Western snare drum. By combining compositions from the Benares tradition of *tabla* playing with rudimental drumming techniques, Becker achieved a synthesis of these two distant traditions.

The members of Nexus sought to explore a wide range of musical traditions because they were curious about the music of their own and other cultures. Having no desire to place themselves within the confines of a Western percussion ensemble, they used improvisation on mostly non-Western musical instruments to create their own style of music. Assuming a non-judgemental approach towards music, Nexus thought nothing of juxtaposing diverse styles and musical traditions in its performances. As the group's musical expression and sound palette expanded, so did its definition of music.

¹⁵⁴ Becker's comments in Mattingly, 'Nexus,' p. 37.

¹⁵⁵ Daniel Warburton, 'Aspects of organisation in the "Sextet" of Steve Reich,' Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 1988.

¹⁵⁶ Hartenberger, Conversation with author.

The members of Nexus transferred their experience of improvisation and non-Western music to their performance of composed music. Choosing to perform rather than rehearse, Nexus maintained a spontaneity in its performances of this music as decisions were frequently left to the moment. Wyre explains:

This spontaneity is absolutely essential. You see, when you study music you only learn what others have known. To really make music you have to get rid of all those old ideas, all that garbage in your head. There are musicians who spend 80 per cent of their time practising. And it shows when they give a concert. It sounds like they're still practising.

With Nexus, we're trying to get percussion [sic]. What we're really trying to get into is the essence of music.¹⁵⁷

The members of Nexus came together through their interest in exploring sound and improvisation and in so doing, they found that they had formed a group which gave them the freedom to be themselves. Not only could they perform the music of their choice, but they also had a supportive group in which to share their musical interests. That some of these interests involved different musical traditions other than their own seems self-evident in view of the social and historical context. As Wyre notes:

North America's a melting pot, and we forget that our tradition is based on many different cultures rather than one particularly strong culture. We've been lucky in being able to explore and develop all kinds of new things. In fact, most of the groups in Canada and the United States are fusion groups that represent a combination of many cultures.¹⁵⁸

Cahn's philosophy took the concept of fusion one step further: 'All music is fusion. That's the beauty of it. It is connecting people from different times and places together.'¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Peter Goddard, 'Sextet shares gut feeling: True Nexus is in the solar plexus,' *The Toronto Star*, 1 May 1976.

¹⁵⁸ Iris Brooks, 'The World Drum Festival,' *Modern Percussion*, 3, December 1986, p. 17, 37.

¹⁵⁹ Cahn's comments in Bump, 'A conversation with Nexus,' p. 32.