

# The Audio/Visual Percussion Ensemble Concert

BY GENE FAMBROUGH

For a recent percussion ensemble concert at UAB (University of Alabama at Birmingham), we presented what was referred to as an “audio/visual” concert. As part of an ongoing need to keep our programs interesting for my students, our audience, and myself, I wanted to create an out-of-the-ordinary concert that the students would be proud of.

## IMPETUS

I have had an idea for a new type of percussion concert for quite some time. I’ve wanted to stage a multimedia production, incorporating several areas into one event—percussion, film, choreography, lighting, staging in the round, electronics, marching percussion, and other aspects—to create a unique performance genre. After attending PASIC 2003 and seeing the Base4 percussion quartet from Northern Illinois University, I became determined to make a similar project happen for a large percussion ensemble.

Recently, enough pieces of the puzzle fell into place to allow a reduced version of the multimedia production: the audio/visual concert. As most ensemble directors are aware, planning a fall concert can be problematic because of unknown factors—enrollment, student ability, etc. Between the fall and spring semesters, enrollment of the ensemble grew in both quantity and quality, and I started to consider literature that would capitalize on our available talent.

## PROGRAMMING

This program began as would any other percussion ensemble concert; each work found its way onto the program based on its own qualities. I had been waiting for the right time to perform Varese’s “Ionisation,” and as I studied the score with personnel in mind, it be-

came apparent that we could finally pursue it. One of my all-time favorite works is “Stained Glass” by David Gillingham. I thought this would provide excellent contrast, in addition to being a piece that I wanted my students to know. I had discovered that one of my students was an avid Led Zeppelin fan—the per-



The picture and recording together created the effect that Varese was speaking to the audience about his music.

fect reason to lure him into the group and feature him on “Bonham” by Christopher Rouse.

As I looked at these selections, several logistical concerns became apparent. These were all large works in terms of performers, stage setup, and/or difficulty (no quartets, xylophone rags, or novelty pieces). Our normal approach to concerts at UAB is to present three or four works for percussion ensemble and three or

four steel band charts on the same program. I now had to pick steel band selections that would work for this concert. At this point, all was progressing as normal. Several colleagues and I discussed the concept of performing a live soundtrack to a silent film. I had contacted Steven Hemphill at Northern Arizona University about a recent project of his, and he sent details about a silent film accompaniment he had created. As we looked at the list of xylophone rags, several of us had performed many of the solos. After a short discussion, a project was born.

After the programming was complete, the timing of these pieces made it necessary to move the steel band off the concert to a different performance date (a good decision, as it turned out). As I thought about the selections for the program, the concept of the audio/visual connection became an apparent option for the multimedia event. The next step was to plan, design, and implement the visual aspects of each work.

## VISUALS

For this concert, an atypical beginning would signal the audience to expect an unusual performance. A PowerPoint slide show was created to introduce “Ionisation” and to outline basic structural points as they occurred. The introduction featured a picture of Varese while a voice-over was played over our house sound system. The recording was of several passages that characterized his approach to composition.

I located a professor of French in our Department of Foreign Languages who could spend a few minutes in our recording studio. I asked him to let his accent come through naturally so as to sound like a transplanted Frenchman. The picture and recording together created the effect that Varese was speaking to the audience about his music—a pre-concert

lecture of sorts. During the performance, major structural events were marked on corresponding slides, some of which contained thematic material transcribed in Finale and imported into PowerPoint.

The next piece on the program, "Stained Glass," needed a different visual approach to be effective. Rather than continue with slides, we took advantage of the professional lighting system in our performance hall. Listening to the work, the various moods in each section implied colors or shades. For our performance, the opening of the first movement was performed in a red color wash, the marimba entrance in the second movement was done in blue, and the third movement opened up to a bright yellow. One of the more complicated (but effective) sections was the descending chromatic harmonization in the second movement, in which colors faded between shades as the harmony changed. In a departure from the score, the chime part (opening the second movement) was split into two parts and performed by two players in the balcony at the rear of the hall. As the piece concluded, the stage went to black.

The first half of the program concluded with "Bonham." Again changing the visual accompaniment, footage from *The Song Remains the Same* and *Led Zeppelin* were spliced together for a video montage. Not meant to synchronize exactly with the music of the ensemble, the footage was to provide a background similar to a contemporary music video. Some video had effects added or was slowed down to create visual interest. The video was timed to stop as the drumset solo began, focusing attention on the ensemble for the remainder of the performance. Certainly more of a long-term project for the semester, it was well worth the effort.

For the second half of the program, a "live soundtrack" was produced to accompany the 1923 silent film *The Balloonatic* starring Buster Keaton. The film runs approximately 23 minutes, and as mentioned earlier, a group of colleagues and I took on this project. The musical portion was a series of seven xylophone rags: "Charleston Capers," "Valse Brillante," "Xylophonia," "Cross Corners," "Yes! We have no Bananas," "Ragtime Robin," and "Triplets." These mirrored the mood of the action in each scene of the film. Additionally, students

produced "Foley" sound effects while watching the film—everything from slide whistles and slapsticks to waterfalls and bulb horns.

Preparing this part of the program was a challenge. The most difficult aspect was coordinating a rehearsal schedule that would afford security to the performance. Each piece was timed to coincide with certain events on the film. If the tempo was too fast or slow, transition points would not synchronize correctly.

Occasionally, adjustments to the overall form of a work were made in order to correct timing issues.

#### ADDITIONAL CONCERNS

When planning a visual "accompaniment" to a piece of music, several factors must be considered. First, the visuals should be a natural outgrowth of the music, not an aspect that is forced onto the audience. Second, the accompaniment should be interesting enough to comple-

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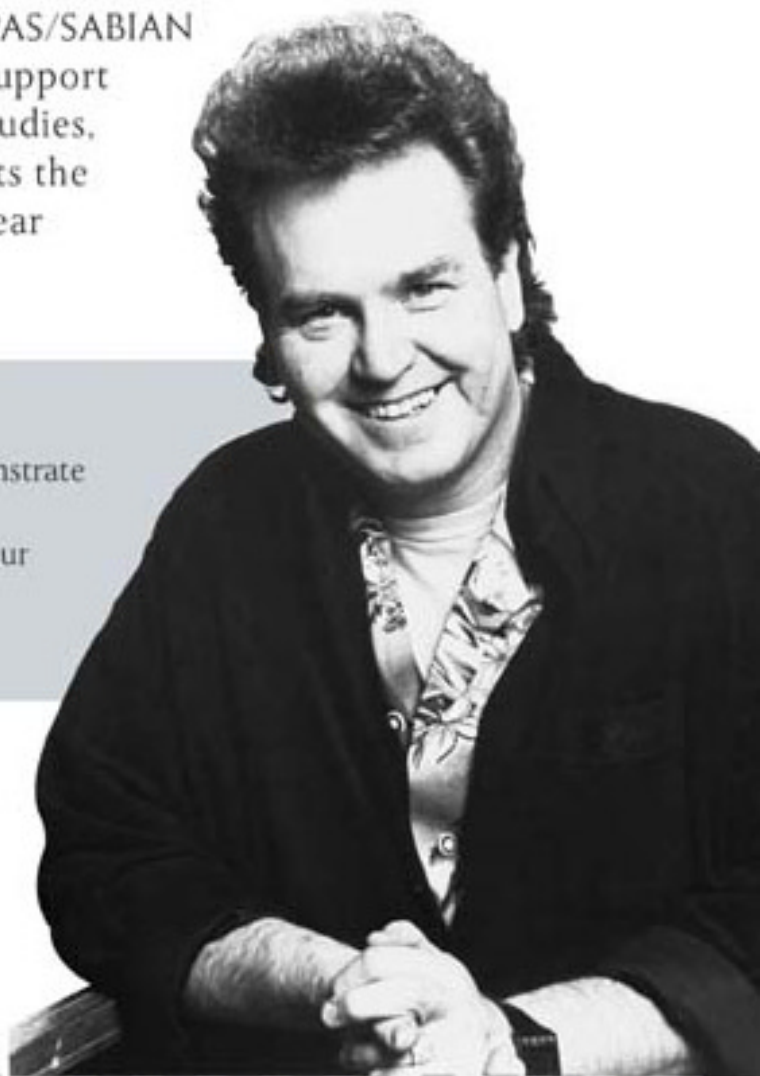
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- A) Complete and submit the application below.
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ment the work, yet not so overbearing as to detract from the music. Third, presentations should be of the highest professional quality; otherwise the project will not have a strong impact.

As our ensemble rehearsed, it was also apparent that the highest caliber music preparation was critical; the goal is to enhance the concert experience, not substitute for poor performance quality. Additionally, it is important to have ample rehearsal time with colored lighting, especially when changing colors during a performance. When planning an audio/visual concert, the visual accompaniments should vary in style from each other to be as effective as possible.

It was necessary to appoint a non-playing member of the ensemble as a technical assistant on each piece. For example, the assistant for "Stained Glass" used a score marked with the color changes to cue the lighting technician. The assistant for "Bonham" assembled the video footage and prepared the format. As we have a music technology program at UAB, this capitalized on the tools available to these students while providing valuable experience within their field. An additional assistant was needed to operate the computer during the concert; this included running the PowerPoint presentation (while following the score to "Ionisation") and the footage for both films.

The professional staff of our campus arts center easily handled the procurement of a 15' x 15' projection screen, the sound playback to begin the concert, and the lighting changes during "Stained Glass." It was also necessary to secure a laptop computer and projection monitor from our campus technology department.

## CONCLUSION

In my four years at UAB, this was by far the best percussion ensemble concert we have presented. I hope some of the ideas presented in this article provide you with some inspiration for a future concert. With some thought, an effective program can be planned to give both performers and the audience a new and exciting concert experience. The audio/visual percussion ensemble concert takes a good deal of advance planning and work, but it is certainly well worth it.

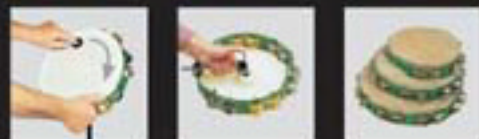
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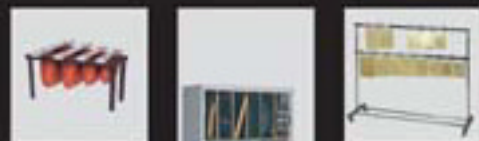
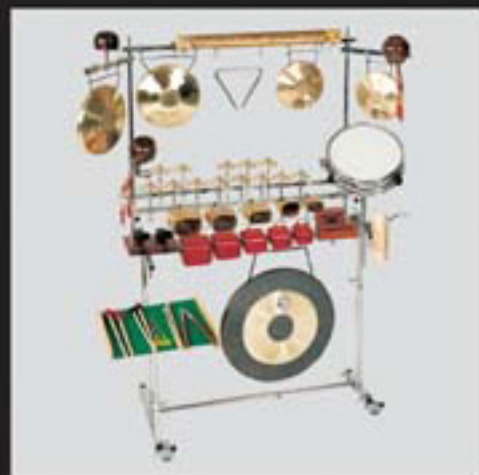
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