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Paul Dresher interview - 'Schick Machine' creator

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic Thursday, March 17, 2011

For more than 30 years, Paul Dresher has been composing and performing music for recognizable forces - guitars, keyboards, chamber ensembles, even the occasional symphony orchestra.

But all along, he's also kept a hand in as a sort of musical Thomas Edison, retreating into his lab together with inventing partner Daniel Schmidt to conjure up fantastical new instruments - industrial-strength dobros, deconstructed pipe organs, gargantuan metronomes and more.

Some of those creations are now on display in "Schick Machine," a work of musical theater starring percussion virtuoso Steven Schick, with text by Dresher's longtime collaborator Rinde Eckert. The performance run at Z Space helps mark the 25th anniversary of the Paul Dresher Ensemble.

Dresher, 60, spoke by phone from his home in Berkeley.

Q: Your invented instruments first came into full view in 2002, with the wonderful theater piece "Sound Stage." Had you been working on them all along, behind the scenes?

A: I actually started inventing instruments when I was in high school. I dropped out of an advanced placement math class and went into woodshop so I could start building these fantastical devices.

But the real turning point came when my mother gave me a copy of "Genesis of a Music," by the composer and instrument builder Harry Partch. I didn't understand his tuning system, or what he was talking about in terms of music theater - but I was inspired by the idea that you could build your own orchestra. And later, when I studied with Lou Harrison in the mid-'70s, I started building gamelans.

Q: So what happened to the inventing during the intervening years?

A: In 1979, I built my tape loop system, which I used in pieces like "Slow Fire" and "Dark Blue Circumstance." That looks like a different thing, but in fact it's quite related.

I had an idea for a style of music that I wanted to play, which involved small forces creating layered, contrapuntal music. And making a tape loop system that could produce that was really a form of instrument inventing.

Q: How closely did the results fit what you'd imagined?

A: They did, but an inventor doesn't necessarily want to know all the uses of what they invent. The best case is when you invent something and it turns out to be capable of doing an infinite number of things that you didn't invent.



Q: What are the instruments used in "Schick Machine"?

A: The main one is something called a Hurdy Grande, which is like an oversized hurdy-gurdy. I was fascinated by the process of mechanically bowing a string. This is about 10 feet long, with seven strings and a motor controlling the wheel that's bowing the strings. For the player, it's a cross between a guitar and a keyboard.

Q: It sounds as though your initial impulse was to create instruments that could produce the sounds you imagined, but with the recent instruments, you build them and try to figure out what they can do.

A: It actually works both ways, and part of the process is to see what a performer will find in the instrument. That's especially true for percussionists, like Schick or Joel Davel, who's my main performing partner.

Percussionists are always trained to find what sounds can come out of any simple object. With Schick, you can give him a spoon, a fork and a piece of paper, and he'll come up with an amazing improvisation.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I have a number of projects going, in particular a concerto that was commissioned by the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra. Last year when I worked with (music director) Joana Carneiro on my piece "Cornucopia," I really fell in love with her. That piece is 20 years old and has been done by a lot of orchestras, but her performance was the best.

Q: So, this is a concerto for invented instruments?

A: Yes, the Hurdy Grande and another one called the Quadrachord, which is a horizontal 15-foot stringed instrument that you can pluck, bow or hammer. Right now I'm figuring out what it will mean to integrate the tuning systems of these instruments with a traditional symphony orchestra.

At the moment, I'm in my usual state of being both excited and terrified. Which is good - terrifying is what gets me going. It gets me to ask the questions that have to be asked in order not to embarrass myself. Terrifying is where all the growth comes from.