
SCHICK MACHINE:

Premise, Aesthetic Vision, Method and Educational Program

Our basic premise is as follows: our character is a musician/percussionist who, because of his obsessive focus on sound, endlessly collects the many objects/instruments that for him carry the vivid memories of his lifetime of sonic experiences. He has become weighted down by these objects and memories and now, facing eviction from his warehouse/loft that is being razed in the name of progress, he must choose just a few objects/sounds/memories that he can take with him. This simple premise offers us the means to develop both the musical and dramatic narratives simultaneously. In the process of choosing what from his collection of objects/memories to retain or discard, he must revisit both the musical and narrative experiences that each carries for him. The accumulation of musical and personal stories will allow us to explore many larger issues - memory, progress, ageing, obsession, the unforeseen consequences of our choices and the acceptance of the ephemeral and fragile nature of sound, objects and life itself.

OUR VISION OF *SCHICK MACHINE*

Schick Machine will be a work for solo percussionist and physical performer Steven Schick on a stage filled with very large musical instruments and mechanical sound sculptures that can move under sophisticated computer control. There will be two distinct personalities on-stage: Steve Schick, the individual, and the sound sculptures/machines that inhabit a world seemingly controlled by an unseen hand or arbitrary power. As Schick attempts to relate to the machines, many struggles emerge: the familiar one of man versus machine; the search for individual expression in a technologically overpowering world; and an exploration of how, as individuals, we can find a way to live within an environment of opposed forces that we are unable to fully understand or control.

As the lights come up on a multi-leveled stage, we see two very different groups of objects. One group, constructed primarily of wood and organic materials, appears to consist of unique but clearly musical instruments suited to making sounds we recognize as conventionally musical. They include a giant version of a medieval hurdy gurdy - in our case with many strings, 10-12 feet in length being bowed by a large wheel turned by a hand crank. The "fingerboard" of this instrument is so large that the performer may have to lie down across it to perform the score. Other instruments include approximately 40 rectangular wooden boxes, each carefully tuned to produce a variety of sounds. We see wooden and plastic tubes of varying lengths and diameter with serrated surfaces that can be "bowed" with a stick to produce sounds ranging from a zipper to a huge chorus of frogs. Some of these instruments first appear only in a fragmented or "raw" form and will be progressively assembled by percussionist Schick over the course of the performance as he tries to gain control over his physical and sonic environment.

The second group of objects looks and feels entirely different, with a threatening quality that evokes uncontrolled power. Constructed primarily of metal and having motors connected to computers, these are large, equally unique contraptions that move apparently under their own volition and produce aggressive sound and seemingly dangerous movements. One device has three independently spinning discs of different diameters from 24 to 60 inches mounted on elliptical axles. These disks crash into one another, creating chaotic and clangorous sounds. There is also a group of what appear to be upright poles, each bearing an erratically moving motor that whips around a 10-foot length of band saw blade. As that blade strikes a solid object, it produces a remarkable sound resembling a whip, a slap and a "boing." Large rectangular boxes are attached to chains that rattle and thrash about at independent speeds, sometimes creating repetitive, intense interlocked drum-like rhythms.

These two groups of objects function as the musical instruments and the stage set of the piece. They are emblematic of the dramatic physical and emotional contrasts that motivate the new theatrical work: musical sound versus random noise, human/live performer versus computer controlled machine, organic musical instruments versus inorganic metal objects, and so forth. Over the course of the work, the boundaries and interrelationships of these seemingly disparate realms are both mediated and exploited. Sometimes our performer, virtuoso percussionist Schick, will have human characteristics, while at other times he will take on machine-like characteristics, obsessively repeating the same physical/ musical gestures. The machines will also take on different roles, at times moving and responding with what appears to be human sensibility to Schick, to

other machines, and even to the audience. Throughout the work, questions about what distinguishes noise from music, human from machine, will be explored in diverse ways.

In the work, spoken text will not have a traditional narrative function. Schick's character and the issues he struggles with will be defined primarily through sound and movement. This frees playwright and director Rinde Eckert to create a text that will freely explore the broader philosophical issues being evoked through Schick's physical interaction with the invented instruments and sound sculptures. Our upcoming collaborative phase will determine precisely how these issues will be addressed, but given Eckert's past experience as playwright and actor, we are certain that seriousness as well as humor will be a strong component of the libretto he creates.

The work will explore many philosophical and aesthetic subjects. These will include such issues as the dynamic of man versus machine, the quest for human control of a world increasingly dominated by unseen powers, the search for individual expression in a technologically complex world, and our struggle to reconcile and ultimately enjoy those things which are irreconcilable but which nonetheless coexist in counterpoint to one another.

THE AESTHETIC PREMISES OF *SCHICK MACHINE*

Because the premises for the project are so unusual, its artistic director Paul Dresher has written the following explanation of his artistic aspirations for the new work:

"From the time I carried my first "exotic" invented instrument through the halls of my high school decades ago (constructed over two intense weeks during the Christmas holiday in 12th grade, it was something like a guitar but with a very large and unusual body shape, and many additional strings), it has been my consistent pleasure to see the wonder and curiosity that audiences experience during their first encounter with an invented musical instrument. My amazement continues to this day, even after decades of creating and performing on new acoustic and electronic instruments, as evidenced most recently by audiences at last weekend's Bard College Summerfest, where I performed on a pair of huge invented string and electronic instruments.

Although discussing the mysterious and magical properties of music is beyond the scope of this proposal, it is the premise upon which all my work is based. I believe that one of the primary reasons that music has played such a vital role in all cultures and for all time is that it touches a part of the human psyche that transcends language and connects people across cultural and historical boundaries. The sound and sight of invented instruments, particularly if they result from a radically new design or method of performing, returns people to this child-like place of wonder: "how *did* you get that amazing sound when you... ?" People young and old are thrilled to experience the visual and sonorous qualities of an invented instrument being pounded, blown, struck, bowed or even dropped on the floor.

When we combine this sense of wonder about sound with the power of the large visual *scale* of the invented instruments (i.e. bigger is better in theater, as regularly demonstrated on the grand opera stage or the elaborate sets and costumes that are now a requirement for commercial theater productions like *Lion King* or *Cats*) we have a very fertile ground for creating a theatrical production due to the high level of audience engagement from the outset of a performance."

OUR COLLABORATIVE METHOD

Our collaborative method is one that Paul Dresher, Rinde Eckert and the Ensemble have developed over nearly three decades of producing a series of strikingly individual and critically acclaimed works. The fundamental part of this process is our confidence that through it we can transform ambitious, generalized aesthetic premises and questions into compelling works of art. Some of our most successful pieces were developed collaboratively, including *Slow Fire* [1985-1988], which grew out of strictly musical improvisations; *Pioneer* [1990], which explores America's pioneer roots and identity; and *Sound Stage* [2001], which, like the proposed work, emerged from the sounds made by a group of invented musical instruments.

Our collaborations begin with a carefully selected group of artists who, having agreed to very generalized starting premises, commit to a lengthy interactive process. The process will alternate between largely solitary

work periods, where each artist produces something (an instrument design, a way of moving, text or music) that could potentially be part of the production, and progressively more interactive periods (meetings, workshops and then final production) when the individually-produced ideas are shared, analyzed, and experimented with in various ways. Typically preliminary ideas are either discarded or gradually developed collectively to become an integral part of the new work. Each collaborator must be able to juggle his commitments to his own creations with an openness to the ideas of others. Each must ultimately be willing to accept rejections and transformations of his work, often with results that are very different from or even antithetical to the original intentions.

Here is an example of how this collaborative process worked for *Sound Stage*. Dresher's initial concept was to create a music theater work that would be performed on a set comprised entirely of large-scale invented musical instruments. An initial area of interest was the periodic motion of a pendulum and how this physical motion could be exploited in a musical context. Dresher began to experiment with pendulums of various sizes, eventually progressing to building a 17-foot long rolling structure with a 16 foot-long pendulum on each of its two sides. On one side, the pendulum strummed the strings on three giant harps; on the other, the pendulum struck a diverse array of simple percussive instruments such as a cow bell, wood block and tambourine. The complexity of stabilizing this structure for the required musical precision necessitated the construction of an elaborate two-tiered framework of stairs, decks and portals, which in turn became percussive musical instruments themselves. In the end, Dresher made every surface of the construction sonically active.

When Mr. Eckert saw Dresher's initial conception, he was most impressed by the way the giant pendulums evoked a slow-moving antique grandfather clock. In addition, Dresher's instrument seemed to be as much about architecture as music. For Eckert, it resembled a home with a ground floor and an attic in which one stores the past. From these two perceptions Eckert began to evolve his language for the work: the physics of pendulums defined time, and a home combined with time created memories. He then interviewed each performer in the work to learn about their memories of their childhood homes and their sense of the passage of time. Based on these interviews, he created fictions that explored the themes of time, memory and home. Dresher, responding to Eckert's preoccupation with *time*, composed sections of music that connected the pendulum with Eckert's textual explorations of the same subject.

THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Modeled on the very successful program we developed for *Sound Stage*, the educational program associated with our new work will include a 55-minute performance tailored to the interests of school-age children and family audiences. It will premiere along with the San Francisco run of the new work in Spring 2010. Because the invented instruments and sound sculptures in our new work exemplify basic principles of the physics of sound in a palpable and engaging way, building an educational program around them is a natural step. These programs will be presented to a broad range of ages, with a focus on children in 3rd through 12th grades.

Since most of our performances take place in venues operated by institutions of higher education or large municipalities, each usually has separate educational departments in place to offer programs to local schools and community groups. Typically, our presenters run an annual series of educational events that are marketed to the public and private schools and community groups; on occasion, a presenter has an ongoing relationship with specific schools or teachers whose students have special interests or training in the arts. We will work closely with these education departments, providing them with a description of our program offerings, a one page marketing piece and a spiral bound book that explains basic principles of sound to children. This instructional manual can also be used by teachers to introduce those principles before our presentation or to review what the children have seen later on.

Our basic educational program can be modified as needed to suit the children's age and the size of the group. The children will see and hear an hour-long presentation that will include basic explanations of how the instruments and sculptures work. After an extended question-and-answer period, we will invite groups of children up on stage and with strict supervision allow them to experiment with some of the instruments.

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Paul Dresher, Composer and Artistic Director
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