

“Personally curated, yet easily disposable”:

Crossing the threshold into the realm of found objects

by Jessica Tsang

Before diving into my survey of musical found objects, I'd like to take a step back to examine the often-ignored and close cousin of percussion – soundmen. Perhaps one of the most important and invisible jobs in the entertainment industry, good soundmen are true masters of noise. These artists are tasked with making the unnatural natural, or sometimes vice-versa – and must be well versed in every sonic detail of day-to-day life.

Jack Foley was the first true soundman – the proprietor for sound effects being viewed as a craft. Foley led an extremely interesting life: one in which all of the component parts led to him creating a new genre of sound art.

Foley was an Irish Catholic from New York. He moved to California to marry his Protestant wife, also looking to start a baseball career there. Eventually, he wound up in Bishop, CA, during WWI and served with the American Defense Society, guarding the precious local water supply from contamination. He's often described as a kind of everyman, writing and acting in the local theatre, working at the hardware store, drawing cartoons for the local paper, and so on. After the war ended, the town of Bishop needed revenue, since its residents had sold their farms to LA in exchange for

water rights. Foley had a brilliant idea to convince small film studios to start shooting westerns in Bishop: the town was a convincing enough “Wild West”, and still within the state boundaries of California. At that point, the film industry was just getting started and was ripe for ambitious entrepreneurs. There were no established positions, so studios were looking for flexibility and innovation in their employees. Foley quickly rose to a stuntman, assistant, and then director.

However, the turning point for Jack Foley came from the 1929 film, *Showboat*. Universal was set to release *Showboat* as a silent movie, despite the story’s popularity as a hit Broadway musical. Days before the release, Warner Bros premiered *The Jazz Singer*, the first full-length motion picture with synchronized sound. This sent Universal into a panic – they thought that audiences would also be expecting *Showboat* to have synchronized sound. In an effort to save face, Universal decided to record sound for *Showboat* with a full orchestra and singers postproduction, enlisting Foley’s help to add all of the additional and “unmusical” sounds in real time during the film. Foley and his crew provided hand claps, footsteps, background voices, and more....and thus, the art of Foley was born.

Foley art still bears Jack’s name today, which is indicative of how crucial he was to creating and forming the genre. All of the original Foley sound techniques were created and championed by Jack Foley, and the professional soundmen of radio, TV, and stage plays stemmed from Foley as well. One can’t really go to school for Foley -

all of the original Foley artists were trained by Jack Foley himself, and the art of Foley lives on only through its practitioners. Today, most Foley artists come from all sorts of different backgrounds that somehow relate to Foley.

Foley is an art, not a science. There are guidelines, but much of it relies on feel and craft. Perhaps obviously, a prevalent background was music – and in particular, drums. Foley artist Bob Mott was a vaudeville drummer who learned how to incorporate his sounds into radio. Robert Rutledge worked in the sound department for *Star Wars* and was known for creating custom effects when no standard sound would do. Similarly, Jimmy MacDonald created custom sound gadgets for animated Disney movies, and invented the marching machine, something that can now be purchased from percussion retailer Steve Weiss. As one may gather from these custom instruments, the Foley artists themselves were well versed in character studies. In the film of the play *Noises Off*, characters are constantly opening and closing doors – to the point where the doors are as much a part of the play as the characters themselves. To “walk” different characters, or to believably amplify the footsteps of any given actor, the Foley artist must replicate their physicality. Styles in sound reflect styles in culture – for example, Italian Foley will be different than French Foley, due to varying cultural values and mannerisms.

The sonic subtleties of Foley artists can also pose some unexpected challenges. How does one create a sound for an alien, or anything else that doesn't

actually exist? Some of the most impressive Foley is created for supernatural or fictional movies. Joan Rowe, the lead Foley artist on *E.T.*, states,

“Spielberg wanted E.T. to be liquidy and friendly, and sometimes liquidy sounds silmy. It's hard to put words to a sound. I walked through some stores and listened to the movement of packaged liver in a flat container. It had a 'cheery little sound'.”

Joan would handle this package of liver as one of the sounds for E.T.'s body. Every few days, she would go to the store and get another package. She would walk into the store in her Foley attire and one time she heard the cashier whisper to the person he was chatting with, “that's the woman who listens to the liver!” In the end, E.T.'s sound was a mixture of three separate ones – jello clumped inside a wet towel, a bag of popcorn, and the package of liver. (Ament 112)

While Foley and percussion are two very separate fields, one of the main connections between the two is Carroll Bratman, an orchestral percussionist from Baltimore. After amassing a huge collection of percussion instruments and building countless sound effects, Bratman decided to open Carroll's Music, a rental company that is still operational today. Bratman is credited with inventing the NBC chime, a three note glockenspiel with resonators that can still be heard at NBC studios today, and Carroll's rents out hundreds of Foley effects, from car horns to boat whistles, all built by Bratman. (Smith)

Just as Foley artists elevated silent movies to the hi-tech film industry that we know today, percussionists have expanded the instrumentation of contemporary music, as well as the idea of the music itself. The main difference between the two fields is the visual element – arguably, Foley artists value sounds more than percussionists, as their only job is to make the correct sound, often imperceptibly so. The best Foley is, in essence, invisible to its audience. Appearance has absolutely no factor – if the sounds of a rifle can be created with a can opener, there is no reason to use an actual gun. In contrast, the performing percussionist is usually quite visible to his or her audience. This visual element elevates the significance of the objects creating the sounds – in a way, they become as important as the sounds themselves. However, sometimes the best percussion solutions work for Foley, and vice versa. Bird calls, sirens, coconut shells, lion's roars, sandpaper blocks, typewriters, washtubs, and more can all be found in a Foley studio or a percussion concert. When vaudeville drummer-turned-Foley artist Bob Mott was asked what his favorite part of his job was, he replied, "I think the creative challenge." (Ament 115) This holds true for numerous percussion performers working with found objects, and many amateur builders seeking to perform the works of John Cage or Lou Harrison have echoed this sentiment.

John Cage is often heralded as percussion music's revolutionary, with good reason – his *27'10.544" for a Percussionist* is the first known work for solo percussion.

Cage's early compositional career consisted mostly of percussion music, which he credits to filmmaker Oscar Fischinger.

"Fischinger...made abstract films quite precisely articulated on pieces of traditional music. He constructed his films on Brahms' *Hungarian Dances* and other pieces of the same genre. He said, however, he would have liked some new music written for his films. When I was introduced to him, he began to talk with me about the spirit which is inside each of the objects of this world. So, he told me, all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound. That's the idea which led me to percussion. In all the many years which followed up to the war, I never stopped touching things, making them sound and resound, to discover what sounds they could produce. Wherever I went, I always listened to objects. So I gathered together a group of friends, and we began to play some pieces I had written without instrumental indications, simply to explore instrumental possibilities not yet catalogued, the infinite number of sound sources from a trash heap or a junk yard, a living room or a kitchen..." ("CageTalk" 73-74)

Cage's compositions for percussion ensemble are widely performed today. Walking into a percussion studio anywhere around the world, one is likely to find tin cans and conch shells among the timpani and xylophones – the former feature prominently in his percussion quartet *Third Construction*. However, Cage is careful to note:

"...when I was writing music for percussion, I simply wrote notes to designate the quite different sounds we were able to collect. We constantly changed sounds and the notation merely served as a way of doing it." ("For The Birds" 160)

This flexibility and adaptation of any (and all) objects forever changed percussion, as both an instrument and a genre – no longer were musicians bound to specialized “musical instruments”.

“Sounds, pure and simple...to us, any sound seemed capable of becoming musical by the simple fact that it was incorporated into a musical piece” (“For The Birds” 74).

Through this philosophy, all objects and sounds were freed. Cage would eventually compose *Child of Tree*, *Branches*, and *Inlets* for amplified natural sounds (cactus, plant materials, and water inside large conch shells), the latter referred to as “the most extraordinary sound”, by Cage’s close collaborator, choreographer Bonnie Bird. Bird called *Inlets*,

“a very Northwest piece on Merce’s part...those two [Cage and Cunningham] responded to the fact that they both grew up in a particular kind of landscape – heavily wooded, magnificent waterways, light, sound, mountains, trees, and so on. It’s where I grew up too, and it touched something common to the three of us.” (“CageTalk” 79).

In an interview with Cage, Peter Dickinson compares these pieces to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades – natural objects that became quite musical when Cage turned the spotlight towards them. (“CageTalk” 35)

In breaking down the barriers of designated classical instruments, Cage challenged the concept of instrumentation, and also the very idea of music itself. Any object present in a piece is an instrument, and any person playing it is a musician. Anyone can make music with anything.

Lou Harrison once said, “to make an instrument is in some strong sense to summon the future”, a poignant statement considering Harrison’s music and legacy. Encouraged to find and invent new instruments by his teacher, Henry Cowell, as a “way of simply by-passing the establishment,” Harrison grouped his new instruments into three categories, often utilizing all three in a single piece. (Miller 11) These categories consisted of found or foraged instruments, extended usage (using traditional instruments in non-traditional ways), and constructed instruments – inventing new instruments. (Miller 129) Despite his fascination with percussive sound, Harrison was committed to melody, balancing highs, lows, and middles in timbre even when writing for found objects. A common Harrison instrumentation usually includes objects such as automobile brake drums, wooden crates, ceramic bowls, and tuned glasses, yet these instruments intertwine with the unity and cohesion of a classical string quartet. While sourcing these materials to perform a single piece may seem daunting, Harrison has made his priorities clear: “You don't know a composer...until you know him on the proper instruments and in the tuning he likes.” (Miller 128)

Among [Harrison’s favorite found objects] are galvanized garbage cans, which he calls “America’s indigenous steel drum”...percussionist/composer William Kraft



remembers a rehearsal of the work during which the Concerto acquired an unplanned olfactory component. The garbage can player apologized, "I forgot to go out and buy one this morning; so I just grabbed my own." (Miller 134)

In embracing the sounds of whiskey crates, clock coils, and garbage cans, Harrison has created distinctly American music, in more ways than one. While "America's indigenous steel drum" can still be found in hardware stores and city parks nationwide, performing a Harrison piece often requires simple construction, and perhaps some digging around in a recycling center or junkyard – a prime example of the "Do-It-Yourself" ethos that has since been a tenet of American alternative culture. Harrison's instrumentations are a snapshot of American "junk", glued together with what musician Robert Hughes called "good ol' Yankee practicality...if I don't have it, I'll go to the junkyard and get it – or I'll build it." (Miller 130)

*Concerto for Violin with Percussion* (1959) includes galvanized washtubs; clock coils and coffee cans struck with beaters; wind chimes; brake drums; flowerpots; and plumber's pipes. Lou built his own "coffee-can metallophone" and "clock coil metallophone". He mounted the coffee cans in a rigid stand and the clock coils onto a resonator constructed from an old guitar. Performers today can easily construct their own coffee-can instrument: Lou specifies only relative pitches and describes in the introduction to the score how to drill and mount the cans. Clock coils, on the other hand, are becoming increasingly rare in our electric age. (Miller 134)

Many of Harrison's (and Cage's) pieces were written for modern dance, and their incredible timbres combined with simple, infectious rhythms often seem to explode off the page. In *Concerto for Violin with Percussion*, the violin soloist is analogous to a solo dancer, accompanied by percussion quintet. After the premiere of the piece, critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote, "Harrison's point... is to contrast the long lines and soaring output of the violin with the strong rhythms and spangling colors of the battery. [He] used to be a dancer, and is still one of the most choreographic of modern composers." (Miller 133)

A short six years after premiering *Concerto for Violin with Percussion*, Harrison had trouble sourcing the found objects that had been so plentiful when the piece was written. "You used to be able to go into a hardware store and make music with almost anything you found there. But no more, all this beautiful-post industrial stuff is soon going to be antiquarian." (Miller 134) In putting together a Harrison celebration concert, conductor Michael Tilson Thomas "lamented that 'even our junk is of inferior quality today'" – and indeed, it is important to remember and treasure our antiquarian objects. (Miller 131) What better way to do so than to listen to them? Harrison said it best: "my musical life has been based on a happy combination of abstruse knowledge and junk" (Miller 131).

While Harrison capitalized on the unique soundscape of post-industrial America, Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino had been contemplating a similar concept in a very different environment. Sciarrino's percussion quartet, *Un Fruscio*

*Lungo Trent'anni* roughly translated to “A rustling over thirty years”, was written (over thirty years) between 1967-1999. Utilizing an odd juxtaposition of natural sounds, raw materials, and violent sounds, Sciarrino creates an almost imperceptible, unsettling, fascinating piece of music.

Program note for Salvatore Sciarrino's *Un Fruscio Lungo Trent'anni*

*It may surprise you, the use of environmental sound (green pine branches, dry leaves, water) mixed with orthodox musical instruments, grouped according to their constituent material (wood, leather, glass, metal). The instruments are mainly brushed, not beaten.*

*Then those inexhaustible heartbeats of the Bass Drum appear. Their sound alarms because they are unnamed, like space.*

*The extreme tendency of the imperceptible is contradicted by violent and balanced elements, such as objects to break, metal pipes, guns.*

*The idea of meditation through sound was always congenial.*

*Imagine you sit on the banks of a river. Not a real river, but the river of music.*

*Imagine sitting down at the beginning of a concert. Not a real concert, but water and wind.*

*There are sounds in which you immerse yourself with delight. But there is one thing in which no sound makes sense, and it is the intensity of silence.*

*The tension is the thoughts of the listeners made perceptible by the performers.*

This piece, as well as almost all of Sciarrino's other works, can be labeled as *phenomenological music*. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena – the

perception of things not as they are, but as they appear to us. This is a philosophical term that has only recently been applied to music and usually in regard to how the listener perceives “non-traditional instrumental sounds.” In a program note for the 2008 Salzburg festival, Sciarrino’s music is described as “concentrated expressions of life...variously related to Sciarrino’s Sicilian origins: the silences of the heat of midday, the deserted landscape and the shimmering Mediterranean light as a background, against which this kind of musical phenomenology can unfold” (Helgeson 4-5).

“Because we experience sounds in relation to the objects that make them, we can identify certain aspects of objects (such as shape) through sound...our grasp of sound-making objects moves beyond simple association. An object can tell us things about its shape and surface merely through the sound it produces, without any prior exposure to it. In addition, our ability to hear shape and surface is intimately tied to our prior lived experience of other sound-making objects” (Helgeson 8).

Sonic objects are presented in the auditory realm, but they are ultimately defined by our larger experiences and relationships with the world. From this point of view, it is not a stretch to consider all sounds, and object sounds in particular, expressions of life. However, every listener’s experience of phenomenological music will be different based on their own previous experiences.

“The fundamental function of ambiguity in presentations of the sonic object is not meant to direct our attention towards any one particular meaning, but simply to direct it

away from the meaning presented by the physical situation (a stage with musical instruments)" (Helgeson 11).

In regards to *Un Fruscio Lungo Trent'anni*, each listener may have their own sonic recollections in response to the rustling pine branches, gurgling water, and gently caressed wood, skin, metal, and glass. As Sciarrino notes, it is a "concert of water and wind", interspersed with tense silence and the low heartbeat of a bass drum. Despite these rustlings, the violent outbursts are impossible to ignore. Each attack is jarring and upsetting, and the entry of gunshots towards the final quarter of the piece is made devastating by the lack of any anticipatory sound – tension, silence, shimmering, and chaos become one.

Phenomenological sound is possible only due to our awareness and memory of the various objects in our lives. From birth, we are surrounded by objects and begin to form attachments to them. Anyone who has ever witnessed the catastrophic effects of taking away a child's favorite toy or breaking a prized vase can attest to the very real emotional attachment many people have with their possessions. It's no wonder, then, that Frederic Rzewski's *To The Earth*, a solo for speaking percussionist playing four tuned flowerpots, is so effective.

*To The Earth* is intended to be a humble piece. The Homeric hymn recited by the performer is a reflection on the beauty of the earth, and there is no such thing as a professional flowerpot. "*To The Earth* shows the closeness of the flowerpots, which

speak for the earth, with the voice of its human inhabitants. The intertwined vocal and flowerpot lines convey the intimacy of our alliance with the planet” (Schick 11). To this end, Steven Schick has some valuable insights on the piece, having performed it frequently in varying locations.

“Listeners are very sensitive to the relationship between the human performer and the flowerpots. Audiences often adopt a sense of guardianship towards the pots. People often say that the pots look and sound beautiful; people are sometimes afraid the pots might crack. In fact concern over the fragility of the flowerpots often seems to border on tenderness. In essence audiences seem to identify with the flowerpots to a much greater extent than they identify with the human performer who ostensibly speaks for them.... the breakable flowerpots echo the impermanence of the earth and the life it sustains.” (Schick 11)

Indeed, protectiveness of the breakable is human instinct – yet there is something to be said for identifying with the pots rather than the performer, who is perhaps doing something seemingly alien to a non-musician. While flowerpots make many an appearance in Lou Harrison’s works, the nakedness of Rzewski’s piece imbues them with an altogether different, personal, purpose.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have a very similar instrumentation being used quite differently. There is a reverence toward the instruments in *To The Earth*, but not so much with David Lang’s *the so-called laws of nature*. Each of the movements is scored aggressively: *part 1* features twenty-eight woodblocks, *part 2* twenty-eight

pieces of metal, and *part 3* with a slightly more delicate instrumentation of teacups, flowerpots, tuned bells, and guiros. Lang's piece is more in the spirit of American consumer culture, than any kind of humility, and the objects themselves are played in a way that is much less precious, and much more an embrace of the mechanical.

In an interview preceding a *So Percussion* concert entitled "American Patterns", percussionist Josh Qullien referred to the flowerpot/teacup/tuned bell instrumentation of the Lang as "personally curated, yet easily disposable" – an all-encompassing phrase that has neatly summarized the role of found objects in today's music. In the program notes for "American Patterns", percussionist Adam Sliwinski reinforced these ideas: "The vast majority of sounds you hear tonight will be on instruments that were created, built, and/or foraged specifically for each new piece...David Lang's tuned flowerpots and teacups reframe ordinary objects as musical instruments" (Sliwinski). More than fifty years after John Cage and Lou Harrison had first liberated their percussion orchestra from the shelves of the hardware store, found object percussion continues to find ways of maintaining its own innovation.

Thomas Meadowcroft, an Australian-born, Berlin-based composer, performer, and instrument builder, is heralding the arrival of entirely new concepts in found object composition. *Plain Moving Landfill*, a percussion solo constructed physically and conceptually to resemble the layers of trash in a landfill, utilizes a unique footpump-controlled melodica organ of the composer's own invention to create a sonic "layer",

coupled with assorted metals, small objects, and a household fan. Meadowcroft's percussion duo, *Cradles*, is deemed a "utopic lullaby, to help put treasured analogue musical equipment to bed." Both percussionists spend the entirety of *Cradles* dragging magnetic tape through a reel-to-reel machine, and the resultant sound is both labored and mesmerizing.

While Meadowcroft evokes his ideas through the creation of new sound worlds, Brooklyn-based composer Christopher Cerrone often draws upon the sounds of his past. *Memory Palace*, a percussion solo for homemade instruments,

...is a kind of paean to the places and people that have deeply affected me...The crickets in the first movement, "Harriman," were recorded on a camping trip with two old and dear friends. The recording of windchimes in the third movement was recorded at my parents' house in their backyard. The sounds in the piece are signposts; they help me remember – and more importantly, understand, who I am.

(Cerrone)

Between the electronics incorporating Cerrone's memories, and the instrumentation featuring an old guitar, tuned pipes, tuned beer bottles, and a homemade marimba, any performance of *Memory Palace* is deeply personal – offering listeners a look into another's sonic past.



The incorporation of non-musical, or “found” objects into contemporary percussion works has opened percussive art up to infinite possibilities. As Oscar Fischinger said, liberating the spirit of objects yields a completely unique relationship between performers, composers, audiences, and the objects themselves, allowing each to tap into a deeply personal, albeit individually unique, experience. We exist and shape our identities through our objects – they are at once familiar and wondrous when applied in a musical context. As musicians, the incorporation of found objects pushes us to create, curate, explore, and ultimately grow, as a craft and collective. Found objects call into question the relationship between a performer and their instrument(s), the perception of objects we own and use on a daily basis, and which components make them familiar or unfamiliar. How many objects does it take to tell a story? How many of them make up a life? Musically, the possibilities and potential are endless.

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