ERPA 2014

The use of body percussion in contemporary choral music

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Abstract

Since the 20th century the body and the movement are at the center of music education thanks to the studies of pedagogists such as Dalcroze, Orff and to the philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s study about perception, where music is no longer seen as a purely intellectual phenomenon, but a bodily experience. We see a growing interest in the body in composition as well: due to the timbre exploration that body percussion offers (as in Vinko Globokar), and to a new ethnographic interest (as in Steve Reich). Aim of this research is to analyze the use of body percussion in contemporary classical choral music, and then to examine every composition in detail. The research compares different composers (Tadeja Vulc, Eric Whitacre, Ko Matsushita, Lozje Lebic) relating to their place of birth, to the type of body percussion chosen, to the different expressive aim; considering the spreading interest in the moving body in choral live performances’ dramatization, the research shows the importance of body percussion in choral education, as well as in timbre exploration looking for more traditional sounds. The purpose of this study is also to give a foundation for future researches since this ground seems to be unexplored and in great development.

Keywords: choral music; body percussion; contemporary composition; polyphony

1. Introduction

Body percussion was introduced in Western classical music by Steve Reich (1936), an American composer operating in minimalism during the Sixties and the Seventies. In 1972 he composed Clapping Music, a score for two

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performers clapping hands: one of them claps a 12-time-unit rhythm, and the other one shifts the sequence by one beat:

![Fig. 1: The sequence used by Steve Reich in Clapping Music](image)

A few years later Vinko Globokar (1934), a Slovenian origin composer working with French avant-garde, begins to test the relationship between the voice and the instrument; in *Corporel* (1985), the very body becomes a musical instrument: the timbre exploration becomes an artwork, and begins a research towards the instrument and the player's unity.

![Fig. 2: *Corporel* by Vinko Globokar](image)

As Brandon LaBelle states:

Many performative works adopt sound as a medium because of the intensities and immediacy of auditory experience [...] for sound figures as a vital articulation or lens on to the body and the tensions of its social performance, by making corporeality explicit: guttural, abrasive, intimate, explosive, vocal, and assertive, sound may amplify the inherent voices and drives of physical experience and what it means to be a body [LaBelle, 2006].

In choral contemporary music body percussion is used in different ways and with different aims. The purpose of this research is to explore the last twenty-five year's musical polyphonic overview, highlighting the different features of this technique. Four composers has been chosen as examples to classify body percussion's characteristics in contemporary choral music.

2. Noise imitation

The American Eric Whitacre (1970) is one of the most famous composers of the XXI century: The Los Angeles Times praised his music as «works of unearthly beauty and imagination, with electric, chilling harmonies» (2000).

In March 2010 he conceived a new concept of polyphony, using the new millennium's communication media (the internet and the webcam) to create a virtual choir; this social media experiment has reached now its fifth edition. In this artwork every singer individually records a video of his performance, and then all the videos are mixed together to give birth to the final performance. In 2013's last edition 5905 singers joined this project sending videos from more than a hundred countries.

Body percussion is used by Whitacre to imitate natural noises: in Cloudburst (1996) we see a first part in which the sound of the rain is imitated by singing Spanish musical phrases at individual time; in a second part, introduced by the whispering word “lluvia”, the instruments (bells, timpani, thundersheet, chimes, crash cymbal, piano) start to play followed by body percussion. One handclap in unison introduces the snaps played at free time, performed by all the singers except some hand-clapping and hitting their thighs at individual time. Body percussion is performed throughout the music's diminuendo, and keeps going on until it's the last present sound.
3. Timbre exploration

Moving to Slovenia, we find plenty authors integrating body percussion into choral compositions: Tadeja Vulc (1978) is one of the most productive ones. In her choral works body percussion is predominant in timbre research, as we see in her composition *Epilogue* (2010). This timbre exploration involves the whole body as well as the various sounds that can be played modifying the oral cavity or the lips' position.

The music begins with a sound played in unison in descending *glissando* sung by the women section, followed by whistles played in different frequencies, while the male section sings whispered sounds. We hear various consonants as f, z, s; then one bass sings an E1 modifying his cavity's resonance, that becomes a sound colored with overtones. Then we find a phrase sung by the men section where the first body percussion's element is shown: the women keep a fist in the left hand and with the fingers of the right hand they hit the other hand's knuckles:

This kind of movement is proposed again during the score; the voices keep increasing the intensity that leads to another percussive element: the choir is ideally split into two sections (left and right) that stomp alternately, and then the whole choir produces a wave made by individual stomps following the conductor's pointing. The third body percussion's element we find in the composition is two consecutive punches with the right hand on the chest, made by the male section on the right, then by the female section on the right, then by the female section on the left until the movement is performed by the whole choir. Meanwhile we see four female singers moving towards the audience and, from a half-circle position, they place in front of the public, without performing any body percussion movement, then returning in the women section's half-circle: in this new placement the singers play some phrases in homorhythm style without any percussive element; at the end of the score E1 with overtones is sung again by the bass, the punches in the chest performed by sopranos, altos and tenors recur, six female singers walks towards the center of the stage creating a small half-circle, while an *ostinato* is played; in the last repetition every female singer tilts forward his head.
4. Scenic Design

In *V Tihem Seletonju Casa* (1991) written by Lojze Lebič (1934), Slovenian composer as well, the choir motion is essential to build up a scenic design, and it is used also to increase the intensity of the music. For him, «the composer’s concept does not equal the pure mimetic attention of the chosen text, but merely acts as an encouragement for his musical reinterpretation led by pure musical dramaturgy» (Jernej Weiss, Contemporary choral production in Slovenia, 2006).

The score begins with all the singers crouched with both hands on their eyes; the men begin to whisper harsh sounds ("iz" “ka”), followed by a female section. All the sounds are combined with a rising movement and with the opening of the hands. The *soprano* section keeps crouching with both hands on the face, while the rest of the singers stands in silence leaning the head forward; this section begins to repeat some high and short sounds, standing up, and we hear now the percussions.

The choir returns whispering harsh sounds, increasing the intensity that brings the singers crouching again in silence. We enter now a new part of the choral work, in which every section performs specific movements with the hands going up and ahead, and later on the crouching position returns;

![Fig. 5: Zborsvetega Nikolaja Litija performing V Tihem Seletonju Casa (2012)](image)

then a new gesture is introduced: the male and female section alternate the opening and the closure of the hands at individual time. The singers now simultaneously turn the head on the left, then on the right, then in front of the audience and later this movement becomes individual, and ends with the arms stretched forward. The body weight is taken backwards first by the last lines, then by the middle lines and then by the front lines of the singers.

The opening position crouching with both hands on the eyes is back again, while gasps in unison are performed; the sections stands gradually until a soloist begins to sing, and the choir replies stretching out their hands back and forth; then the singers alternate the movement with the hands up and down stomping. The opening music is reprised in standing position with loose arms and rotating the head; at the end of the composition the male section stomps forward, and this movement is repeated by the women and alternated a second time until it's performed simultaneously. The piece ends with the choir frozen.

5. Scenic Design

Moving to Japan we see Ko Matsushita (1962), a choral conductor, composer and educator, who created *Japanese Game* (2005): looking at the title we can imagine it is a choral work in which the traditional feature is predominant.

The score begins with some vocal lines in which male and female voices cross each other as in a counterpoint, followed by a new phrase sung by a section of the women with nasalized sounds and with a round movement of the arms, some hand-clapping and small hops; this movement is performed in a canon by the rest of the female singers and by men in a modified way, with the right arm up together with the left knee. This movement is performed by the whole choir, and then begins a hand-clapping on time.
In a new part of the score the time changes going from a fast 4/4 to a slow 7/4, and the movements are performed alternately: when a section sings the other one replies with structured movements, including handclaps, stomps, hits on the tights:

![Fig. 6: NUSChoir performing Japanese Game (2012)](image)

then we see a movement performed in mirror style by men and women that begins simultaneously and then alternately; then this structured movements are performed in different ways by every section, until the same movement is performed by the whole choir. The score ends with all the singers keeping the left hand on the right shoulder and the head tilt on the left.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion we can suppose that body percussion is used in choral composition with different aims. There's an imitating purpose, another one that explores beat-box and vocal resonances, another one is to involve tradition into classical music; there's an interest in scenic design and choreography, and in exploring the body sounds; sometimes it is used in music education.

This topic surely needs a deeper analysis, since the mentioned authors portray a very small part of choral composition that involves body percussion; it would be interesting to trace a chronological line of composition, to conduct a specific research on different countries, to interview the composers to understand what's beyond the choice of this technique.

It would be stimulating to begin a research on possible benefits that body percussion can produce during choral warm-ups, as we are studying the great power on cognitive process played by BAPNE® method.

References

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