WEATHER SYSTEMS III

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Steven Schick

DISC 1:

DAVID LANG **Unchained Melody** (2002) 7:13
William Brent, ludbots

DAVID LANG **String of Pearls** (2006) 9:20

DAVID LANG **The Anvil Chorus** (1991) 8:00

MICHAEL GORDON **XY** (1998) 16:02

HARRISON BIRTWISTLE **The Axe Manual** (2000) 23:38
Aleck Karis, piano

DISC 2:

IANNIS XENAKIS **Rebonds** (1989) 12:41

BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH **Bone Alphabet** (1992) 12:19

KAIJA SAARIAHO **Six Japanese Gardens** (1994)

I: Tenju-an Garden of Nanzen-ji Temple 3:08

II: Many Pleasures (Garden of the Kinkaku-ji) 1:26

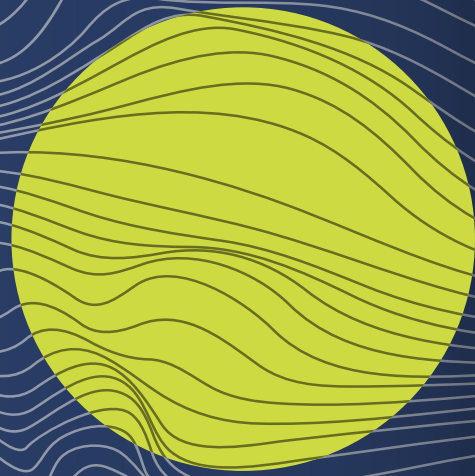
III: Dry Mountain Stream 3:04

IV: Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji 3:16

V: Moss Garden of the Saiho-ji 1:55

VI: Stone Bridges 3:17

RAND STEIGER **For Robert Erickson** (2024) 21:06

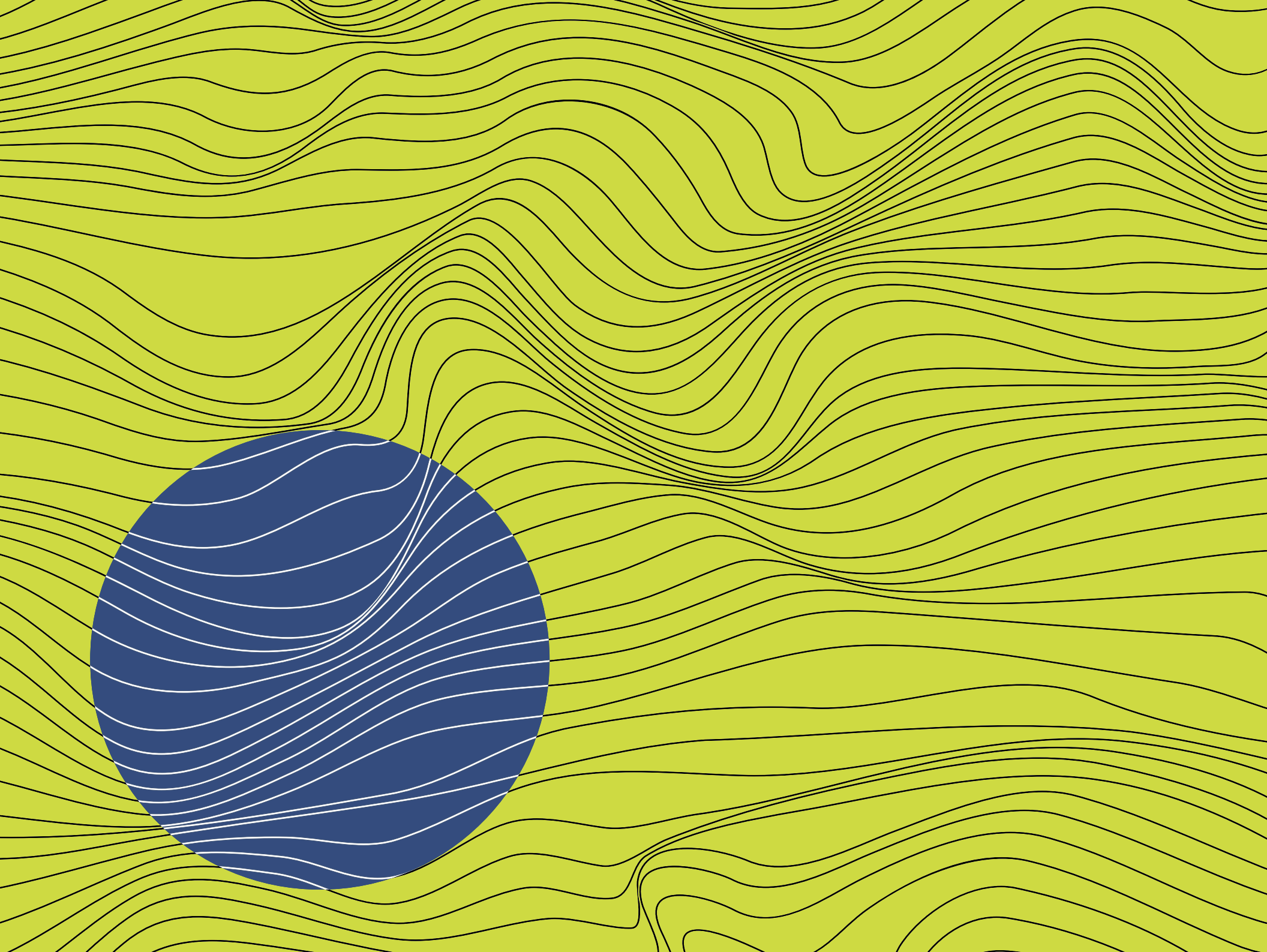


All pieces recorded at the
University of California, San Diego, Studio A

RECORDING ENGINEER: **Samantha Dunscombe**
David Lang: *The Anvil Chorus*
Kaija Saariaho: *Six Japanese Gardens*
Rand Steiger: *For Robert Erickson*

RECORDING ENGINEER: **Andrew Munsey**
Iannis Xenakis: *Rebonds*
Brian Ferneyhough: *Bone Alphabet*
Harrison Birtwistle: *The Axe Manual*
Michael Gordon: *XY*

RECORDING ENGINEER: **Josef Kucera**
David Lang: *Unchained Melody*
David Lang: *String of Pearls*



WEATHER SYSTEMS III

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Weather Systems III, "It's About Time," responds to the complexities of the time field, from the broad campus of historical time to the micro-temporal perturbations of polyrhythms. It is an ode to the reciprocal wisdom between past and present, between pieces I have lived with for decades and the newest of the new.

Any retrospective survey such as the Weather Systems series—seven CDs of personally meaningful solo and small-form chamber music that I recorded about the time I turned seventy—risks lapsing into nostalgia, that ill-advised desire to return to, purportedly, better times. But music helps us resist the backward urge. It shows us that the past need not be an anchor; it can be a root system.

The spine of "It's About Time" consists of music from my decade as percussionist with the Bang on Can All-Stars, from 1992 to 2002. The founders of the Bang collective—composers, Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang—and my original bandmates, Evan Ziporyn, Mark Stewart, Lisa Moore, Robert Black, and Maya Beiser are not only fearless artistic collaborators, they are life-long friends. This music is heard here in dialogue with canonic works by other composers important to me.

The Anvil Chorus, now a classic of the solo percussion repertoire, was an early collaboration with David Lang. David imagined a ring of blacksmiths all working together around the same piece of metal, counting their hammer blows carefully to avoid accidentally whacking each other. This noisy polyphony is to be played on metallic instruments—ringing, dry, and a third group that David once described to me as "nasty"—along with a bass drum and two wood blocks. In the mad touring days of the All-Stars, I used portable metal pipes and borrowed everything else. (I learned the word for "brake drum" in a dozen languages.) For this recording, I created a distinctly non-tour-able version featuring large brass bells, the heaviest of which takes three people to hoist.

Unchained Melody was a gift from David when I left the All-Stars that made the sadness of the moment more bearable. Each pitch of a simple melody for glockenspiel is paired with a unique percussive noise. Here, I team up with William Brent, ingenious computer musician and instrument builder, who created a dozen "ludbots," which are simple remotely activated kick drum beaters triggered by a MIDI program. Perhaps the noises they perform are designed to abrade the smoothness of the glockenspiel tones or maybe the euphonious glockenspiel softens the noises. Either way, the composite of gongs, bells, garbage can lids, and broken cymbals makes for a strange and beautiful grunge gamelan.

String of Pearls is a meditation on linear time: a single line on a single instrument played out like the long arc of a fly fisherman's line cast onto still water. Harmonies move slowly. The player's hands move fast. And the listener is mesmerized by beguiling eddies of marimba sound. For me, the true fascination of *String of Pearls* lies in the beauty of a single line extended as far as possible. There's no hoarding fuel for a return trip; just see how far you can go.

Michael Gordon is one of today's most soulful composers. We witness Michael's special alchemy in *XY* as he transforms a simple set of five drums into an eloquent chorus. On the practical side, interlocking crescendo/decrescendo phrases—one hand is always getting louder as the other gets softer—reveal a series of polyrhythms of escalating complexity. The equal rhythmic values of the opening first bifurcate and trifurcate, then eventually split further to create proportions of 6:5 and 12:5, each with multiple asymmetrical subgroupings. But even as *XY* becomes a thicket of drum sounds, it remains much more than the interplay of intricate rhythms. The music projects the energy and expansiveness of an Elvin Jones solo, but at its core it is a barren aria with the inescapable melancholy of a Beowulf monologue. I am always moved.

Three works extend percussion into its natural partnerships with technology and chamber music. New technologies reinforce the search for new sounds, a core mission of the contemporary percussionist, and chamber playing echoes the communal practices at the heart of traditional percussion music.

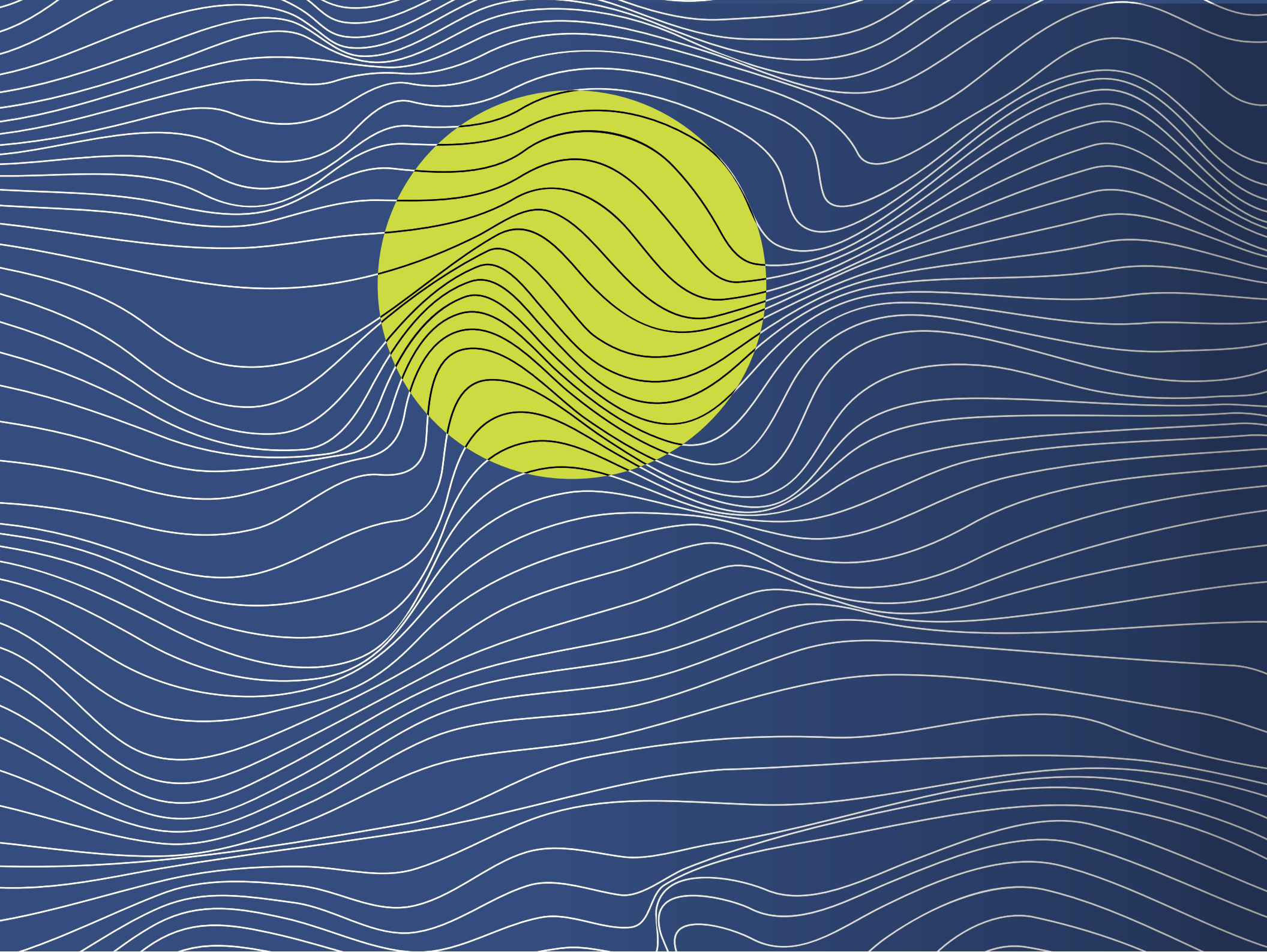
In his boisterous *The Axe Manual*, which I play here with my friend Aleck Karis, Harrison Birtwistle explores the complexities of complementary and intertwining strands of piano and percussion sound. Though the performers often play in independent meters and tempos, the goal is organicity. Balance is

achieved as the greater pitch range of the piano and its natural capacity for harmony is counterpoised with the large range of timbres and the intense dynamic scale of percussion. With each instrument speaking its natural language, the stage is set for a ludic interplay of rhythm and texture; time and harmony.

The historical schism within music technology has been between fixed media, where a pre-recorded tape or sound file is an invariant part of the music, and signal processing where a computer musician alters the sounds made by a live performer in real-time. In the former, the task is to make the fixed medium sound responsive to the player (even though it is not) and in real-time processing the goal is to make the electronics sound like they are initiating musical ideas (even though they cannot.) Despite these challenges, two very fine pieces work their magic through electronics—Kaija Saariaho's *Six Japanese Gardens* for large percussion set-up with prerecorded sound files, and Rand Steiger's *For Robert Erickson* for vibraphones, cymbals, and live processing.

Kaija wrote her *Six Japanese Gardens* after an extended visit to Kyoto. In it she refers to specific gardens in that beautiful city, in some cases by using field recordings of Japanese music and natural sounds. Over the course of the six movements, Kaija's rhythms become more complex and her electronic interventions more inventive. You might expect the greater sophistication of compositional vocabulary to lead us into abstraction and away from the solidity of the real places that inspired the music. But even as she works her craft, the music remains evocative. The sounds of Buddhist chanting accompanied by the tolling of gongs in the fourth movement, "The Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji," is haunting. And the solitary plinks of bell, stone, and triangle notes imitate the ubiquitous sounds of dripping water in the Moss Garden (Saiho-ji), perhaps the greenest place I have ever seen. In a final ingenious sleight of hand, one worthy of a composer of the stature of Saariaho, at the end of the sixth movement, "Stone Bridges," she pivots seamlessly to the music of the opening. We are returned to a sonic *Urwelt* of insects and drums; bells and breath. And we realize that we have not lost contact with the earth at all.

Rand Steiger explores rhythm on a micro-level through the frisson of acoustic beating between two vibraphones, each with one manual in equal tempered pitches and the other in just intonation. *For Robert Erickson*, is an homage to the co-founder of the University of California, San Diego's music



department, were Rand and I teach. Erickson was a pre-eminent experimentalist, instrument-builder, and researcher. Rand explores his own brand of experimentalism through the rub of the double vibraphones, the visceral noises of cymbals, and the enhancements of extensive sound processing. As with any Steiger piece, the texture is electric with a lively interplay of rhythm and harmony. And I find that the slow bowed section at the middle of the piece, exploring the delicious differences between tuning systems, is among the most beautiful passages in all the solo percussion repertoire.

In this culminating volume of a retrospective set of recordings, I have included two pieces with which I have had life-long relationships. Iannis Xenakis's *Rebonds* and Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*. Some might consider these works to be anachronistic displays of conventional virtuosity. The percussive versions of Boulez's *Second Sonata*, or the *Hammerklavier Sonata*. Indeed, they are very challenging works to perform, even for expert percussionists. But like the Boulez and the Beethoven pieces, they are also much more than that.

Ferneyhough's dense rhythmic language features as many as four simultaneous lines of convoluted polyrhythms. The difficulty here is extreme. As a result, I learned *Bone Alphabet* at the glacial pace of roughly one month of intense practice per minute of music. The extreme slowness of learning afforded me the time to examine parallels between the thorniness of the score and the vicissitudes of living. I saw that the poetry of the piece did not lie in the sweat-free swagger of anhydrous virtuosity but in the realization that at the ragged edge of physical capacity, intuition was a more valuable tool than hand speed. I began learning *Bone Alphabet* by trying to show my mastery as a percussionist and ended with a willingness to reveal my shortcomings.

My father died in 1991 on the day I began learning bar 20. This measure starts a phrase where Ferneyhough imitates the sound of someone practicing. Repeated nested polyrhythmic figures at slightly offset speeds seem to be searching for a way through an intractable problem. Try it slower, then faster. Succeed here; let yourself fail there. Play it again. Practice. It might be difficult to imagine being comforted by music as prickly as *Bone Alphabet.* But without it I would have been lost.

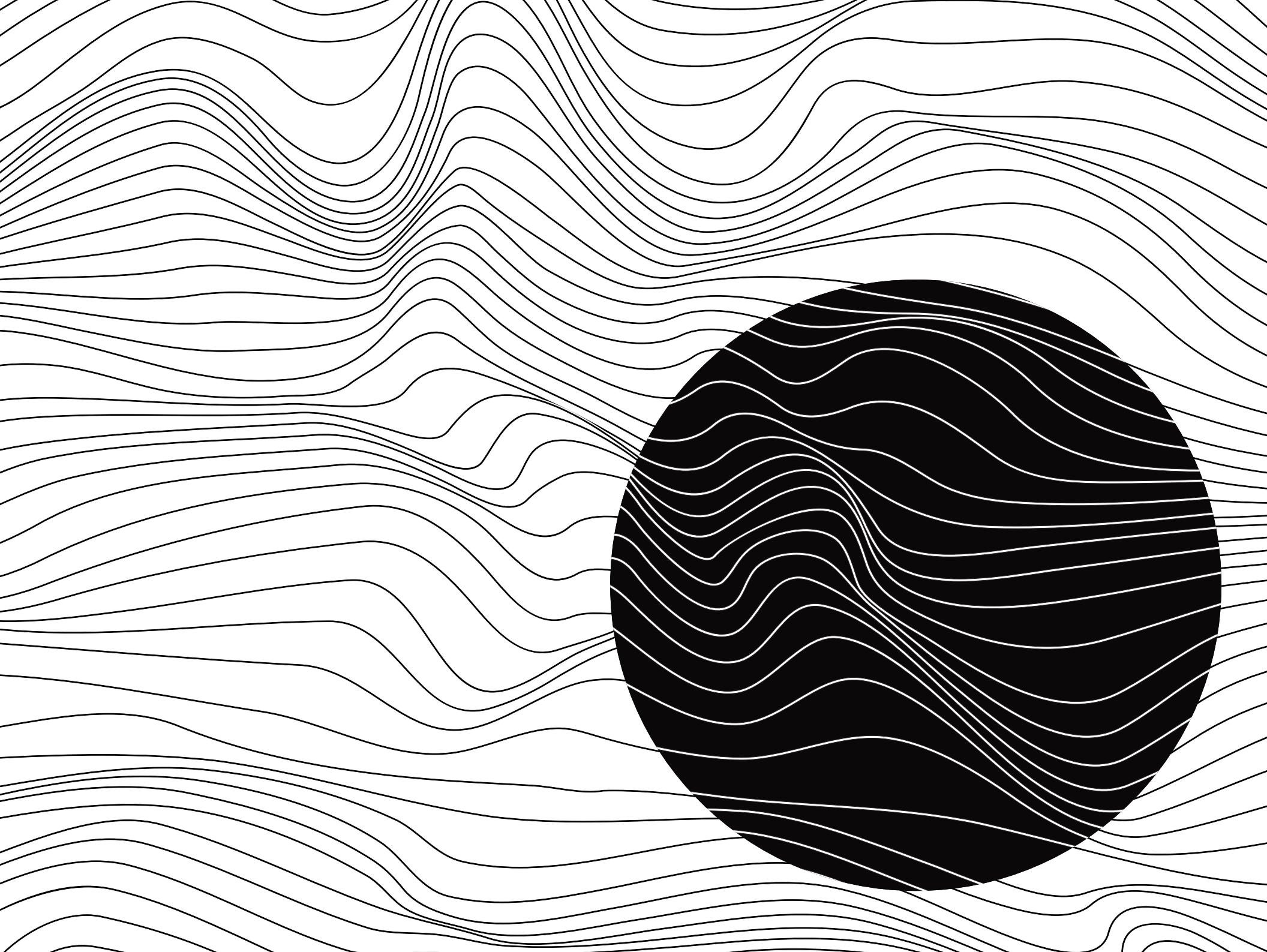
Iannis Xenakis's *Rebonds* has become core repertory for the solo percussionist and is standard fare on many student recitals and in the first rounds of competitions. In that vein, many performances by

emerging virtuosos project a sense of triumph, the performer victorious after vanquishing the significant difficulties of this music. But in each Xenakis piece that I know there are moments of true impossibility, designed to thwart the heroic urge. When those impossible passages occur, the player has a simple choice—either stop playing or find a flawed and human solution to an unsolvable problem. Thus, Xenakis transforms a musical problem into an ethical one. *Rebonds* invites us to jettison the heroic and embrace the human. Hubris was the undoing of arrogant heroes from Achilles to Icarus. Is Xenakis reminding us here of their tragic fates?



Steven Schick playing the American premiere of Iannis Xenakis's *Rebonds* in April, 1990.

In this final volume of the Weather Systems recordings, I have found inspiration and comfort in the shadowy corners of percussion music. In places where clear answers are elusive and where, at the very moment I feel sure of myself, I feel equally sure that I have missed or misunderstood something. For more than sixty years, despite or perhaps because of my shortcomings, I have fashioned percussion music into a favored tool, one with a sharpened edge and well-worn handle. To wield it as "an axe for the frozen sea inside of us," as Franz Kafka wrote to a childhood friend. Thus freed, music has become an ally in a grand exploration of life. And perhaps that has led to a kind of wisdom.



BIOGRAPHIES

William Brent is a computer musician and Associate Professor of Audio Technology at American University in Washington DC. In collaboration with internationally recognized composers and performers, he develops original software for intermedia performance works, such as James Dillon's *Nine Rivers*, Steve Antosca's *HABITAT*, and *OFFSHORE*, by Laure Hiendl and Monica Duncan. In this capacity, he has presented work at venues such as SESC (São Paulo), Glasgow Concert Halls (Scotland), Miller Theatre (New York City), The Kitchen (New York City), and the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC). He is a founding member of the INTERFERENCE New Music Collective, which performs in-residence at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center.

Rand Steiger lives in San Diego where he draws inspiration from the natural landscape and the history of experimental music in Southern California. His compositions combine orchestral instruments with electronics and deploy a hybrid approach to just and equal-tempered tuning. Some examples include: *Introspective Trilogy* premiered by the JACK Quartet at the Time:Spans Festival, Ecosphere, developed at Ircam and premiered by the Ensemble Intercontemporain; and the Coalescence Cycle, premiered at Miller Theater by the International Contemporary Ensemble. In 2016 he was commissioned by the LA Philharmonic and Yuval Sharon for an installation *Nimbus* with 32 loudspeakers in theatrical clouds playing a series of compositions throughout the day for the entire season. Steiger was also active as a conductor and led a series of critically acclaimed concerts with the Ensemble Sospeso in N.Y. in the 2000's, and the California EAR Unit in L.A. in the 1980's and 90's. A former Guggenheim and Rome Prize Fellow, he also held residencies with the L.A. Philharmonic, and the Qualcomm Institute. He has served as Fromm Distinguished Scholar at Harvard University and holds the position of Distinguished Professor and Conrad Prebys Presidential Chair at U.C. San Diego.

Aleck Karis has performed recitals, chamber music, and concertos across the Americas, Europe, Japan and China. As the pianist of the new music ensemble Speculum Musicae he participated in over a hundred premieres and performed at major American and European festivals. His appearances with orchestra have ranged from concertos by Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms to those of Stravinsky, Messiaen and Carter. His first solo disc in 1986 featured Carter's *Night Fantasies* along with Chopin's *Fantasie* and Schumann's *Carnaval*. This was followed by six more solo discs, featuring music by Mozart, Stravinsky, Cage (*Sonatas and Interludes*), Feldman/Webern/Wolpe, Poulenc, and Debussy (*Études* and *Children's Corner Suite*). On Roméo he has released three solo discs: Music of Philip Glass, Late Chopin, and, in 2025, an acclaimed Beethoven recording featuring the Sonatas Opus 106 ("Hammerklavier") and Opus 2, no. 1. His discography of contemporary ensemble music is extensive. Aleck Karis became a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in 2023 after teaching at UC San Diego for 33 years. He studied with Artur Balsam, Beveridge Webster, and William Daghlian.



Percussionist, conductor, and author **Steven Schick** was born in Iowa and raised in a farming family. Schick was an early champion of contemporary percussion music and has given first performances of hundreds of works, many of which have become standard repertory for percussionists. He was hailed by Alex Ross in the New Yorker as, "one of our supreme living virtuosos, not just of percussion but of any instrument." Steven Schick was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 2014 and is currently Distinguished Professor of Music and holder of the Reed Family Presidential Chair at the University of California, San Diego.

He lives with his wife Brenda Schick in La Jolla.

"It's About Time" is dedicated to **Michael Gordon**, **Julia Wolfe**, and **David Lang**. Deep gratitude to Islandia Music and to **Maya Beiser** for our many years of friendship and for trusting me with this project.

The entire Weather Systems series is dedicated with love to **Brenda June Schick**.

Executive producer: **Maya Beiser**
Label manager: **Kristen Loring**
Art direction: **Denise Burt** / elevator-design.dk

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