

Touch: Music for Percussion. Rob Power, composer and performer, with various performers and ensembles. St. John's, NF: [Independent release], 2013. 1 compact disc (66:53). Contents: *Tunnel Mountain* (6:19) – *Untouchable* (11:05) – *Shard* (9:32) – *Woody Island* (9:21) – *Cappahayden* (10:31) – *Amalgamation* (10:38) – *Gray matter* (7:26). Available from: <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/robpower/>.

Currently a resident of St. John's, Newfoundland, Rob Power has enjoyed a multifarious career. As a percussionist, he has performed extensively as a soloist and chamber musician throughout Canada to great acclaim. Power also maintains a successful career as an educator at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where he has served for several years as a faculty member. Yet Power wears a third hat—that of an accomplished composer. His [website](#) identifies that he has been active since 2000; his works thus far are entirely for percussion.

The present recording, *Touch*, is a self-published disc containing seven of Power's compositions. The pieces provide a nice overview of his activities as a composer from this fourteen-year span: two date from 2000; two further works from 2005-06; and three range from 2010-13. The recording is notable in that while a variety of musicians perform on the disc, Power appears in each work: his performances on a variety of percussion instruments vividly convey his virtuosity.

The first work on the disc is also the most recent, the 2013 *Tunnel Mountain*. In his program notes, Power identifies that the piece was motivated by the imposing views in Banff National Park while on a creative residency at the Banff Centre. The piece is scored for a percussion ensemble of seven players—glockenspiel, vibraphone, three marimbas, gongs, and the seventh musician playing various cymbals and drums. The piece's electric vibrancy provides an excellent opening to the disc. The work is in two parts, followed by a short coda. In the opening portion, the vibraphone and marimba play a thematic gesture generated from triadic figures, while supported harmonically by relentless sixteenth-note motion by the other two marimbas. In part 2, the composer develops small motivic fragments generated from the melodic and underlying harmonic materials of part 1. The coda deftly integrates both elements to a rousing conclusion.

The next work is *Untouchable* from 2006. Winner of the 2006 Millennium Arts Society composition competition, the piece is scored for vibraphone and two marimbas. In a sense, the piece is a type of ternary design. Part 1 contains a spirited, syncopated series of motives that appear in a perky conversation among the instruments. The middle portion of the work is much slower in tempo; the vibraphone plays a succession of emotionally suffused melodic gestures, overtopped by the sustained harmonies of the two marimbas. Part 3 integrates the melodic and harmonic motives from the first two sections. Finally, the energetic rhythmic material from the coda brings the work to a thrilling conclusion.

Scored for five musicians, the 2000 *Shards* is one of the earliest compositions on this disc; the work was co-composed by Power and JERK, an ensemble comprised of Power, Eric Donovan, Bill Brennan, Kevin Coady, and John D. S. Adams. Three of the five musicians play both a shaker and a glass triangle (the latter instrument is a container in which suspended pieces of glass are kept—hence the title of the piece). The piece contains twenty-seven measures, each of which is repeated an unspecified number of times. In essence, the piece is an arch design: the opening contains one rhythmic attack, and each successive measure increases the rhythmic activity; the middle of the work contains substantial activity by all three instrumentalists. Gradually, the amount of rhythmic motion decreases, until the final measure contains a single rhythmic attack point. More specifically, the latter twelve measures reverse the order of the first twelve, with one important exception: while the three instrumentalists use shakers in the first ten measures, the latter ten measures are scored only for the glass triangle. Interacting with these three instrumentalists is a fourth player who improvises on a djembe, a type of West African drum, as the shakers transform to shards of glass; and these overall sounds are manipulated electronically by the fifth player.

Woody Island from 2010 is scored for a percussion duo. The piece is a ternary design, with respect to instrumentation. Specifically, the opening part is scored for the vibraphone and marimba; here the vibraphone assumes the bulk of the melodic material, with harmonic support by the marimba. As contrast, the middle section is scored entirely for wooden sounds. The vibraphone and marimba duo returns to the opening texture of the work; a series of melodic phrases utilize a 7/8 dance-like ostinato as harmonic support. Unlike the opening, though, the melodic material is not relegated to the vibraphone but appears in dialogue between the two instruments. In the final measures, the melodic material disappears, and the harmonic ostinati brings the work to a calm repose.

Cappahayden from 2012 derives its title from a small fishing village on the southern shore of Newfoundland. It is written for a percussion quartet, each member of which plays either a marimba or vibraphone along with non-pitched drums and metallic sounds. The work begins with slow, interactive material for the keyboard percussion and metallic instruments; there is almost a child-like innocence to the nature of the music. Eventually the naïve opening gives way to a relentless, toccata-styled ostinato played by the various drums that builds to a frenetic culminating passage. Although the ostinato remains for much of the second portion of the piece, both the keyboard percussion and drums contribute to the rhythmic patterns and are subdued in dynamic level. Noteworthy is the series of joyous melodic phrases played in succession by the marimbas and vibraphones. Eventually, though, the dynamic level increases again and the work ends in a violent torrent of unison drums.

Scored for three percussionists, *Amalgamation* is, apart from the crotales, scored for non-pitched instruments. The piece is a type of rondo design, where the sections with crotales represent a type of refrain that is punctuated by episodes of the non-pitched instruments. Viewed this way, the exciting final pages can be interpreted as a coda, where the brake drums, used as markers for the episodes, interact simultaneously with the crotales. The work exemplifies Power's adeptness in developing small rhythmic motives into complex polyrhythmic structures.

The final work on the disc is *Gray Matter*. Composed in 2005 for Halifax-based percussionist D'Arcy Gray, the piece, scored for non-pitched percussion, is a tour de force for a solo instrumentalist. Formally, *Gray Matter* is one long crescendo form. Specifically, the piece is slow and placid at the opening; gradually throughout the course of the work, the writing becomes faster, more rhythmically energetic, and virtuosic. After reaching the culminating point of this musical journey, the character immediately changes, and the serene short coda is reminiscent of the opening measures, bringing the composition full circle to a calm repose.

One of the challenges of writing for percussion is that composers can become easily distracted by the wealth of colours available to them, at the expense of establishing meaningful melodic and/or rhythmic associations. To my mind, one of the true strengths of this disc is that while each piece is suffused with a panorama of colour, each is markedly strengthened at the same time by the substantial development of the pitch and harmonic domains. With repeated listening, I became ever more engrossed in these fascinating and intricate associations. Put another way, these pieces are not just studies in colour and sound, but substantive works that have continuously increased my interest with each listening.

As mentioned above, Power performs on all seven works and we should presume that the exceptional performances are authoritative. The excellent sound and balance throughout the disc was engineered and mastered by John D. S. Adams. The disc contains no liner notes; however, they can be procured from the composer's website (as well as PDF downloads of the scores). In sum, this is an outstanding release of contemporary percussion works by one of Canada's leading performers. I eagerly await Power's next release.

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