

*Bone Alphabet* is an infamous and often-written-about work in the percussion canon. It's considered one of, if not the hardest, multiple percussion solos in our repertoire and in many ways serves as a rite of passage for young percussionists stepping into the avant garde.

What Ferneyhough writes is impossible to play. The human body and mind serve as a flawed conduit for realizing what is on the page. Theoretically, however, it is possible. Every black dot on that page has an absolute temporal mathematical value. Attempting to realize the and perfect the notation is intellectually and emotionally exhausting and demands hundreds of hours of practice. Ferneyhough doesn't want perfection, however. He wants those hours.

The instrumentation further confuses the issue: seven instruments who cannot share a material (e.g., glass, wood, skin) with the adjacent objects on the stove. If the human ear is constructed to hear melody as varying pitches of identical timbre, then it is inevitable for Ferneyhough's already brutally intricate lines and polyphony to be almost entirely lost at their most complex.

So, what the hell is the point? Each performer's interpretation is built out of arduous discipline and process, reevaluating the alphabet ("stripping it to the bone") of music they've come to understand even as these figures in front of them on the page look frustratingly familiar. What happens to our artistry when we contort ourselves physically and mentally into challenges we can't triumph over?

Ultimately, as Jonathan Hepfer writes, it's about our failures, and from these failures we're brought to question our accountability. If a note's rhythm or pitch is incorrect in Bach, we can hear that. So it goes even in the percussion world: each note in Xenakis or Reich or even Cage has its time and place. Listening to other versions of *Bone Alphabet*, there are moments when I have no idea if what the performer has just played is correct ("Their 9:17 against 7:8 was rushing!"). I don't think that's important. The performer is accountable to themselves to faithfully learn the notes and rhythms and is accountable to the audience to convey what is important.

What is important? The metaphors in *Bone Alphabet* are different to each performer and performance and are constantly changing. It's this state of flux, the way energy is never at rest and is often confounding that remains universal. Maybe the inevitable change that failure demands is good. What each interpretation of *Bone Alphabet* shares is its tendency change, fail, and to try anyway.

- Background
- Notation
- Instrumentation
- metaphysics