

# EXCELSIS PERCUSSION QUARTET

SATURDAY, JULY 22 | 2 PM | COLONY HOUSE

Marcelina Suchocka,  
Aya Kaminaguchi,  
Britton-René Collins,  
and Mariana Ramirez

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DANIEL LEVITAN

**Marimba Quartet**  
(Approximate duration 15 minutes)

ERIC WHITACRE arr. Joby Burgess

**Sleep**  
(Approximate duration 6 minutes)

OWEN CLAYTON CONDON

**Fractalia**  
(Approximate duration 8 minutes)

RÜDIGER PAWASSAR

**Sculpture in Wood**  
(Approximate duration 7 minutes)

YAZ LANCASTER

**Sequoias**  
(Approximate duration 10 minutes)

VANESSA THOMLINSON

**Sonic Dreams**  
(Approximate duration 15 minutes)

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## Daniel Levitan (b. 1957): *Marimba Quartet*

Daniel Levitan is the composer of several well-known works for percussion. A percussionist, piano tuner, and composer, Levitan creates music with extraordinary rhythmic vitality and momentum. *Marimba Quartet*, now a classic piece in the percussion literature, was commissioned by the Manhattan Marimba Quartet and composed in 1987. Since then, it has become one of the most frequently performed quartets for keyboard percussion in the literature.

Levitan studied composition and percussion at Bennington College, where he received his B.A. in 1976. At Bennington he studied composition with Henry Brant, Vivian Fine, and Marta Ptazynska. After graduation, he studied tabla with Phil Ford and Ray Spiegel, conga and Latin percussion with Frank Malabe, and mallets with Tom Hemphill. Influencing his compositional approach have been his many years of experience in the field of piano technology.

Levitan has received commissions for solo, chamber, and orchestral works from the Kronos Quartet, Marimolin, Manhattan Marimba Quartet, James Preiss Solo Marimba Commissioning Project, Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra, Ithaca College Wind Ensemble, and the National Endowment for the Arts joint commissioning project. Theater and dance commissions include works composed for Theatre for a New Audience, Uris/Bahr Dancers, and Trina Moore and

Dancer. His Concertino for *Marimba with Percussion Orchestra* won first place in the 1978 Percussive Arts Society Composition Contest.

A wide variety of influences have molded Levitan's particular approach to composition. These influences include the study of North Indian tabla drumming, Latin percussion instruments and styles, and keyboard percussion. Some of Levitan's works are scored exclusively for non-pitched instruments such as *Variations on a Ghanaian Theme* (1981) for cowbells, temple blocks, and tom-toms, and *Septet* (1981) for triangle, cymbal, cowbells, cabasa, bongos, timbales, and rototom, alongside others that are scored for only pitched instruments. Between 2006-2007, he wrote a set of duos for non-specified, non-pitched percussion entitled *Eight Two-Part Inventions*. In 2008, he completed *Marimba Four Hands*, a cycle of five movements for two players utilizing one marimba. Recently, Levitan has entered a new phase of compositional activity and is currently composing a quintet that includes pitched and non-pitched percussion.

*Marimba Quartet* utilizes many different styles of marimba strokes, such as lightly played "ghosted" notes and written out muffling to absorb the resonance of the instrument. The slow first movement explores the many different sounds that the instrument can produce. Initially, Levitan establishes a laid-back groove in seven; as the music progresses, the rhythmic patterns between players become more complex and often are not on the beat. Additionally, the players must pay careful attention to the dynamic intensity and to the instructions Levitan has given for muffling various pitches in order that the music achieves both the colors and balance that he intends as the melodic and harmonic ideas travel between the various members of the quartet. The movement ends with a change in style, moving from the simplicity of single notes to rolled melodies. In a final transformative coda, a lush chorale highlights the marimba's resonant qualities.

The second movement is often performed as an independent piece and is marked by its jazzy and groove-oriented feeling. Many of the muffling strokes evident in the first movement are present again here, but because of the faster tempo, are more demanding for the performers.

### **Eric Whitacre (b. 1970), arr. Joby Burgess: *Sleep***

Eric Whitacre received his M.M. in composition from the Juilliard School of Music, where he studied with John Corigliano and David Diamond. He has become a much commissioned choral and symphonic and film composer, as well as a conductor and clinician. He has been nominated for a Grammy; he also has received composition awards from ASCAP, the Barlow International Foundation, and the American Composers Forum.

With cluster chords throughout (chords that are made up of close tones that create dissonance), *Sleep* is a quintessential Eric Whitacre work, originally structured in eight-parts. Whitacre conceived of *Sleep* as an acapella choral work in 2000. The text is by Charles Anthony Silvestri, acclaimed lyricist and poet. It has since been arranged for winds and, as you hear it in this concert, for marimba quartet arranged by Joby Burgess.

The music evokes the feelings and sensations of drifting off to sleep. It builds to a climax, before slowly tapering off as sleep approaches.

The evening hangs beneath the moon,  
A silver thread on darkened dune.  
With closing eyes and resting head  
I know that sleep is coming soon.  
Upon my pillow, safe in bed,  
A thousand pictures fill my head.  
I cannot sleep, my mind's a-flight;  
And yet my limbs seem made of lead.  
If there are noises in the night,  
A frightening shadow, flickering light,  
Then I surrender unto sleep,  
Where clouds of dream give second sight,  
What dreams may come, both dark and deep,  
Of flying wings and soaring leap  
As I surrender unto sleep,  
As I surrender unto sleep.

### Owen Clapton Condon (b. 1978): *Fractalia*

Owen Clayton Condon writes music influenced by minimalism, electronica, and taiko drumming. He studied with Frank Epstein and Will Hudgins at the New England Conservatory and made his solo debut in 1996 with the Louisville Symphony Orchestra after winning the orchestra's Young Artist Competition. In 2000, He won New England Conservatory's Concerto Competition and performed with the NEC Symphony Orchestra. He completed his doctoral studies in music at Northwestern University, where he studied with Michael Burritt and James Ross.

He has performed with the Chicago Civic Orchestra, the University of Chicago's *Contempo* series, and he has appeared as a guest artist with the Eighth Blackbird contemporary music ensemble. He was one of the original members of Third Coast Percussion, an acclaimed percussion quartet that formed in 2005. Recently, he performed on behalf of Northwestern University at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. Condon is working as a sound artist, having recently composed music for an interactive new media installation in Chicago called "Luminous Field at Millennium Park" with light artist Luftwerk.

Condon's acoustic and electronic works, including *Fractalia*, composed in 2013, have been featured as the soundtrack to video and light installations at Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater" and Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate," the famous sculpture (affectionately referred to as "The Bean") in Chicago's Millennium Park. Condon plays with the Chicago Millennium Chamber Players.

Condon composed *Fractalia* for Third Coast Percussion in 2011. It is scored for four performers playing two marimbas and four concert toms, alternately. *Fractalia* takes advantage of both the expressive and articulate characteristics of the marimba while utilizing the power of taiko drumming to create a seamless texture of rich harmonic and rhythmic depth with frequent dynamic changes throughout. Much of the piece contains repeated rhythmic figures on a single note throughout extended ostinatos (with interjecting drum figures as well).

The work is a sonic celebration of fractals, geometric shapes whose parts are each a reduced-size copy of the whole. The term derives from the Latin *fractus*, meaning "broken". The kaleidoscopic fractured melodies within *Fractalia* are created by passing a repeated figure through the four players in different registers of the marimba.

Condon describes his work in his own brief program note: "A recursive geometric algorithm makes the smaller parts of a structure replicates of the larger parts. Describing it in words is, frankly, more difficult than a purely mathematical one. But suffice it to say that under it all in this composition, a single motivic pattern, passed from player to player in different octaves, is what unifies the work for the listener, heady math aside."

### **Rüdiger Pawassar (b. 1964): *Sculpture in Wood***

Percussionist Rüdiger Pawassar is a German composer specializing in writing repertoire for small percussion ensembles consisting mainly of marimba. Resident percussionist with the Staatsorchester in Kassel, Germany since 1990, he is also a member of the chamber ensemble "Triomotion" (flute, vibraphone, and marimba). Pawassar studied percussion in Lübeck and Freiburg, Germany and marimba in the U.S. with Leigh Howard Stevens. His work has been influenced by composers Luigi Nono, Iannis Xenakis, and Mauricio Kagel.

The marimba quartet *Sculpture in Wood* was commissioned by the Marimba Art Ensemble Basel. It premiered in Freiburg in 1995. The marimba quartet (as well as the trio version, *Sculpture 3*) has become one of the most often performed chamber works for marimba ensemble.

*Sculpture in Wood* features a marimba quartet performing a variety of jazz harmonies, rhythms, and melodies. The work contains classical undertones and is written in the traditional A-B-C-A form. It also bears resemblances through its harmonic structures to jazz of the 1970's and 1980's. The motifs rotate quickly between performers who share the roles of accompanist and soloist. Pawassar noted that he found composing this work was, for him, similar to creating a wood sculpture where in his drafts, many parts were cut off, added again, shifted, and intertwined with one another. He also felt that the semicircular formation of the marimba quartet constituted a sculpture of wood by itself.

### **Yaz Lancaster (b. 2000): *Sequoias***

Yaz Lancaster (they/them) is a Black transdisciplinary artist. On their website, they state, "They are most interested in practices aligned with relational aesthetics, the everyday; fragments & collage; and liberatory politics." They believe that "activism through music has been a vital force throughout history as a display of resistance to oppression and injustice." Lancaster performs as a violinist, vocalist, and steel-pannist in a wide variety of settings; their work is presented in many mediums and collaborative projects. It often reckons with specific influences ranging from politics of liberation and identity to natural phenomena and poetics. Sara Constant, in *Musicworks*, has articulated Lancaster's music credo: "The changeability of Lancaster's music comes from their belief in being adaptive to others as an act of care, and from their vision of art as something defined by the relationships it creates."

Lancaster holds degrees in violin and poetry from New York University where they studied with Cyrus Beroukhim, Robert Honstein, Joan La Barbara, and Terrance Hayes. Currently, they are the visual arts editor of *Peach Mag*, a co-organizer of *Sound Off: Music for Bail*, and the newly appointed co-manager of PPR.

*Sequoia*, composed in 2019 for Western Carolina University, is scored for an even number of percussionists and fixed media/electronics. It had its world premiere July 18, 2022 at Princeton University. Its subject is the recognition of biodiversity loss through the specific and personal example of redwood trees. The piece is also about taking time to notice and appreciate nature around you as this loss is happening.

Sequoioideae, popularly known as redwoods, are known for being the largest and tallest trees in the world. These trees can live for thousands of years. Today they are threatened by logging, fire suppression, air pollution, and climate change. Since logging began in the 1850's, 95% of old-growth coast redwoods have been cut down.

For the performance of this piece, two of the performers (or two groups of performers) are required to first choose a spot in a natural location that they enjoy and to record three minutes of sound in a single, continuous recording. These sounds will then be triggered at two points during the piece.

### **Vanessa Thomlinson (b. 1971): *Sonic Dreams***

Trained as a percussionist, Vanessa Thomlinson is a composer and academic dedicated “to exploring how sound shapes our lives, awakening our ears to new sounds, in new spaces, with the hope that attentive listening will lead to attentive custodianship of place. With a long history in experimental music, she relies on the sonic investigation of objects to create compositions, create contexts for improvisation, and collaborate across art-forms and disciplines.” (from *Nature Forms*.)

Thomlinson explains that she uses her knowledge of objects, time, and space to “build compositions, create contexts for improvisation, interpret the voices of other composers, and collaborate across art-forms and disciplines.” With a long history in experimental music, Thomlinson uses this body of knowledge to consider how we listen through site-specific explorations of space and place and through investigating our potential to explore new ideas through sound. She has toured the world for twenty-five years, premiering over 100 works by significant national and international composers, presenting work at major international festivals, and collaborating with improvisers, dancers, artists, and more.

Thomlinson studied at the University of Adelaide and the Hochschule fur Musik in Freiburg; she received her Master's and Doctorate from the University of California, San Diego where she worked closely with Steven Schick and George Lewis. In addition, Thomlinson has studied Sichuan Opera with Master Zhong Kaichi in Chengdu, China. She has been on the faculty of the Queensland Conservatorium of Music for eighteen years, transforming the field of percussion in Australia, helping to define the field of Artistic Practice in music internationally, and pioneering the performer/composer, interpreter/improviser pathway for students. Currently Director of Creative Arts Research Institute at Griffith University, she continues to lead research projects that help define the agenda for performing artists in the academy.

Thomlinson's key projects have included *The Immersive Guitar* (with Karin Schaupp at Curiosity Brisbane), *The Piano Mill* (a purpose built structure in the Australian bush), *Sounding the Condamine* (examining the history of the Condamine Bell in outback Queensland), *Water Pushes Sand* (examining intersections between Sichuan Opera and improvisational practices with Australian Art Orchestra), *Sonic Dreams* (a series of compositions about extinct and imaginary sounds) and *Beacons* (co-composition with Lawrence English).

Thomlinson writes that she composed *Sonic Dreams* in 2017 for bass clarinet, electric guitar, and harp (but as she has suggested, the work can be performed by any number of performers on any instrument.) “*Sonic Dreams* is an imagination of lost and unknown sounds. Performers improvise their way through eight imaginary soundscapes – the turtle coming up for breath; the spines of the giant echidna rubbing against a tree; the stick-nest rat moving about in its nest for example.

This piece was composed for and dedicated to GreyWing Ensemble, a group of sonic

investigators that live in Perth, Australia. All the sound worlds imagined in this work once belonged to this area of the world and are now either extinct or critically endangered. In the case of the turtle *Pseudemys umbrina*, its habitat is now the Perth airport where it remains in a critically endangered state, its sound world totally transformed."

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## Excelsis Percussion Quartet



Hailed as "One of the most innovative and exciting percussion ensembles to emerge in the golden age of chamber music" for their immersive sound world, New York City-based Excelsis Percussion Quartet is Marcelina Suchocka (Poland), Aya Kaminaguchi (Japan), Britton-Rene Collins (United States), and Mariana Ramirez (Mexico). This international group of women with a multilingual combination of five languages join together to speak the universal language of rhythm, rooted in their belief that music possesses an ability to unite us all. Excelsis brings vibrancy into the percussion community through eclectic programming, innovative storytelling, and embracing their intersectional identities.

Excelsis made their debut at the PAS NYC Weekend of Percussion in 2014, playing with Lisa Pegher. Described as a "fiery new percussion quartet on the rise," Excelsis has twice been featured on the NPR show *From The Top* with Christopher O'Riley and appeared as a guest ensemble at the Zeltsman Marimba Festival in 2015. In 2016, Excelsis took the opportunity to curate a program featuring women composers for their performance in So Percussion's concert series Brooklyn Bound.

In the summer of 2016, Excelsis was part of the Tippet Rise Music Festival in Montana, performing John Luther Adams' outdoor percussion piece *Inuksuit* alongside Doug Perkins and members of the Montana Symphony. In addition to their active performance schedule, Excelsis delivers masterclasses and educational workshops, most recently giving a clinic at the Salem State University in Massachusetts.

Excelsis Percussion Quartet's breadth of repertoire spans from classical to avant-garde. With the presence of exciting arrangements, including Bjork and other pop music covers, Excelsis advocates for multi-genre representation in their programming, charming audiences with contrasting and uniquely innovative concert experiences. Excelsis Percussion Quartet proudly endorses Sabian Cymbals.