

DIVERSIONS

ONSTAGE

Percussionist Rosenthal fills Recital Hall with his unique sounds

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One unambiguously positive trend in 20th-century classical music was the introduction of larger and larger percussion sections into the orchestra, and later as soloists in the concert hall.

As many composers began to write music driven more by rhythm than by melody, the larger percussion sections added essential colors to the orchestral palette. Postmodern composers used percussion as an effective

way to assimilate the influence of non-Western art music, which in many cultures is mainly percussion-based.

More to the point, however, the large percussion sections gave classical composers, performers and listeners the one thing their music had previously lacked: ear-rupturing bass.

One was reminded of all these truths on Thursday, when undergraduate percussionist Jay Rosenthal took over the new Gildehorn Recital Hall in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center for a

short but memorable recital. Playing a wide variety of instruments, he resolved the long-standing debate over whether or not solo percussion music can really be counted as "classical" music by asserting, with convincing performances, that it's all music and it's all good.

The one thing Rosenthal was not able to do in this performance was overcome my prejudice against the vibraphone. I have always found the instrument, and the pieces written for it, pallid and timorous.

Rosenthal's performances of the solo vibraphone music didn't quite have the distinct personality he brought to the rest of the music he played. However, a transcription of two pieces by Hungarian composer Bela Bartók sandwiched around another transcription of jazz pianist Chick Corea's "Postscript" worked much better, both because Marty Grossman provided effective marimba support and because Rosenthal seemed more involved with transcriptions he himself had conceived.

The rest of the program was pretty jaw-dropping. Michael Colgrass' "Six Unaccompanied Solos for Snare Drum" exploits colors one didn't suspect the snare had, and Rosenthal realized them with joyous verve and exquisite control. Marta Ptaszynska's "Spider Walk," written for a huge array of instruments, made a big impression with its sheer variety and volume of sounds, but it was Rosenthal's grasp of the work's architecture that made every note of the work seem inevitable and necessary.

But the highlight had to be the closer, a work for snare drum by Jacques Delécluse transcribed by Rosenthal for an unlikely instrument: the tambourine. Rosenthal stated in his program notes that, on the tambourine, "I am the ultimate arbiter of the techniques I use," and the virtuosity he invented for us was both completely unique and utterly breathtaking.

Oh, and if you were wondering whether or not the Gildehorn Recital Hall can handle large bass, the answer is yes.