

Ricochet, Concerto for Ping Pong, Violin, Percussion, and Orchestra

Andy Akiho

Composer and percussionist Andy Akiho is fascinated by the possibilities of percussion and has gained particular attention for his compositions that spotlight the steel pan. Following his graduation from the University of South Carolina, he began visiting Trinidad, enmeshing himself in the steel pan community and composing works for steel pan ensemble, which continue to play a central role in his musical life. In 2011 Innova Records released his debut CD, *No One To Know One*, a collection of his rhythmically complex music in which steel pans stand front and center. He went on to earn master's degrees from the Manhattan School of Music (in contemporary performance) and the Yale School of Music (in composition), and he is currently pursuing a doctorate at Princeton University.

The New York Philharmonic commissioned his *Oscillate* (for three percussionists, piano, and string orchestra) for its 2012 *CONTACT!* series. Other recently commissioned premieres include works for the National Symphony Orchestra and Carnegie Hall's ACJW Ensemble, in addition to the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, which introduced the work played in this concert.

Akiho has been gaining considerable attention for his compositions; recent honors include the 2014–15 Luciano Berio Rome Prize, the 2015 Lili Boulanger Memorial Fund award, a 2014 Frimm Foundation Commission from Harvard University, the 2014 American Composers Orchestra Underwood Emerging Composers Commission, and a 2014 Chamber Music America Grant with the Friction Quartet and Jenny Q. Chai.

Forward-looking chamber ensembles have commissioned works from him, including eighth blackbird, the Calder Quartet, Ethel, and the Times Two Duo. He has been in-

involved in performances of his music on the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella series, in concerts at the Kennedy Center, and on a tour of Taiwan for the 2012 International Drum Festival. His music has been featured on PBS's *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* and by performing organizations such as Meet the Composer, Bang on a Can, American Composers Forum, and the Society for New Music.

A concerto with solo violin would not strike concertgoers as unusual, since that instrument occupies a seminal position in both Chinese and American music. Add a solo percussionist, and the experience grows considerably more curious. Add a pair of Ping Pong players, and one enters a musical region previously uncharted in the concerto repertoire. Conductor Long Yu, who led the premiere of this work in 2015, wrote:

IN SHORT

Born: February 7, 1979, in Columbia, South Carolina

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2015, on commission from the 2015 Beijing Music Festival and 2015 MISA (Music in the Summer Air) Festival for the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and the China Philharmonic Orchestra, Long Yu, Music Director

World premiere: July 18, 2015, at Shanghai Symphony Hall, by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, Long Yu, conductor; Ariel Hsing and Michael Landers, Ping Pong players; Elizabeth Zeltser, violin; David Cossin, percussion

New York Philharmonic premiere: this performance, which marks the work's U.S. Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

Music and Ping Pong seem entirely unrelated. Yet there is something which links them, and together they can make an ingenious concert. Transcending all barriers, music plays an important role in cultural and international exchange. Tiny and lightweight, the Ping Pong ball had nevertheless laid a weighty foundation in establishing friendship between China and the U.S.

He was referring to a historic event in 1971: the visit of an American table tennis team to China, the first public contact between the two nations in more than two decades. This encounter, widely hailed at the time as “Ping Pong diplomacy,” served as the unlikely bridge to a thawing in U.S.–China relations and to President Richard Nixon’s visit to China the following year, when he met personally with Mao Zedong, chairman of the Communist Party of China.

Although a Ping Pong set-up obviously draws the audience’s attention in a dramatic

way, Akiho delves into its possibilities from a musical perspective as well. Apart from the rhythmic impulse created by the bouncing balls, he seeks out gradations of tone by having the players hit the balls with a variety of paddles — and even wine glasses, which suggest the fragility of the situation. The Ping Pong table itself becomes an instrument, with the solo percussionist including it among the sound sources in his arsenal.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, vibraphone, tam-tam, bass drum, orchestra bells, harp, and strings, in addition to solo violin, solo percussionist, and two Ping Pong players (amplified, using wood or sandpaper-surfaced paddles, professional speed paddles, frame-drumhead paddles, resonant wine glass pitched in G, small gong, and tam-borine-style drumhead paddles).

In the Composer’s Words

The goal of *Ricochet* was to explore the juxtaposition of indeterminate rhythms and quirky ostinatos created by amplified Ping Pong performers against the composed melodies and timbres of the orchestra and two other soloists. The solo percussionist — performing with metal pipes, wooden planks, glass bottles, and other found objects — often interacts directly with the Ping Pong performers, even mimicking their athletic rhythms while drumming on the table directly. The violin soloist, with lyrical expressionism and percussive zest, serves as a musical ambassador to the orchestra. Each element of this idiosyncratic ensemble is a wild card, and the virtuosic conversations of chance versus control between musicians and athletes are intended to spawn a unique and exciting experience during each performance.

I am especially excited that *Ricochet* is being performed tonight in New York City, with the soloists who performed the World Premiere. I first met Elizabeth Zeltser when the Orchestra commissioned my work *Oscillate* for *CONTACT!* in 2012. She, Ariel, Michael, David, and I all reside in Manhattan, and we all are happy to bring this piece home.

— Andy Akiho

