
Action/Reaction

a structured improvisation for multitasking percussionists

by Mark Phillips

duration: variable

(most performances will probably run 5-10 min.)

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Player 1

vibraphone, xylophone
multiple woodblocks, set of log drums
bass drum or large floor tom — plus any loud
noisemaker(s) for use in signal motive action/reaction

Player 2

marimba, glockenspiel
set of temple blocks
large tam-tam or suspended cymbal — plus any loud
noisemaker(s) for use in signal motive action/reaction

The Premise:

This piece calls for each player to initiate specified actions, which in turn require specified reactions from the other player. Reaction times may vary, but not to the point that they lose temporal connection to the original action. Initially the volume level of reactions should be consistent with that of the action it answers ... and after executing a primary action, a player should wait to hear the entire reaction before initiating a new action. Once the piece is well underway players should feel free to introduce more dynamic surprises ... and may begin to initiate multiple primary actions before waiting for a reaction. Overlaps are always permitted between secondary actions and reactions, so a reaction to a secondary action can begin before that action has been completed. Likewise, a new action may be initiated once a secondary reaction has begun. A player obligated to a reaction may always choose to initiate a primary action prior to doing so. The primary and secondary action/reaction paradigms are independent of each other.

Actions for Player 1:	Reactions for Player 2
Primary action: Strike any single note on vibraphone (pedal down).	Reaction to primary action: On marimba, play a 2-3 note motive (approximately equal loudness) spanning more than an octave; time gap between notes should noticeably shorter than between action and reaction.
Secondary action: Execute a brief roll (or tremolo) with a crescendo on any note of the xylophone or vibraphone (l.v. ending on vibraphone) — or use bass bow on vibraphone.	Reaction to secondary action: On a marimba bar chosen for its contrast to the original action, play a gradual accelerando into a very brief roll then retrograde your gesture (i.e. decelerate).
Actions for Player 2	Reactions for Player 1
Primary action: Strike any single note on glockenspiel.	Reaction to primary action: Play a 2-3 note motive (approximately equal loudness) spanning more than an octave on xylophone or dampened vibraphone; time gap between notes should noticeably shorter than between action and reaction.
Secondary action: Execute a brief roll (or tremolo) with a crescendo on any temple block (<i>or a single marimba bar near the top of the instrument?</i>)	Reaction to secondary action: On a woodblock, log drum or non-traditional location of another instrument, play a gradual accelerando into a very brief roll then retrograde your gesture (i.e. decelerate).

Additional Performance Guidelines

The performance begins with a primary or secondary action from either player. Then, for a short while afterwards, performers should strive for clarity to “educate” the audience in the “rules of the game.” Ideally listeners will have the opportunity to hear all primary and secondary actions and reactions at least once with clarity before things get too dense. Players should strive for a balance between the amount of time spent on primary and secondary actions/reactions. Individually, secondary actions and reactions will generally consume more time (often a lot more time). This means that every performance should have many more primary actions and reactions than secondary actions and reactions.

At any point during the performance, either player may decide it’s time to call a halt and regroup, by issuing a signal motive. (See chart below.) This decision could be arrived at as a result of any of the following conditions, alone or in combination:

- one player has lost the ability to keep track of the threads of actions and reactions
- one player believes the other player is not keeping up with the reactions in a timely fashion
- one player believes the texture has gotten too complex for the audience to be able to follow the threads actions and reactions
- either player simply feels that the time is right for an interruption of the chain of actions and reactions.

Signal Motive for Player 1: bass drum and/or floor tom: a short loud explosion of sound	Reaction to Signal Motive for Player 2 tam-tam and/or cymbal soft roll (duration ad lib.) slight volume swell up and down
Signal Motive for Player 2: tam-tam and/or cymbal(s) a short loud explosion of sound	Reaction to Signal Motive for Player 1 bass drum and/or floor tom(s): soft roll (duration ad lib.) slight volume swell up and down

Note: A signal motive is not restricted to a single note, but conceptually it should be a single event — a roll, a short burst of fast notes, a flam. Additional noisemakers may be added to the signal motive for emphasis, if desired. Obviously, for the signal motive to be effective, it needs to be loud enough for the other player to hear. If multiple signal motive interruptions are employed, each one should be given it’s own distinctive character.

Once a signal motive interruption has died away, the process of action/reaction starts up again — constrained initially (though briefly) by avoiding the overlap of primary actions and reactions. The process then continues, with overlapping permitted once again, until the next signal motive interrupts it or the performance ends.

At some point in the performance (no more than once, though it may be hinted at earlier), a player may choose to react to a signal motive from the other player with a very strong answering *signal* motive. In this case, the exchange of action and reaction will continue using signal motives and reactions of ever-increasing complexity and density until one player stops — or until 20-30 seconds have elapsed, whichever comes first. The conclusion of this interaction between signal motives heralds the beginning of a “codetta” for the performance. After a suitable delay for the dissipation of sound, the process of action/reaction starts up again and continues at generally soft volume levels for 30-90 seconds, before ending in the manner described below. During this codetta, players should avoid overlapping of primary actions and reactions. Obviously, care and discipline should be exercised as to when to invoke this option, as it has a profound effect on the overall duration of the performance. Ideally, its length (and that of the codetta) should reflect the overall timing of the performance.

The ending of the performance is signaled when one player simply stops initiating actions and begins only reacting to the other player. Once the decision to stop initiating actions is made, that player should continue reacting long enough to ensure that both players realize that the ending is near. The final moment of the piece occurs when the player who has only been reacting fails to do so.

Rehearsal Strategies

- Rehearse with player 1 always in the role of “actor” and player 2 always in the role of “reactor.”
- Rehearse with player 2 always in the role of “actor” and player 1 always in the role of “reactor.”
- Rehearse with players in both roles but limited to only primary actions & reactions (with & without overlaps).
- Rehearse with players in both roles but limited to only secondary actions & reactions (with & without overlaps).
- Rehearse using all guidelines of “The Premise” except the following: no initiating of primary actions when a reaction is called for or still pending and no overlapping of secondary motives.
- Rehearse using previous strategy, but allow overlapping of secondary motives.
- Rehearse using all guidelines of “The Premise.”
- Do Not Over-Rehearse! Keep it fresh! ;-)

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video link to premiere:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG_6ELwjvaA