



REVIEW | Korea and the Western Drumset: Scattering Rhythms

Simon Barker

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Simon Barker is an accomplished and sensitive jazz drummer with profound interest in Korean percussion and rhythmic particularities. His current publication addresses the question of whether new improvisational vocabularies for Western drumset can grow through engagement with Asian traditional drumming forms, with a particular focus on Korean-inspired rudimental patterns. Paired with techniques for schematic phrase construction and creative coordination practices, Barker's integration of Korean techniques delivers a powerful tool for drummers' cognitive and practical expansion. He uses linguistic metaphors to justify his approach, saying that the best way to improve one's subtlety as a drummer is to know the grammar of particular musical moments, so that no matter how complex a rhythm might sound, it is conceptualised by the drummer as elemental, natural and breathing. This ties to the Korean traditional aesthetic concept of *hohŭp*.

As an educator, Barker found that when students have little experience or access to international performers and musical resources they tend to be less receptive to the transmission of drumset information. He thus began an inquiry into pedagogical methods appropriate for students with limited access to resources, and the cultural cues that make up the fabric of contemporary jazz and improvised music.

His mission was to create "a methodological framework for viewing one's regional music traditions as a conceptual guide for answers to questions relating to drumset performance" (101), taking inspiration from Koreanized approaches to rhythm and aesthetics along with other Eastern approaches to both breath and

movement. In this way his mission was diverse but sometimes unclear – though he developed educational processes in order to become a better drummer himself, Barker’s mode of guiding in writing other drummers through such techniques, while deliberate and generous, seems equally a justification for his artistic process as an offering to the academy. Regardless, his “solutions” and exercises to promote practical and conceptual growth are solid, carefully prepared and cleverly musical. The problem with clarity lies more in his verbal transmission than intentions, as becomes obvious with increased exposure (see video recommendation below) – Barker is a wonderful educator and exceptional performer who is now turning his vast skills to academic writing.

Here, Barker takes several quite separate tasks and marries them. His first aim is to consider Korean techniques and processes in order to define an aesthetic framework for Korean musical tension and release. He combines this with a history of Western drumset and, in particular, examples of Sydney musicians in his musical sphere, especially crediting Greg Sheehan for his innovative contributions. Barker expounds his personal motivations for researching applications of Korean drumming concepts and techniques to Jazz drumming. By collaborating with Korean musicians since 1998, Barker has evolved his local musical language with ensembles including Band of Five Names, and this book documents a few key career moments that are indicative and exemplary of the cross-cultural engagement typical (though diverse) of his work during the last twenty-five years.

In the meatier Chapters 3 and 4, Barker documents processes he underwent to create an improvisational vocabulary for drumset: namely, using “archetypal streaming” and “concurrent pulse streams” (his terms). He shares Korean-inspired approaches to basic stick technique that promote physical relaxation, or rather insist upon the removal of physical tension. These chapters are instructional and they pair with a DVD of practical activities and a CD of musical examples. Track 6 of the CD, “Missing”, is an example of *p’ansori* (expressive raspy singing with drum accompaniment) where Bae Il Dong, a virtuosic *p’ansori* singer of the Eastern school, emotes powerfully over at first sparse drumming and later sophisticated sub-divisions. “Missing” forms part of one of Korea’s most epic folk story/songs *Ch’unhyangga* and is thus an important work to have included in this study.

The DVD’s technical exercises are delivered calmly and with enthusiasm. They encourage the viewer to try, not only to conceive of, the activities. On the pages, these activities are marked in black-rimmed boxes so that easy reference can be made to the practical, without feeling too much like a maths textbook.

Barker discusses how he has applied Korean forms to his musical and pedagogical processes for greater improvisatory freedom and expression. He does this clearly and simply, demonstrating his deep, complex understanding and practice of these forms. For a succinct and engaging summary of work included in this book, see Barker’s talk at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music “About Music Lecture” in September 2015 (YouTube 2015).

Scattering Rhythms expands upon existing literature on Korean percussion, drumset tradition, and improvisation pedagogy. In the last fifty years, several non-academic publications of “non-Western” rhythms have entered drumset repertory, augmenting awareness of “foreign” sounds and conventions, but these rarely

explain the adaptive processes such traditions undergo when appropriated. Barker responsibly demonstrates the processes he has taken to access these cultural objects and sound-events, and he explains how and why they are adapted so as to both promote Korean sounds and broaden other players' palettes. This is a helpful resource for percussionists of multiple standards and interests, and a great window into particular aspects of Korean drumming cultures.

References

YouTube. 2015. About Music Lecture.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz6uHO2XstQ&feature=youtu.be>; Last Accessed: 25 November 2015.