

# WORKS FOR VIOLIN AND PERCUSSION ORCHESTRA

Agócs · Harrison · Rodríguez



Nicholas Kitchen, Violin

New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble

Frank Epstein

# WORKS FOR VIOLIN AND PERCUSSION ORCHESTRA

**Robert Xavier Rodríguez** (b. 1946)

**Xochiquetzal** (2014)

**21:32**

- |   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| ❶ | I. Xochiquetzal and Her Retinue of Hummingbirds (Andante grazioso) –                | 3:49 |
| ❷ | II. Xochiquetzal's Love Spell (L'istesso tempo, affettuoso) –                       | 4:17 |
| ❸ | III. Xochiquetzal's Husband, Tlaloc, God of Thunder and Rain (Andante misterioso) – | 3:57 |
| ❹ | IV. Xochiquetzal's Tears of Yellow Marigolds (Adagio mesto) –                       | 3:53 |
| ❺ | V. Xochiquetzal's Gifts of Music and Dance (Vivace)                                 | 5:36 |

**Lou Harrison** (1917–2003)

**Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra** (1940–59)

**20:59**

- |   |                                     |      |
|---|-------------------------------------|------|
| ❻ | I. Allegro, maestoso                | 8:20 |
| ❼ | II. Largo, cantabile                | 8:01 |
| ❽ | III. Allegro, vigoroso, poco presto | 4:29 |

**Kati Agócs** (b. 1975)

**Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra** (2018)

**19:07**

- |   |                        |      |
|---|------------------------|------|
| ❾ | I. Incantata           | 4:48 |
| ❿ | II. Inquieto           | 3:15 |
| ⓫ | III. Maestoso –        | 6:02 |
| ⓬ | IV. Briosso; Cantabile | 5:00 |

**Nicholas Kitchen, Violin**

**Members of the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble**

**Aziz Bernard Luce, George Nixon, Kazuki Oya, Matt McKay, Rieko Koyama,  
Joe LaPalomente, Kevin Kosnik, Dan Wozniak ❶–❺**

**Will McVay, Sean Van Winkle, Nathan Vendel,  
Luis Herrera Albertazi, Harrison Honor ❻–❽**

**Doyeon Kim, Jackson Rowles, David Uhlmann, Shan Wang,  
Tennison Watts, Leigh Wilson ❾–⓬**

**Frank Epstein, Director**

# AGÓCS · HARRISON · RODRÍGUEZ

## Works for Violin and Percussion Orchestra

This album brings together three concertos for violin and percussion orchestra, an unconventional combination pioneered by Lou Harrison in 1959.

Here is a composer well ahead of his time. While producing music rooted in classical convention – symphonies, concertos and suites – he was instinctively open to Eastern influences, using colourful combinations afforded to him by conventional and homemade percussion instruments.

Born in Portland, Oregon in 1917, Lou Silver Harrison enjoyed a broadly varied musical education, learning violin, piano and composition. He enrolled on Henry Cowell's 'Music of the Peoples of the World' course in San Francisco, introducing him to music from Native America, China and Indonesia. With fellow Cowell pupil John Cage, he explored the potential of music for percussion ensemble. The two toured California in the late 1930s with Japanese, Chinese and Indian instruments, along with their own constructions made from discarded automobile parts.

Harrison then spent a brief period in Los Angeles, studying more rigorous Western compositional methods with Arnold Schoenberg. Moving to New York in 1943, he worked with Virgil Thomson and befriended another musical free spirit in Charles Ives, conducting the long-delayed world premiere of the composer's *Third Symphony* in 1946. Returning to California in the early 1950s, Harrison broke clear of the serial methods explored under Schoenberg, immersing himself in the Indonesian gamelan, which he had discovered in San Francisco in 1939. Its colours infused his music with greater concentration as the 1950s progressed, notably in the *Suite for Piano, Violin and Small Orchestra* of 1951.

The *Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra* evolved around this time, begun in 1940 and completed in 1959 with a first performance under dedicatee and soloist Anahid Ajemian in the Town Hall, New York. It encapsulates the range of Harrison's musical and cultural consumption, including its Esperanto subtitle, 'Koncerto por la violono kun percuteda orkestra'.

The percussion orchestra in question reflects the fruits of those experiments with Cage. The more conventional instruments, including cymbals, maracas, gongs, a tam tam and a bass drum, work alongside carefully calibrated extras such as two suspended wash tubs, two resonating clock coils and six flowerpots. A double bass, resting on its back, is to be tapped or firmly struck with sticks, using the strings either side of the instrument's bridge.

The *Concerto's* structure is a conventional three-movement model, the violin placed firmly in the foreground like a congregation leader. Introduced by a bass drum roll, the soloist plays a deeply romantic solo, marked *Maestoso*, reflecting the impact on Harrison of Berg's *Violin Concerto*. The music gains momentum, the percussion ensemble's punctuation rhythmically developed, before a richly colourful central section falls under the spell of legato violin phrases. These are complemented by brake drums and the thrum of the double bass before a bass drum roll brings in an emphatic statement from the soloist. The movement ends with a percussive clamour.

The second movement, slowly paced, also begins with a languorous violin solo. The accompaniment suggests wind and water by turn, free of rhythmic constraints in its Gamelan-derived approach, Harrison using meditative sections either side of a powerfully wrought centre.

The third movement is half the length of the previous two but generates kinetic energy in keeping with its marking of *Allegro, vigoroso, poco presto*. The violin, often double-stopped, leads folk-inflected music of colour and syncopation, employing open strings to sharpen the emphatic closing statement.

While not often performed, the *Concerto* has proved highly influential and is recognised through the companion works on this album, both composed in its honour.

Like Harrison, Robert Xavier Rodríguez received a varied musical education, given by teachers including Nadia Boulanger, Jacob Druckman, Bruno Maderna and Elliott Carter. Boulanger wrote of her pupil, 'Robert Rodríguez is one of these naturally gifted composers ... he answers to an inner call with fright and certainty, never lacking the courage that characterises his creativity.'

Rodríguez has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Goddard Lieberman Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Prix Lili Boulanger and the Prix de Composition Musicale Prince Pierre de Monaco, serving as composer-in-residence with the San Antonio Symphony and the Dallas Symphony. Writing in a wide range of forms from solo instrumental to opera, he has a catalogue of more than 100 works with G. Schirmer.

## Ben Hogwood

*Xochiquetzal* is a 22-minute chamber concerto for violin and percussion sextet. I completed the score in Dallas in June 2014 in response to a commission from a consortium of percussion ensembles from: New England Conservatory (Frank Epstein, director), Southern Methodist University (Jon Lee, director), The State University of New York at Onondaga Community College (Robert Bridge, director) and the University of North Texas (Christopher Deane, director). Frank Epstein conducted the premiere performance in November 2014 in Boston with Nicholas Kitchen, violin soloist. In 2015, I made a version for violin and piano.

*Xochiquetzal* was designed as a companion piece to Lou Harrison's *Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra* (1940–59). It is also a companion to my own previous composition for percussion ensemble, *El día de los muertos* (2006). *El día de los muertos* and *Xochiquetzal* are both programmatic works based on Mexican subjects. Both contain folk melodies, and both may be performed with dancers.

Xochiquetzal was an ancient Mayan goddess associated with music, dance, beauty, love, fertility and female sexual power. She is a similar figure to Aphrodite or Venus in Greek and Roman mythology. The name 'Xochiquetzal' [So-chee-KET-sal] means 'feather flower', combining the Nahuatl words for 'feather' (*quetzal*) and 'flower' (*xochitl*). Xochiquetzal is always portrayed as young, beautiful and richly attired, accompanied by hummingbirds and surrounded by yellow marigolds. Marigolds were Xochiquetzal's signature flower, and they were said to have sprung magically from her tears. Her consort was Tlaloc, the powerful and terrifying god of thunder and rain, with whom she had a tempestuous relationship.

To evoke the ancient Mayan world, I present simple pentatonic themes in the spirit of what Manuel de Falla called 'imaginary folk music'. In the final movement, there is a quotation of *Xtoles* [Shi-TO-les], an ancient Mayan dance song notated by the Spaniards after the conquest of Mexico. Believed to be one of the oldest known melodies, it also appears in my 2001 musical version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, set in pre-Columbian Mexico. These folk materials interact, and sometimes clash, with contemporary sounds to create a synthesis of time periods and cultures.

The solo violin represents Xochiquetzal throughout, and the writing is virtuosic, with frequent multiple stops and extensive use of the upper register. The percussion scoring emphasises pitched instruments (two vibraphones, two marimbas, crotales, glockenspiel, chimes, timpani, seven tuned roto toms and six tuned nipple gongs), with a wide variety of exotic, non-pitched sounds. Each movement employs a distinctive timbre, in keeping with its subject:

1 Xochiquetzal makes a graceful entrance, accompanied by bowed vibraphone and glass wind chimes to depict her retinue of hummingbirds; the music then grows more spirited to show her power. 2 A seductive, incantatory love spell follows, with delicate nipple gongs, and the movement gradually builds in intensity. 3 Tlaloc then appears in an ominous and eventually violent toccata featuring timpani, roto toms, bass drum, tam-tam, thunder tube and thunder sheet. Following Tlaloc's stormy visit, there is a mournful *adagio* 4, depicting Xochiquetzal's tears, which are represented by crotales, glockenspiel, brass wind chimes and gently rippling violin arpeggios. The finale 5 is a rhythmic celebration of music and dance spiced with cow bells, temple blocks and shakers and featuring a violin cadenza. The *Xtoles* melody joins the other themes, stacked together in a grand *quodlibet*.

Robert Xavier Rodríguez

The other piece on the album comes from American-Canadian composer Kati Agócs. Born in Canada to Hungarian and American parents, Agócs studied at The Juilliard School with Milton Babbitt, forging close links with educational establishments in Boston, Budapest and New York, then serving on the composition faculty at the New England Conservatory in Boston since 2008. Her numerous awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, an Arts and Letters Award, a Charles Ives Fellowship and Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the ASCAP Foundation Leonard Bernstein Composer Fellowship at the Tanglewood Music Center.

*Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra* was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University for the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble in 2018. The six percussionists play a wide array of instruments including five timpani, xylophones, vibraphones and marimbas, six types of cymbal and a large body of metallic and wooden implements.

Despite its large inventory the concerto is an economical work, with four movements running for roughly 18 minutes. As the work progresses Agócs explores the combination of the soloist and different groups of percussion. The first movement (*Incantata*), finds long-breathed violin phrases linking with softly ringing pitched percussion, including two vibraphones, in what the composer describes as a 'lyrical barcarolle'. Though the music is serene there is an underlying tension through bitonal effects between the melody and the contrasting harmonies of the ensemble. The second movement (*Inquieto*) has animated dialogue and syncopated rhythms with the orchestra's two xylophones. For the third, a recitative and aria marked *Maestoso*, Agócs brings forward a pair of marimbas to provide a softly rocking berceuse against the violin's richly turned melody. A powerful cadenza follows, loudly marked by the orchestra, before a softer complement of double-stopped trills from the soloist. The *Concerto* heads directly into its *Briosio* finale, where a gypsy-like dance alternates with an intensely lyrical passage. Another virtuosic cadenza beckons the 'skinned' percussion instruments for the first time, before an assertive full stop. Throughout the concerto Agócs achieves a wider spectrum of sound than would seem possible for six players, deftly allocating the instruments at her disposal. In this way she draws from Harrison's lead, while securing her own distinct and highly expressive style.

*Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra* is dedicated to Frank Epstein, Nicholas Kitchen and the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble.

**Ben Hogwood**

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Following a performance of the Lou Harrison *Concerto for Violin and Percussion*, with its colourful mixture of Western and Eastern instruments, as well as its combination of Classical forms with Romantic violin utterances, I realised just how extraordinary this work is. That experience led me to imagine a larger project, one in which new compositions for a similar ensemble could stand as companions to the very unusual Harrison *Concerto*.

Two wonderful composers, Kati Agócs and Robert Xavier Rodríguez, agreed to undertake this project, and each ended up composing a marvellous new concerto fully equal to the Harrison. Eight years after the performance that had inspired the project, we completed the recording of all three works. I could not be more pleased with the result.

I am grateful to NEC administration for its support of this extended project, to the NEC Audio Department engineers for their careful and skilled work, to the many student musicians of the NEC Percussion Ensemble for their devoted work, and, of course, to the superb violinist Nicholas Kitchen for his peerless playing.

**Frank Epstein, NEC Percussion Ensemble Music Director**

## Nicholas Kitchen



Photo: Christopher Kitchen

Nicholas Kitchen is a solo violinist, chamber musician, teacher, technology innovator and arts administrator, with *The New York Times* naming him as one of the most active and innovative performers in the music world today. He is artistic director of the Heifetz International Music Institute, as well as a professor of violin at the New England Conservatory. He has performed worldwide for the last 30 years as first violinist and founder of the award-winning Borromeo String Quartet, currently the faculty quartet-in-residence at New England Conservatory. He has performed in many of the world's most illustrious concert halls, including the Philharmonie in Berlin, the Tonhalle in Zurich, the Dvořák Hall in Prague, Suntory Hall and Dai-Ichi Seimei Hall in Tokyo, Seoul Arts Center, Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall in New York, and the Tanglewood and Ravinia Festivals. Kitchen enjoys performing relationships with the Heifetz International Music Institute, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the Library of Congress, and the Taos School of Music in New Mexico.

[www.nicholaskitchen.com](http://www.nicholaskitchen.com)

## New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble



The New England Conservatory (NEC) Percussion Ensemble was founded by Frank Epstein in 1968. The ensemble has toured throughout the New England area and in more recent times performed at Carnegie Hall in New York. The ensemble has produced a two album set on the Naxos label, *American Music for Percussion* (Vol. 1: 8.559683; Vol. 2: 8.559684), featuring commissioned pieces by American composers Elliott Carter, Peter Child, Edward Cohen, John Harbison, Jennifer Higdon, Fred Lerdahl, Robert Xavier Rodríguez, Felicia Sandler, Gunther Schuller and Joan Tower. The ensemble continues to produce two concerts a year at the New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall in Boston, Massachusetts.

[www.newenglandpercussion.com](http://www.newenglandpercussion.com)

## Frank Epstein



Frank Epstein is a graduate of the University of Southern California, the New England Conservatory and the Tanglewood Music Center. In 1968 he joined the Boston Symphony, with whom he performed for 43 years, and in the same year, as part of the New England Conservatory faculty, he founded and directed the NEC Percussion Ensemble. In addition he served as chairman of the brass and percussion department for over 25 years. As founder of Collage New Music, and music director from its inception in 1972 through to 1991, he has overseen the commissioning and performance of over 200 new works as well as the production of 17 recordings, with the ensemble celebrating its 50th anniversary season in 2022/23. Epstein has been involved with the Avedis Zildjian Company as a consultant on new product development (including the introduction of the Classic Orchestral Cymbal Selection), and as a clinician, conducting workshops and seminars throughout the country and in Europe. His book *Cymbalisms*, a complete guide for the orchestral cymbal player, was published in 2007 by Hal Leonard.

[www.frankepstein.com](http://www.frankepstein.com)



Photo: Kate Lemmon Photography

Kati Agócs



Robert Xavier Rodríguez



Jeremy Sarna, Nicholas Kitchen, Frank Epstein



The unique instrumentation of the three works in this album was pioneered by the innovative Lou Harrison, whose 1959 concerto encapsulates his culturally wide-ranging aesthetic. More conventional instruments work alongside calibrated extras such as wash tubs and flowerpots in a work of colour, languorous elegance and kinetic energy. The companion works were composed in its honour: Robert Xavier Rodríguez's *Xochiquetzal* evokes the ancient Mayan world in imaginary folk music to form a synthesis of time periods and cultures, while the economical serenity of Kati Agócs's concerto also includes bitonal effects and zesty syncopation.

## WORKS FOR VIOLIN AND PERCUSSION ORCHESTRA

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|-------------|---|--------------|
| <b>1–5</b>  | <b>Robert Xavier Rodríguez</b> (b. 1946):<br><i>Xochiquetzal</i> (2014)*                          | <b>21:32</b> |
| <b>6–8</b>  | <b>Lou Harrison</b> (1917–2003):<br><i>Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra</i> (1940–59) | <b>20:59</b> |
| <b>9–12</b> | <b>Kati Agócs</b> (b. 1975):<br><i>Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra</i> (2018)*       | <b>19:07</b> |

**\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

**Nicholas Kitchen, Violin**

**Members of the New England Conservatory  
Percussion Ensemble**

**Frank Epstein, Director**

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

Recorded: 5 May 2015 **1–5**, 22 November 2016 **6–8**, 14 February 2020 **9–12** at Jordan Hall,  
New England Conservatory, USA • Producer: Frank Epstein

Engineers: Patrick Keating **1–5**, Jeremy Sarna **6–12** • Mixing engineer: Eric Engler **9–12**

Editors: Frank Epstein **1–12**, Nicholas Kitchen **1–12**, Robert Xavier Rodríguez **1–5**, Kati Agócs **9–12**

Booklet notes: Ben Hogwood, Robert Xavier Rodríguez

Publishers: G. Schirmer, Inc. **1–5**, C.F. Peters Corporation **6–8**, Kati Agócs Music **9–12**

Cover illustration of *Xochiquetzal* from the Codex Borgia

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