Trimpin: Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra / MATRIX 244
Trimpin, who goes by a single name, creates sonic contraptions that explore what sound can do and how sound can move around and through a space. The Seattle-based composer, sound sculptor, installation artist, inventor, and instrument builder uses hybrid instruments of his own invention to visualize sound. A bevy of everyday objects, materials, and intricately engineered gizmos and gadgets trigger his instruments and scores. The sounds, both musical and mechanical, however, are always acoustic, with the notable exception of the occasional electric guitar. For **MATRIX 244**, Trimpin is premiering *Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra*, a singular new sound installation inspired by the avant-garde expatriate American composer Conlon Nancarrow (1912–97).

As a young boy in the Black Forest region of Germany, Trimpin (b. 1951) played the flugelhorn, often practicing with his musician father. But when an allergy to metal forced him to stop playing the horn, Trimpin took the opportunity to explore new avenues of musical study, with a particular leaning toward acoustic environments. He received a degree in electromechanical engineering from the University of Berlin, and moved to America in 1979, ultimately settling in Seattle.

Musical composition, instrumentation, and presentation became more and more integrated in Trimpin’s work as he continued to push traditional boundaries. He has explained how constructing instruments is central to his process of writing music: “When a certain composition is in my head, I have to get the instrument down first. When it is finally built, it’s never the way I’d envisioned it exactly. So the idea for the composition is changing as the instrument is taking shape.”

It is easy to understand Trimpin’s affinity for Nancarrow. Born in Arkansas in 1912, Nancarrow became involved in jazz and new music early in his life. Ultimately, he found his way to the East Coast, where he studied counterpoint with Roger Sessions and associated with composers such as Elliott Carter and Aaron Copland. After fighting in Spain against Franco, Nancarrow returned briefly to New York in 1939, but as a committed socialist he found his homeland less than welcoming. He moved to Mexico City in the early 1940s, where he lived and worked for the remainder of his life.

Nancarrow is best known for rhythmically complex and intensely layered compositions. From the late 1940s he composed studies for player and prepared piano, compositions that challenge the very limits of human performance. For decades his radical player-piano scores existed only as unique, manually punched rolls. After meeting in 1987, Trimpin convinced Nancarrow to allow him to convert the vulnerable rolls into electronic information. Trimpin, who had already invented his own computerized memory system for music, “transcribed” Nancarrow’s compositions for
computer, transferring the notations into MIDI data and creating an enduring format for these otherwise fugitive pieces.

Trimpin's own compositions increasingly began to reflect and build upon the influence of Nancarrow, as well as other avant-garde composers such as John Cage and Henry Cowell. In 1993, he performed an “instant prepared piano” work at The Kitchen in New York City. Mechanically driven bows and plucks manipulated piano strings in *Contraption IPP 71512*, performing an expanded harmonic range of the piano. A few years later Trimpin created an enormous room-sized musical sculpture, *Conloninpurple*, a seven-octave percussive constellation of marimba sounds. Trimpin seems to envision no end to percussive possibilities. In *Liquid Percussion* (1991), timed glow-in-the-dark water drops rhythmically play the composition; in *Sheng High* (2005), tall bamboo pipes set in plastic buckets of water create the sensation of a giant surround-sound pipe organ (the ancient Chinese reed instrument, the sheng, is at the foundation of the modern pump organ, accordion, and harmonica). In 2008, during a residency at the University of Michigan, Trimpin connected infrared sensors and record players to “play” a cello, an instrument he actually didn’t know how to play.

*Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra* is a new work, created in honor of the centenary of Nancarrow’s birth. Nancarrow liked making instruments that produced their own music: photographs from the 1950s show Nancarrow in his Mexico City studio with a massive room-sized percussive machine that he designed, built, and played. Trimpin’s new performative installation results from several years of study and investigation and incorporates percussive instruments originally designed by Nancarrow, which Trimpin has carefully restored, both preserving them and reanimating their musical dimension.

*Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra* incorporates three salvaged upright pianos, which have been broken apart, reconfigured, mechanized as player pianos, and “prepared” to play a variety of Nancarrow’s scores. The compositions are rearranged and fragmented across the three pianos in short and varied pieces. Trimpin likes to alter sounds. He has noted that he is “more interested in modifying or elaborating on the sounds made by traditional instruments, and in seeing how sound works in time and space. If you play the notes C and C-sharp together on a keyboard, you hear dissonance, but if you play C in one part of a room and C-sharp in another, you perceive them quite differently.” One piano plays Nancarrow’s *Study No. 30* (undated, but most likely composed in the late 1940s), a three-minute rapid-fire rhythmic progression. Another piano plays a gamelan ensemble, and the third Trimpin refers to as a singing piano. The motion of visitors in the gallery triggers the acoustic environment,
incorporating the audience and spatial environment into the character and performance of this work. *Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra* performs in real time over the course of the exhibition, with hundreds of feet of player-piano paper spilling out onto the gallery floor from a tall tripod-like construction, expanding the piece into a continually evolving spatial performance of acoustic sound.

**Lucinda Barnes**  
Chief Curator and Director of Programs and Collections

*Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra* is commissioned by Other Minds in collaboration with BAM/PFA in conjunction with Nancarrow at 100: A Centennial Celebration. Trimpin was assisted with this installation by Jess Rowland, a graduate student in UC Berkeley’s Department of Art Practice, and Aaron Oppenheim, Ryan Page, and Shanna Sordahl of the Mills College Music Department. The MATRIX Program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.


2 *Conloninpurple* was first presented in 1999, and most recently in 2012 in London. While the musical composition remains the same, each installation of Trimpin’s works is site-specific, and changes physically.

3 Quoted by Jean Strouse in “Perpetual Motion Trimpin’s Sound Sculpture,” *The New Yorker*, May 8, 2006, 40.

Front: Trimpin: *Sketch VI* for *Trimpin: Nancarrow Percussion Orchestra* / MATRIX 244, 2012; 8½ x 11 in.; courtesy of the artist.