



shakin' all over

Sabrina Schroeder's *Stircrazer*

BY JENNIE PUNTER

A FEW YEARS AGO, WHEN SHE WAS HELPING A GERMAN musician friend improve his English translation of his band's song lyrics, composer Sabrina Schroeder encountered the nonword "stircrazer." She loved its strangely evocative energy and soon after used it as the title of a sound experiment that begat a solo performance that kick-started what is now an ongoing series of works. For her *Stircrazer* pieces, Schroeder attaches slightly modified out-of-the-box bass shakers (more formally known as tactile transducers) to musical instruments and assembles custom performance kits consisting of small, homemade, vibrating, electronic tools. Another aspect of her creative process is developing for the *Stircrazer* pieces scores and sound maps that reflect how the pieces are intended to sound. Until recently, Schroeder participated (offstage, as a controller of the electronics) in all the performances of these works. The most recent of these, *Stircrazer* | *Hammer + Flutter* for small ensemble, is serving as a workshop piece. As she explains, "Initially I was developing solo-performer systems, but I want to create enough flexibility in these tools to work with ensembles and get a range of sounds—so that they're like a connective tissue between the different instruments."

Schroeder was born in British Columbia, where she studied violin ("an instrument I rarely write for," she laughs) and began composing, with an interest in extended performance and installation settings. Right now, she lives in Massachusetts, where she is completing a Ph.D. in composition at Harvard University. In 2014, she was one of six composers selected to participate in the International Contemporary Ensemble's annual collaborative incubation residency ICElab, and in

2016 will start a research residency at Experimentalstudio des SWR Freiburg (Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra), where she will be developing and testing performer-controlled tool systems related to *Stircrazer*—systems that will allow the pieces to travel on their own, so to speak. [The following interview has been condensed and edited.]

MUSICWORKS: What led you to start working with bass shakers?

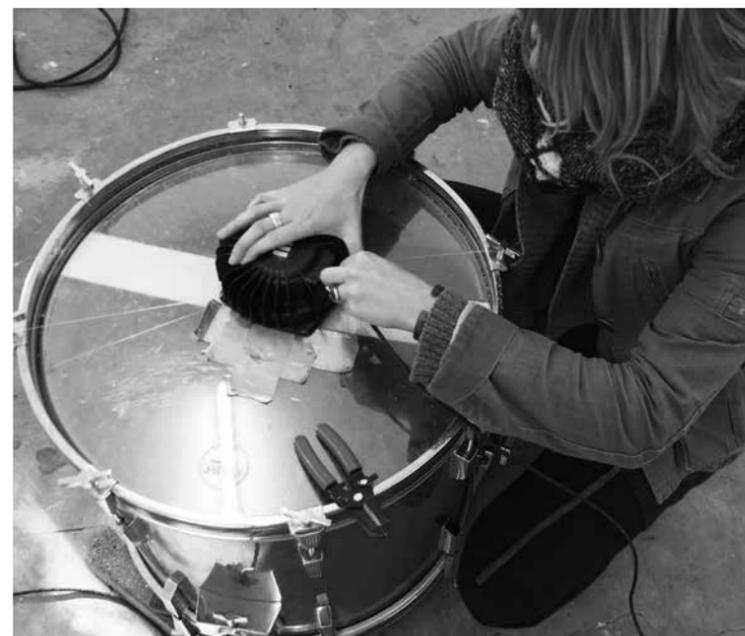
SABRINA SCHROEDER: For my small ensemble piece, *He Cuts Snow* (2012), I started building mechanisms—tools for players to use—and ended up using bass shakers on drums to create a subterranean layer for the piece. It felt like there was a whole soundworld underneath that piece that needed digging out, and where I wanted to hang out. So I rented some bass drums for a long weekend and experimented with the shakers—moving them around, changing the intensity of the wave form. I did play with gongs and other surfaces, like snare drums, but they only had one hot moment, whereas the bass drums could do more than two cool things.

But it was a solo show in Dusseldorf in 2013 that brought *Stircrazer* into the performance realm. The piece was improvised, but I mapped out a rough plan during five days before the performance, working out various gestural possibilities to do with building up sound within the space.

ON THE CD: *Stircrazer* | *Hammer + Flutter*



BELOW, RIGHT: Composer Sabrina Schroeder soldering the wires of a bass shaker. The other photos show her preparation and set-up of bass drums and gear for the self-performed show *Stircrazer* | *Cause Unfold Proceed*, a solo set for eight remote-controlled bass drums with live mechanics, presented in October 2013 at Dusseldorf's Parkhaus im Malkastenpark.



MW: So how did *Stircrazer* evolve from that experience?

SS: This is a really different process for me, because I am in constant dialogue with the process of building and creating the means to reach this soundworld. I started using those tools as peripherals, almost as effects, and now I am finding ways to find the expressive potential of that soundworld. With *Hammer + Flutter* I've entered the composition mode, opening up new rooms in that space, and from there figuring out where the composition is.

For me, it's important that listeners to these works know they're not hearing anything out of a speaker, they're hearing only acoustic sound through these shakers, the physical space resonating, which is a distinction from more typical uses of electronics in live performance.

MW: Tell me more about the performance kits.

SS: Each performer gets a kit of custom-made tools for each piece and performance. Some are modelled on pen lights, with little battery packs, no wires, and different tunings for each performer. Some have oscillating metal tips to hit strings or drums. There's a rubber-dipped variety, and some are more vibrator-like: you can put it in direct contact and transmit vibrations.

MW: Feel-good music! Do you get feedback from the musicians?

SS: This project has also been about figuring out how I can make these tools and systems better suited to the natural physicality of a performance. One pianist I worked with was rehearsing with an interface I'd built in my studio, and within five minutes of watching his body respond I knew it made no sense for a pianist. So we worked together on developing a keyboard-based interface that he felt was closer to the muscle memory that was native to him.

When I'm alone in my studio, I'm often just focused on getting the sounds I want. So having a chance to work with performers early in the process of each piece and playing with the language has been a huge benefit.

JENNIE PUNTER is an arts journalist and the editor of *Musicworks*.

LINK: <<http://sabinaschroeder.com>>

FYI: In 2016, two commissioned works by Sabrina Schroeder will receive their world premieres in Canada: in January, JACK Quartet will perform a new work at New Music Concerts in Toronto; in August, clarinetist Heather Roche will perform a new work at Salt New Music Festival in Victoria.

PHOTO BY MAX SCHULZE

TOP AND LEFT PHOTO BY PHILLIP SCHULZE, RIGHT PHOTO BY ROSS KARRE