We call “noise” any undesirable signal in the transmission of a message through a channel, and we use this term for all types of perturbation, whether the message is sonic or visual. Thus shocks, crackling, and atmospherics are noises in radio transmission. A white or black spot on a television screen, a gray fog, some dashes not belonging to the transmitted message, a spot of ink on a newspaper, a tear in a page of a book, a colored spot on a picture are “noises” in visual messages. A rumor without foundation is a “noise” in a sociological message.

At first sight, it may seem that the distinction between “noise” and “signal” is easily made on the basis of the distinction between order and disorder. A signal appears to be essentially an ordered phenomenon while crackling, or atmospherics, are disordered phenomena, formless blotches on a structured picture of sound. However, there is no absolute structural difference between noise and signal. They are of the same nature. The only difference which can be logically established between them is based exclusively on the concept of intent on the part of the transmitter: A noise is a signal that the sender does not want to transmit. Or, more generally: A noise is a sound we do not want to hear.

— Abraham Moles, from Information Theory and Esthetic Perception

In the ordered world of Western art music, percussion has long been employed to bring in the noise. The bulk of the percussion family is in fact comprised of instruments that produce noise rather than tone. The increasing use of percussion instruments over the last one hundred years can be understood as emerging from the same impulses that have lead to a gradual prioritization of sound and timbre over pitch and harmony in much contemporary music. This has gone hand in hand with developments following atonality, such as the influence of non-western musics, and the emergence of electronics in the later half of the twentieth century. Henry Cowell wrote of a fundamental distinction in music, “a division into tone – or sound produced by periodic vibration, and noise – or sound produced by non-periodic vibration.” However, as the increasing use of non-conventional sounds on all manner of instruments makes clear, this distinction is no longer necessarily relevant. In fact, much of contemporary music feels like percussion music now in its primacy of timbre.

Contemporary percussion music was born when John Cage and other composers in his circle started a percussion orchestra of found sounds from junkyards. Included among their arsenal of sounds was the automobile brake drum, which must have once seemed like pure noise, but has now become almost a conventional instrument. It is an interesting starting point for this program to point out that Alex Creighton and Brian Simalchik derived the pitch material for their if i were in, on, or around from the specific brake drums that they found in the music building at Williams, thereby creating a scale from noise instruments generally understood to have no pitch at all. While this program celebrates the noisier end of the percussion spectrum, it also seems to constantly question the fundamental distinction between noise and tone. This process reaches its end point in the final work on the program, Michel van der Aa’s Between. The opening B flat in the electronic part, a perfectly clear and clean tone, is met with a constellation of B flats from the percussionists performed on rice bowls and cowbells, in skittering rhythmic
spasms that make the initial electronic pitch sound as though it is being gently unwound from inside.

As always, Cage set the terms for much of this. In his 1937 essay The Future of Music: Credo, he wrote, “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.” Cage’s project was always to open our ears to new sounds. The magic of percussion music is the way it transforms every-day objects such as a wooden plank, a hunk of metal, or a saw blade, into a musical instrument. As with circuit bending, the work of our guest artist Peter Wise, it reveals to us something of the hidden nature of things. Noise occurs beyond sense and order, giving the listener a physical and at times ecstatic experience of sound itself.

Zoltán Jeney (b. 1943)

Impho 102/6, composed in 1978, is representative of the composer’s then emerging interest in minimalism. Jeney uses six crotales, or pitched antique cymbals, as a vehicle for constantly shifting rhythmic patterns over a relentless pulse. Above this insistent chiming of the crotales emerges an unpredictable cloud of complex overtones which gradually becomes unmoored from its source.

Considered one of Hungary’s foremost contemporary composers, Zoltán Jeney studied composition with Ferenc Farkas at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest (1961-66) and pursued postgraduate studies with Goffredo Petrassi at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome (1967-68). In 1970 he founded the New Music Studio Budapest in collaboration with Péter Eötvös, Zoltán Kocsis, László Sáry, Albert Simon, and László Vidovszky. Since 1995, Jeney has served as Head of the Department of Composition at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, Hungary. Several of his compositions have been released on the Hungaroton label.

Alex Creighton (b. 1988) and Brian Simalchik (b. 1988)

if I were in, on, or around was inspired by John Cage and Lou Harrison’s Double Music, a piece for four percussionists written in 1941. They created a large-scale structure for the piece, then each wrote parts for only two of the four musicians. Harrison said, “We each did our own form. We wrote separately and then put it together and never changed a note. We didn't need to.”

Using this model, we decided to write a piece for four percussionists in which we each wrote separate parts and later put them together. We divided our piece into small sections, switching the players we wrote for every 4 or 8 bars. The larger structure of the piece comes from the shape of an antique horn called a “serpent” (which is in the display case in the Bernhard lobby at Williams College), from which we derived five overarching sections (ABABC). The A sections use bell-like pitched instruments (glockenspiel, vibraphone, brake drums), while the B sections use non-pitched cans, drums and cymbals. The piece is also organized around a scale derived from the pitches of the brake drums, and the short rhythmic motif that begins the piece. After composing our parts separately, like Cage and Harrison, we laid them on top of one another, having no idea what the finished piece would sound like.
The title of the piece reflects the compositional process: we each picked three words and combined them. Alex picked “in, on, or around”; Brian, “if I were”.

Alex Creighton grew up in Lyme, NH, and started playing percussion in 4th grade. In high school, while receiving drum set lessons, he played with a steel drum orchestra for which he wrote his first composition. Currently a senior, he has taken composition classes at Williams College for which he has written several other pieces, in addition to writing vocal arrangements. This is his second collaborative effort, following last January’s collaboration with a choreographer from the Williams Dance Company.

Brian Simalchik is a senior at Williams College, majoring in music with a focus on composition. He was recently in residence at Mass MOCA with Roomful of Teeth, an eight-member vocal ensemble focusing on extended vocal techniques, where he wrote two pieces especially for them that were premiered at a concluding concert. The Williams Symphonic Winds recently premiered two of his pieces: when I lived in permanence for three amplified cellos and wind ensemble, and Untitled, which was presented during a concert of collaborations with the Williams Dance Company. His score for the documentary Child of Hope: Darfur Dreams of Peace won best soundtrack at the 2008 Kent Film Festival, and he has had premieres by the Williams Percussion Ensemble of The Light is Electric, and the Williams Student Symphony of an arrangement of selections from Eric Satie’s Sports et Divertissements. In January 2010 his piece Modular Homes will be premiered during the I/O New Music Festival, and he is currently working on a piece to be premiered in April 2010 by the Berkshire Symphony.

Giacinto Scelsi (1905 – 1988)

The secretive, mystical Giacinto Scelsi saw music as a spiritual revelation. His early works are influenced by a multitude of sources, including medieval and baroque music, as well as the modernist and serial practices of the time, and by his interest in Eastern philosophies. His later works are distinguished by their concentration on single notes and sounds; in so doing he revolutionized the role of sound in Western music and his oeuvre can be considered a forerunner of modern electro-acoustic music. His I Riti: Ritual March is quite short, brooding and out-of-kilter. Scelsi uses a combination of group textures and short motifs that draw attention to themselves, creating an atmosphere of tension.

Giacinto Scelsi's music was largely unknown throughout most of his life, as he refused to conduct interviews or make analytical comments about his works and rarely sought out performances. The attitudes behind his musical creations can be tied in with this reclusiveness; in the 1940s he began seeing music as a type of spiritual revelation, composing works involving static harmony with surface fluctuations of timbre and microtonal inflection. This type of harmonic minimalism was developed independently of other minimalist trends of the twentieth century, and was received with fascination by the musical world when his music finally began to receive performances and recordings in the 1980s. He wrote over 100 works, including several major pieces for orchestra, and works for chamber ensemble, string quartets, and solo and duo pieces. Many of his pieces were worked out in improvisation and subsequently written down.

Born the Count of Ayala Valva to an aristocratic Italian family, Scelsi was able to compose without the necessity of making a living. He played the piano from an early
age, before studying composition in his thirties with Walter Klein, a pupil of Schoenberg's, and then with the Scriabin enthusiast Egon Koehler. Scelsi absorbed the influences of his teachers in this period, using Schoenberg's techniques to write twelve-tone music, but also writing in a freely atonal style. Following the Second World War, Scelsi suffered a breakdown and was forced to spend time convalescing. His thinking began to be shaped by the Eastern philosophies that he had picked up while traveling, leading him to view composition as a spiritual process unconnected with the individualism central to most music making in Europe since the eighteenth century. Rather, he saw the composer as the creator of circumstances through which secret worlds hidden in sounds could be revealed. At this time he also became fascinated by the complex sounds comprising a single note, and reportedly played single pitches repeatedly on the piano, listening intently. These influences began to be felt in his works in the 1950s, with many pieces consisting of very slowly shifting harmony, often moving in one direction, for example in *String Quartet No. 4* (1964). This trend was at its most pronounced in the *Quattro Pezzi Su Una Nota Sola* (1959), for chamber orchestra, where refined orchestration, glissandi, trills, and microtonal movement are given prominence through the stillness of larger scale harmonic action. Dating Scelsi's compositions has been difficult as he re-dated manuscripts deliberately to confuse musicologists. He would not have his photograph taken, preferring instead to be represented by the symbol of a horizontal line placed under a circle.

James Romig (b. 1971)

The Frame Problem, composed in 2003, was commissioned by a consortium of percussion ensembles from Iowa State University, Susquehanna University, Truman State University, University of Akron, University of Illinois, University of Northern Iowa, University of North Florida, University of Southern Mississippi, Western Illinois University, and William Patterson University. The work's instrumentation comprises multiple "trios": each player performs on a trio of woods, metals, or small drums, while a fourth trio—of larger drums—is distributed between the three parts. The work, a strict circular canon (each part is identical, merely starting from a different point on a looped continuum), also incorporates a paradigmatic "trio of trios" into its large-scale structure: a particularly explosive and distinct section of the work occurs three times in each part (nine times, therefore, in total), functioning as a kind of "keystone." Over the span of the work, this short section is heard twice as a solo (once in the metals; once in the small drums), twice as a duet between players (woods and small drums; woods and metals),
and finally as a trio that concludes the work. The title refers to a primary difficulty in designing robots and computer programs with "artificial intelligence." Human brains have a remarkable ability to "frame" information: in an instant, we are able to observe and organize an enormous amount of data, sorting and categorizing what is relevant and what is not. When listening to music, one of the primary hierarchical "frames" we create is that of meter. In this percussion trio, multiple distinct meters occur concurrently—in different lines, at constantly shifting dynamic levels, and in different timbral aggregations—providing human listeners with the opportunity to resolve multiple overlapping "frames" simultaneously. Robots in the audience will probably just be confused.

James Romig composes solo, chamber, and large ensemble works that have been performed at recitals and festivals throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. Compositional studies with Charles Wuorinen instilled in his musical aesthetic a deep regard for iterative structure and self-similar form, while theoretical studies with Milton Babbitt reinforced the notion of multi-level correlation of rhythm and pitch. Interaction with the natural world through hiking and photography has engendered an interest in fractals and chaotic systems, while influences as diverse as Paul Klee, Brian Ferneyhough, and Haruki Murakami have inspired the creation of multivalent artworks that provide performers and audiences with numerous potential cognitive pathways and manners of appreciation. Romig holds a Ph.D. from Rutgers University and M.M. and B.M. degrees from the University of Iowa. He is currently associate professor of composition and theory at Western Illinois University and has also taught at Rutgers University and Bucknell University. Guest-composer visits include Northwestern University, Columbia University, the Cincinnati Conservatory, Juilliard, the American Academy in Rome, and Petrified Forest National Park. His works are available from Parallax Music Press, Curving Walkway Publications, and www.jamesromig.com.

**Elliott Sharp** (b. 1951)

To saturate is to fill, treat, or charge with the maximum amount of another substance that can be absorbed or combined. Composed in 1993 for the Rotterdam Festival, *Saturate* is packed with timbral transformations, variable densities, and hocketed grooves. Selected performances include the premiere in Rotterdam by the Dutch group Loos and the 2003 Nuova Consonanza Festival in Rome performed by the Italian group Logos Ensemble.

Composer/producer/sound artist Elliott Sharp has been a key figure in the avant-garde and experimental music scene in New York City for over thirty years, releasing more than sixty-five recordings ranging from blues, jazz, and orchestral music to noise, no wave rock, and techno. He has pioneered methods of applying fractal geometry, chaos theory, and genetic metaphors to musical composition and interaction, as well as innovations in the use of computers in live improvisation with his Virtual Stance project of the 1980s. He is an inveterate performer, playing mainly guitar, saxophone and bass clarinet. Sharp has led many ensembles over the years, including the blues-oriented Terraplane, Tectonics, and Orchestra Carbon.

Sharp describes himself as a lifelong “science geek,” having modified and created musical instruments from his teen years. He attended Cornell University from 1969 to 1971, studying anthropology, music, and electronics and completed his B.A. degree at
Bard College in 1973, where he studied composition with Benjamin Boretz and Elie Yarden; jazz composition, improvisation, and ethnomusicology with trombonist Roswell Rudd; and physics and electronics with Burton Brody. In 1977 he received an M.A. from the University at Buffalo, where he studied composition with Morton Feldman and Lejaren Hiller, and ethnomusicology with Charles Keil.

Since the late '70s, Sharp has been a pillar of New York's downtown music scene. His compositions have been performed by the Symphony of the Hessischer Rundfunk, the Ensemble Modern, Continuum, the Orchestra of the SEM Ensemble, Kronos Quartet, Zeitkratzer, the Soldier String Quartet, and the Quintet of the Americas. He releases music under his own label (zOaR music) as well as punk label SST and downtown music labels such as Knitting Factory records and John Zorn's Tzadik label.

He has collaborated regularly with artists including Christian Marclay, Eric Mingus, Zeena Parkins, Vernon Reid, Bobby Previte, David Torn, Nels Cline, and Frances-Marie Uitti, as well as qawaali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, blues legend Hubert Sumlin, and Bachir Attar, leader of the Master Musicians of Jajouka. He also curates the State of the Union compilations of one-minute tracks by experimental musicians, and produces records for numerous artists.

Peter Wise on Currents:

Electronic music today almost always makes use of computers and cutting edge technology. But in this concert, Peter Wise (of electronic duo Doggo & Sons) will work with the percussion ensemble players to make electronic music using kid's toys, cheap microphones and other scavenged materials.

"Circuit Bending" is an increasingly popular method of taking electronic children's toys that emit sounds, disassembling them and rewiring their circuits to create sounds their manufacturers never intended. The new world of sounds that opens up before your ears can sometimes be funny and weird, but also surprisingly beautiful and rich.

Michel van der Aa (b. 1970)

Between was written in 1997, when Michel Van der Aa was composer-in-residence with the Percussion Group The Hague. The model Van der Aa had in mind when composing Between was that of a Chinese ivory ball containing several smaller concentric carved spheres, allowing them to move freely inside one another. The work is comparable to a journey across those concentric spheres. It is a multilayered piece, symmetrical in structure.

The basic idea is set out clearly in the opening section: percussion and electronic sound take over from each other at regular intervals, the one being, as it were, “between” the other. But soon the percussion quartet falls apart, becoming first a duo, then four individual players, each interacting with his own “between” part on the tape. The entire first segment (A) is taken up by metal instruments all playing at a single pitch.
After a climax comes section B, with drums (i.e. without pitch), in which live sounds and soundtrack continually diverge and coincide. Metal takes over again in section C, this time joined by the wooden instruments and adding two tones to the initial pitch. Section D re-introduces the drums, now in a climactic four-layered dialogue reminiscent of section A. The fifth section (E) is the heart (if not the centre) of the piece. It consists of no more than a prolonged jingling chord of five tones. After this the composition repeats the whole sequence in reverse order. In the process the different layers of the “ball” start to shift, until the percussion section finds itself coinciding with the sound track, leaving gaps in what used to be a continuous flow of sound. — Frits van der Waa

Between is part of the “Preposition” trilogy – Above, Between, Attach. Each part focuses on a specific positioning of the musical material. Van der Aa won the prestigious International Gaudeamus Prize for this piece in 1999.

Michel van der Aa (Netherlands, 1970) is one of Europe’s most sought-after composers today. For Van der Aa, music is more than organized sound or a structuring of notes. His music has expressive power, combining sounds and scenic images in a play of changing perspectives. Van der Aa's recent stage works show a successful involvement as a film and stage director as well as composer.

Van der Aa's works often include a theatrical element: staging, film and music are seamlessly interwoven. Dramatic personages take on various identities or have an alter ego; musicians on the stage interact with their electronic counterparts on soundtrack or film. The virtual space that emerges works its way into the mind of the audience. Sound, in Van der Aa’s book, is malleable: it can constantly assume other forms, sometimes recognizable, sometimes not. Van der Aa is in fact a playwright in music. His sounds – like real people – can be flexible or stubborn; they either take control or get the short end of the stick; they reinforce or counteract each other, affecting audiences with their expressive power.

Having completed his training as a recording engineer at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, Michel van der Aa studied composition with Diderik Wagenaar, Gilius van Bergeijk and Louis Andriessen. His style, independent in spirit, is characterized by a constructivist approach and the use of rhythm and chords as structural elements. It is strikingly subtle, playful, poetic and transparent but not, however, expressive or melodious in the traditional sense.
In 1999 Michel Van der Aa was the first Dutch composer to win the prestigious International Gaudeamus Prize. Subsequent awards include the Matthijs Vermeulen prize (2004), a Siemens Composers Grant (2005), the Charlotte Köhler Prize for his directing work and the interdisciplinary character of his oeuvre (2005) and the Paul Hindemith Prize (2006).

Van der Aa’s music is recorded on the Harmonia Mundi, Col Legno, Composers’ Voice, BVHaast, and VPRO Eigenwijs labels.

Michel van der Aa is published by Boosey & Hawkes.