

# Keeping pace with Gordon Phillips



PHOTOS BY BABAK AMIRFEIZ

As a Phd chemistry graduate, **Gordon Phillips** took a leap of faith 15 years ago when he decided to enter the music profession. Since then, the 40-year-old percussionist hasn't had time to look back, as his career has ricocheted him into the areas of composition, accompaniment, and performing live for modern dancers. Between teaching at York and nightly performances in Robert Desrosiers's newest work, *Lumiere*, Phillips spoke with *Excalibur's* Paulette Peirol about his experiences.

For many people, the term "dance accompanist" conjures the image of a middle-aged woman playing Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" or, for variation, breaking into an upbeat "Tea for Two" on a rickety upright piano. And often musicians themselves regard dance accompaniment as no more than easy rent money.

Gordon Phillips, however, is one percussionist who shatters all preconceived notions of dance accompaniment, blending his eclectic musical background with an instinctive grasp of movement.

Whether accompanying a modern dance class, composing with choreographers, or performing live on stage, Phillips rarely sits still. Punctuating movement with music is his trademark.

In dance studios at York, for example, Phillips can be heard playing an exotic array of percussion instruments, from *marimbas* (African xylophones) to thumb pianos and bells. "These instruments work very well for modern dance," he says, since they complement the abstract form of the dance more appropriately than traditional instruments and melodies can.

Yet dance accompaniment is not a skill which can be taught. Phillips acquired his craft only by years of avidly observing various dance forms and learning to internalize music so as to make it physically fluid. "If you allow yourself, you can think with your body," he maintains.

Phillips' musical style is unique, drawing from his experiences with electronic musician John Mills-Cockell and avant-garde composer John Hassel, as well as his studies in ethnomusicology and electronic music at York. As a mature student in the early 1980s, Phillips learned West African percussion music, Bulgarian bagpipes, and Indian music. Today, he combines all these skills in his dance accompaniment, composing, and teaching. "In order to teach in fine arts," he says, "you have to be working in the field."

Phillips began his "fieldwork" in the early 1970s, playing percussion at "The Place," The London School of Contemporary Dance. There, he was exposed to the style of Martha Graham, a pioneer of modern dance who

stressed that movement must be syncopated with breathing and internal rhythms.

After two years of working at "The Place," Phillips came to Canada and began composing with choreographers such as York teacher Peggy McCann, Carol Anderson of Dance-makers, Danny Grossman, and Robert Desrosiers. He has also composed for David Roche in Adelaide, Australia.

"As an electronic music composer in particular, my interest is in timbre and texture, that is, how an instrument sounds, how unusual it is, and how you can combine unusual sounds to make interesting textures," he notes. "The reason why I like to work with choreographers is that they have very open ears. They don't have the same definitions of what music is, and formally, they often tend to be quite interesting and experimental."

Robert Desrosiers is arguably one of the most experimental choreographers that Phillips has worked with to date. From 1980-82, Phillips was the musical director for the Desrosiers Dance Theatre, and composed scores for the company's critically acclaimed *Bad Weather* and *The Fool's Table*. Currently, he is one of four musicians in Desrosiers' latest work, *Lumiere*, being performed at the Premiere Dance Theatre until December 6.

Last summer, Phillips, Ron Allen, Ahmed Hassan, and York graduate John Lang were asked by Desrosiers to meet and begin "throwing around ideas" for *Lumiere* in the studio. Only Phillips and Lang had previously worked with each other.

"We all have different backgrounds and styles, and that's why Robert put us together," Phillips notes, adding, "He's quite smart in that way, since he needs to draw from a variety of styles to produce a major work."

Yet "it's very hard to put four composers in a room and say 'make music'—the politics of it are almost insurmountable," Phillips states. "We had a difficult time with the ensemble, having to come together so quickly to produce so much music."

*Lumiere* consists of at least 15 to 20 distinct pieces, with an equal number of transitional musical bridges between them. Once serious rehearsals began in the fall, the musicians were given only three weeks to set music to video—tapes of the dances, and another week in the studio to work directly with Desrosiers and his company.

Yet even more difficult than the time restraint, was that the composers "had no sense of the overall form of the piece... you really don't get a sense of the whole until you see it run for the first time—which was the same day (as the first performance) in this case," Phillips notes.

"Robert likes to have the option of moving into different ideas in terms of images," Phillips explains. "He can go from a Japanese samurai section into a clown section without any problems at all. And we have to have that versatility too. That's not to say that the music should mimic the dance, but rather with

Robert, it's an added dimension and fills the space."

Phillips notes that in working with Desrosiers, the composer's function "is slightly different. We can bring our compositional and musical skills, but I think he tends to use them in a way that he knows where it's going and we don't." Yet Phillips is quick to point out that the same principle applies for the dancers, lighting designer, costume makers, and film director who worked on *Lumiere* also.

"But what Desrosiers does need, especially in music, is not just musicians and not just composers, because he can't do anything with either one. He needs people who have compositional skills and are also performing musicians, and actually, that's difficult to find," according to Phillips.

In *Lumiere*, Phillips and Hassin play percussion and vocals, Lang is on synthesizer, and Allen plays wind instruments. Between the four musicians, countless instrumental sounds are produced by using two computerized drum pads, a keyboard synthesizer, and a lyricon (wind synthesizer). They also use many individual instruments such as a clarinet, saxophone, bells, a squeeze drum, and a *gutam* (South Indian clay pot drum). Phillips uses about eight computer discs, each one programmed with four differently tuned instruments. Hence, one drum pad is able to echo over 30 instruments, he notes.

Musical styles in *Lumiere* are almost as plentiful, and even harder to identify since such varied instrumentation produces exotic hybrids. "A lot of the musical styles are borrowed," Phillips says, "and Robert doesn't often want originality; he likes clichés." A few of the styles which Phillips identifies in *Lumiere* are 1930s silent film music, 19th century Romantic opera interspersed with German new wave opera with falsetto (ending in a thunderous Wagnerian crescendo), Stravinsky type neo-classical music, and urban African "high life" style.

Yet what is interesting about the music, according to Phillips, is the combination of instruments needed to produce new textures. "If you've got some guy playing a flute and another playing an African drum, and somebody else playing a really strange synthesizer line, and other person is singing falsetto—you have to admit that's a pretty unusual texture. And that's what makes the music different," he says.

Yet Phillips notes that "the real magic is when you take those 15 to 20 different sections and you make it into one piece. Then you have to develop another 15 to 20 transitions, and we're all pressing buttons. It's technology city. There are no holes in the piece; it's almost constant transition. For four musicians to actually cover all those transitions, and for that production to get on stage and work even on the first night, was phenomenal. And that's what's magical about Robert—he makes magic on stage."

According to Phillips, Desrosiers is "a mas-

ter of transitions. He can make a complete work out of those different sections and he can string them together in such a way, even if they are non sequiturs, that the mind can follow those ideas without any problem. The fact that he has a mainstream audience shows that he's making some contact."

Yet much like film directors such as Alfred Hitchcock or Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Desrosiers must maintain strict control over the individual elements of a given work. "Robert is the artistic director, in all respects," Phillips says. And I'd even say that about the music—in a sense, composing music for Robert is not really like composing music. It's like he's the supreme composer; you simply show him your ideas and he makes the final choice."

For example, in the Sampson section of the "Sampson and Delilah" piece in *Lumiere*, "the dancer wanted much more music, and we gave him a whole operatic piece which he liked," describes Phillips. "But Robert said, 'I don't want it, because I have to make this whole opera section move dynamically from the beginning to the end so that the climax is in the right place.'"

"Robert has that sensibility as a composer," Phillips adds. "He knows how to create form. But he creates form as a multi-media artist, not just as a composer, and I have to respect that. He's in total control until he lets you know what he thinks you should know. That way he can control the elements."

Phillips claims that he does not find this approach artistically threatening. "Yet if I did this all the time," he notes, "I might find it a problem. I sometimes need to go away and work with other choreographers who let me be a composer and let me bring a piece of music to them where we can actually talk it through and hammer it out. I still have that need, too."

"We've had some problems," Phillips says of the musicians he worked with on *Lumiere*. "I quit once. I found the compositional process really difficult, because we were all fighting for musical space and our own ideas. And that's really hard; it's exhausting."

In the German new wave opera section which Phillips developed, for example, he says he "had a lot of resistance from the group, because they basically weren't interested in the style. But Robert loved it. So I was fighting there; I could feel that they (the band members) were reticent to do anything with it."

Regardless of each musician's stylistic differences, the group's versatility is its strengthening factor. "That's what's nice about it," Phillips contends, "that we can bring all these ideas to the pieces so it's not all one style. Instead, the music functions in the context of the dance, atmospherically as well as structurally, and we are able to move fluidly through those different styles."

Musical composition for Gordon Phillips "is a live phenomenon" and performing live is what he does best, whether accompanying a dance class or on stage in a large venue. And to this end, Phillips' dexterity has served him well.