Winning a PASIC Showcase Concert slot is the pinnacle for an academic percussion ensemble. These groups are the annual paradigm for junior high, high school, and university-level groups in this art form. I am honored to say that my ensemble at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) won one of these coveted spots, and will perform on the final university time slot at PASIC on Saturday, November 14, at 10 A.M.

Percussion ensemble has been on my mind for a large part of the summer. I was fortunate to judge the High School and Junior High PAS International Percussion Ensemble Competition (IPEC), the Black Swamp Percussion Ensemble Competition, and perform in Recife, Pernambuco Brazil as a member of the X4 Percussion Group. All of these events occurred during the same time period in mid- to late May. When I was approached about writing an article about the UNCG Percussion Ensemble, I was honored and more than happy to share some information about the UNCG ensemble, as well as some thoughts on the PAS IPEC application process.

First, let me state that I am fortunate to have a great studio at UNCG. I only arrived last fall (2014) and, during our initial meeting, stated my five-year goals accompanied with a tentative action plan to complete each goal. The students actively listened, then kept each other accountable to ensure we were able to pull off some amazing projects in my first year. Such an accomplishment does not happen without a cohesive and supportive unit in both the percussion studio and the School of Music.

Besides the traditional undergraduate and graduate percussion ensembles, we are developing our world percussion ensembles, working with community groups, and performing away from campus as much as we perform in house. We are fortunate to: (1) Have a strong composition department to collaborate with new, up-and-coming composers, (2) learn about new cultures and acquire global percussion instruments, (3) work with the Community Theatre of Greensboro’s (CTG) "Teens Downtown" program, and (4) have the opportunity to perform at several venues away from campus, as we did earlier this spring with a full performance of Reich’s "Drumming" at the CTG Studio in downtown Greensboro. Through such projects, UNCG percussionists have the opportunity to play some of the canons of the percussion ensemble repertoire, as well as understand the importance of giving back to the community.

For our PASIC showcase concert, the UNCG Percussion Ensemble will premiere new works by Michael Burritt, Anna Meadors, Jason Treuting, and Jamie Whitmarsh. These composers graciously agreed to write these pieces under a tight deadline, and I am thrilled to share their new works with the PASIC audience.

I have had the good fortune of working with Michael Burritt, Professor of Percussion at the Eastman School of Music, on the PASIC All-Star International Percussion Ensemble, as well as hosting and performing with him at my former university. He is the ultimate combination of performer, teacher, and composer. I wanted a new piece to complement his “Marimba Quartet” and “Fandango 13.” Fortunately for us, Burritt has agreed to compose a new mallet quartet to premiere at the convention, and a consortium of university professors has made this piece fiscally possible.

Anna Meadors is a strong example of the great things happening in the UNCG Composition Department. I first heard Anna’s work at the annual UNCG Collage concert where she premiered one of her compositions, “World Systems,” for alto saxophone, vibraphone, bass, and drumset. My graduate assistants performed the percussion parts, and I immediately loved the piece. Since that time, Anna was a selected composer for the So
Percussion Summer Institute, a fellow at the Norfolk Festival, and a part of the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s National Composer Intensive. Karen Moorman of the Classical Voice of North Carolina said, “I’ll be keeping tabs on this very talented young composer.” I think we all should, too.

I discovered So Percussion very late after their beginning, around 2007, when a student brought me their album Amid the Noise. I was immediately drawn to the new sounds presented in the compositions, and discovered they were composed by Jason Treuting. Since this time, I have had the fortune of hosting So Percussion, performing with them as an extra percussionist, and commissioning and premiering a new work from them, “Chorus Music,” a work featuring So Percussion with percussion ensemble. The UNCG Percussion Ensemble had already been discussing this commission with Jason, and he agreed to complete the work for our PASIC performance.

Last, but definitely not least, one of the new compositions will be a work by Jamie Whitmarsh. Jamie was the composition winner in the 2012 PAS Composition Competition with his “Concerto for Drumset and Percussion Ensemble.” I had the great pleasure of performing the PASIC premiere of this work during the PASIC 2012 New Literature Session, for which I served as clinician. Jamie and I spoke very soon after PAS announced the 2015 IPEC winners to begin laying the groundwork for this piece.

To close, these ideas I implemented in my first year here at UNCG did not happen overnight. For me, they took considerable time, observation, and are now an integral part of the learning process when I share information with my students. Allotting time to research works for percussion ensemble, compiling repertoire lists, and simply trying to discover as many works as possible for this art form is a continuous endeavor. I encourage new ensemble directors to begin their process by going through the repertoire of such leading university and academically-related percussion ensembles as Amadinda, Black Earth, Kroumata, Les Percussions de Strasbourg, Los Angeles Percussion Quartet, Mantra, Mobius, Nexus, Nief-Norf, Percussion Group Cincinnati, Red Fish Blue Fish (UCSD), So Percussion, Square Peg Round Hole, Third Coast Percussion, Tigue, and TorQ Percussion to begin discovering your own voice as a percussion ensemble director.

Should you decide to send in an application for the IPEC, ensure that you perform music that you believe in sharing with others. If you do not truly believe in the music and are simply submitting a piece because it is “on the list,” it will be apparent on the recording(s). Also, while this was my first year directing an ensemble that was selected to present a showcase concert, it was the fourth time I had entered the IPEC (three entries with my previous university). I once thought I needed to only submit pieces from a small amount of chosen repertoire. This is not the case. While there needs to be a certain level of difficulty in the literature presented, it is more important that you choose pieces for which you appreciate every moment of the composition. By doing so, you will feel compelled to detail every second of the work, and this refinement will be transparent in the recordings you submit. This refinement includes your tuning scheme (e.g., membranophones), overall musical decisions, as well as the character of the music presented in your program.

We look forward to seeing everyone at the UNCG Percussion Ensemble Showcase Concert!

Eric Willie has a multi-faceted career as performer, teacher, and arranger. He is Assistant Professor of Percussion at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and is a section percussionist with the Winston-Salem Symphony (WSS). A proponent of new works for percussion, he has commissioned and/or premiered over forty works for percussion solo, percussion ensemble, or mixed ensemble. In addition to his duties at UNCG and WSS, Eric performs with the LegalWood and the Nief-Norf projects, where he has performed at the Big Ears Music Festival, PASIC, and for the Nashville Symphony’s “On-Stage” Series. Eric holds degrees from the University of North Texas (DMA), University of Kentucky (MM), and Austin Peay State University (BME). PN