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Dafnis Prieto

Whether it's through his recordings, performances, videos, or multiple forms of instruction, the drummer actively seeks to knock down barriers of thought and expression.

by Ken Micallef

How can you expand your drumming palette for only seven dollars and in only thirty minutes? Access is available—are you ready to commit?

For a mere seven dollars per video, you can sit at the feet of Dafnis Prieto, 2011 MacArthur Genius Fellow, 2018 Grammy Award winner, and faculty member of the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami. The Cuban native's two new video series, *Lessons* and *Flying Solo* (available at dafnisonmusic.com), delve deep into rhythmic independence, Latin basics, soloing, concepts, improvisation, and “composition as the conduit to reach the fountain of inspiration,” as described in Prieto's press materials.

For a few dollars more, the drummer's latest book, *Rhythmic Synchronicity: Individual and Collective Rhythmic Skills: A Rhythm Course for Non-Drummers*, offers an expansive take on rhythmic singularities of multiple varieties.

If, after all this instruction, you want further inspiration, you need only hear Dafnis Prieto Sextet's current release, *Transparency*. It's the third by his sextet, following 2008's *Taking the Soul for a Walk* and 2015's *Triangles and Circles*. *Transparency* includes nine all-new Prieto compositions plus an arrangement of Dizzy Gillespie's classic “Con Alma,” performed by Prieto, saxophonists Román Filiú and Peter Apfelbaum, trumpeter Alex Norris, pianist Alex Brown,

and bassist Johannes Weidenmueller.

Opener “Amanecer Contigo” is a blast of joyful melody propelled by Prieto's simmering tom-and-cowbell rhythm. “Uncertradition,” another rhythm-blasting enunciation, is a study in grace and control. “Cry with Me” sounds like a big band, but the sextet spirit is strong, driven by the drummer's burning introductory solo. Prieto brings out the brushes for the slow-motion-dance intro of “On the Way,” then shifts to a turbulent solo section and shifting rhythmic waves. “Feed the Lions” finds Prieto using his set as a kind of three-ring circus of sound, whether twirling the hi-hat, leveling a mean and low funk beat, or emanating burly swing patter on the cymbals. “Lazy Blues,” which closes *Transparency*, opens with neat rim-click/bass drum work and then launches into a four-to-the-bar Horace Silver–styled soul-jazz tune punctuated by an extended series of exuberant drum breaks.

Prieto, who still answers the occasional sideman call to work with pianist Michel Camilo, offers a guiding statement for his new recording, which could also represent his many projects: “Transparent ideas, communication, and relationships. The clarity of intentions. A single glance. The simplicity of beauty. The transparent connection to life and everything in it. The depth, the surface, the fragility of existence. A sincere breath of fresh air, a transparent statement.”



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Play



David Garten

MD: That “clarity of intentions”—where does it come from, and how have you developed it throughout your career?

Dafnis: It has to do with my personality. I want to have inspiring relationships and communication. I don't like dishonesty, behind-the-scenes dealing, that kind of hypocrisy. I'm from the countryside, where people are as sincere as possible. This album is almost an invocation of that world and asking the world to be as transparent as possible, to be clear and on a positive path. I'm saying this in the social aspect of it, the political aspect of it, and also the musical aspect of it. I'm serious in what I do and what I create and produce. I'm doing things from top to bottom: I write the books myself, and I publish them myself. My work and teaching and lessons are a sincere representation of who I am. The message is clear and transparent.

MD: Did you encounter hypocrisy and double dealing while in New York?

Dafnis: I still see and feel it everywhere. It's not a regional thing; it's universal. Society affects human beings. Musicians as human beings are affected by the [system] in which they live socially. Many times you say, “Oh, I better not say this,” which is the thing that you *should* be saying. So, the new album is an invocation to be as transparent as possible.

MD: What was the goal for the new sextet record?

Dafnis: It's all my compositions. There are different songs with different characters. I'm really excited to share this record because we got the *sound* in this record. Not that we didn't get it before in other records, but in this one, the quality and the wholeness in the band, we nailed that. We play some amazing ballads and slow tempos that are really very joyful to play and hopefully for the listener to hear. It's a continuation. It's more mature, and clear and transparent. This is my eighth album as a leader. I love the sextet sound. It's almost like a small big band in a sense.

MD: Explain the title of your new book, *Rhythmic Synchronicity*.

Dafnis: Synchronicity usually means two things happening at once, like coincidence, but something even more fantastic. But you can voluntarily synchronize something. It's not a random and occasional interactive situation.

MD: How can you create coincidence?

Dafnis: When two people play together and they're synchronizing with each other, that's something they're voluntarily doing. *Rhythmic Synchronicity* is a course that I designed for the Frost School of Music



at the University of Miami. I've had this in my mind—now I have the opportunity to process it. I created this course for non-drummers, which allows them to explore rhythmic synchronicity regardless of the instrument. There are many exercises and insights on how to [achieve synchronicity] through syncopation and the value that we give to subdivisions to play whatever you want to play on those subdivisions. It's really to improve the rhythmic aspects that both students and professional musicians could benefit from. It gives anyone the inside drummer's perspective, [though] not only because I played the drums, but because I might have a consciousness about what rhythm is.

MD: How is the book organized?

Prieto's Setup

Drums: Yamaha Maple kit

- 5x14 snare
- 10x12 tom
- 14x14 floor tom
- 18x20 bass drum

Cymbals: Sabian

- 13" prototype hi-hats
- 18" HHX crash
- 20" AA Raw ride
- 20" HHX ride crash

Heads: Evans UV1 snare and tom batters and G1 Clear resonants, UV EMAD bass drum batter and EQ1 front

Sticks: Vic Firth SD4 Combo

Percussion: Latin Percussion Mambo cowbell and jam block



David Garten

Dafnis: The book has three levels. The first is the fundamentals and basics of subdivision: how you're going to play those patterns, singing or clapping against a steady pulse. Then you start dealing with the syncopation. For me, syncopation is anything that you don't play on the beat. Ninety-nine percent of musicians can play on the beat. The problem is when they have to play *off* the beat. The course is designed to make your off-beat playing so strong that it becomes effortless. You don't have to rely that much on the beat anymore, because you have the balance between playing on and off the beat.

MD: You're teaching this at the Frost School?

Dafnis: In this class I have thirty students playing together, clapping the different rhythms and patterns from the book. They

learn how to play and react to what the other person is playing. The bottom line is to relate what you're playing with another person. Each musician should sound different with other musicians, the same as in any relationship. We go to different places in different conversations with different people.

MD: What's the essence of the book?

Dafnis: Dealing with subdivisions. It can be 8th notes or 16th notes, and triplet subdivisions as well. It can be played in 4/4 or in triplets, meaning the 8th note inside of a triplet feel. Say one person is playing a beat using different subdivisions. We build the experience from very slow playing; the idea is to get it deep inside to where your body internalizes the information. Not just reading patterns. I'm focusing on the quality, not the

quantity, on the quality of how things are played, and being interactive, which is part of the second level of study in the book.

MD: How do the students internalize the patterns?

Dafnis: Through memorization. Young students today have a huge problem with rhythmic memorization. A lot of music that young people are consuming is very beat oriented. In two beats they have the entire rhythmic concept of the whole song. It's very frustrating when you're giving them a four-bar cycle. It's very hard for them to learn it by heart because they have been exposed to so much looping. Then there's the repetition in the music, over and over; that's not the only quality that we have in rhythm, and it shouldn't be the one of primary focus, that is

the most exposed.

MD: How do you deal with that?

Dafnis: I'm trying to fight that, to challenge the students, to let them know that they have a certain responsibility when it comes to what music they're going to play not only now, but also in the future. I challenge their ability to memorize sequences. When I teach, they have to learn all of it by memory. At the end of the book, you learn the whole book, by memory. You have to get deep and dirty with it; you have to really be patient and make it happen from the ground up.

MD: What do you teach at the Frost School?

Dafnis: I teach private lessons, composition, two different ensembles, and the Rhythmic Synchronicity course. I also run the Latin Jazz Orchestra, a big band.

MD: At your website there's a six-part Lesson series and four Flying Solo performances.

What do you charge for each of the Lesson series and Flying Solo series?

Dafnis: Seven bucks.

MD: Seven bucks? I'm going to take this!

Dafnis: The classes are thirty minutes each. A lot of content. I'm not concerned about length. Also, I want to give a break to students who want to learn. I'm already making a living with so many other things. I'm not putting any expectation of making a living by this. I'm trying to balance what I do, that I love doing, trying to charge a price that seems affordable. Maybe that musician who'd rather have a beer would instead get a video that might change the course of their life.

MD: What was the focus of the video lessons?

Dafnis: Four are related to *The World of Rhythmic Possibilities* book, which is basically the way I present studies for independence and coordination. Another class is more into different groups of Latin music. Another deals with 6/8. I'll be posting more eventually.

MD: The Flying Solos are inspiring. In your bio, they're described as "a conduit to reach a foundation of inspiration."

Dafnis: I get inspiration from the sounds that I produce. What I get before that inspiration are the sounds that I imagine. The conduit of it is me going through those ideas, putting them out there. The act of executing that and listening to it makes me react to the next level of creativity, reacting to that spontaneously in that moment. The focus of this series is really the freedom to sit on

your instrument and play music without preconceptions.

MD: How should students approach listening to and watching the Flying Solos?

Dafnis: Realize that that drumset is a musical instrument—it's not only beat playing. And it's not something that always has to be part of a group scenario, the drumset can be music in itself.

MD: When performing these, are you thinking about a song form?

Dafnis: I'm thinking about the theme of the performance. One performance is dedicated to Africa. So I'm thinking to create some textures and structures, some interaction that reminds me of Africa. Then there's another one called "Introspection." Just looking inside for sounds, motifs, themes.

The ideas take wing on their own, but I try to keep the integrity of the themes as much as

A World of Rhythmic Possibilities. It's always that kind of dualism. In my first book I have a chapter dedicated to tradition that's basically an inner dialogue, a personal dialogue. I've always had these questions. I always have hundreds of questions in terms of where things come from and the choices people make trying to understand these cultures. How people are educated to believe and what people are exposed to.

MD: What do you practice now?

Dafnis: I tend to just improvise most of the time. I don't really practice much anymore because I'm so busy producing music, writing music, conceiving music, and putting it all together.

MD: What keeps you so motivated and clear in your intentions?

Dafnis: It's a necessity to me. It's almost inevitable, as feelings go through me about



Osmani Tellez

possible.

MD: When playing ethnic rhythms in that context, are they literal African or Cuban rhythms, or are they more stylized?

Dafnis: They're stylized. Rhythms and the names of the rhythms are just an excuse to play music. I'm trying to go either deeper or higher than that. To me it's all about the personalization of sound and the personalization of how you receive that information and make it your own. Nobody can really represent one country, one culture, or the whole world. By that I'm trying to say everyone will inevitably add his or her own personalized way of doing it. Even if they don't want to.

MD: It's the natural evolution of things.

Dafnis: Yeah. I pulled it from my first book,

certain things that could be completely unrelated to music. They become part of me as sounds and ideas and concepts. I try to organize them and put them out. That is the motivation. It's not like I'm going out to get information for anything, because more than inspiration, what I need is time to put down the ideas that I have. Inspiration is everywhere. It's in nature, in people. And inspiration is not something that always comes from a good source. You can be inspired to do something good coming from something very negative, such as the social aspects of this country, for example. There are a lot of negative things, but there are a lot of people doing a lot of positive things because of those negatives.

