

Program Note

IT DON'T MEAN A THING . . .

Robert Greenberg

The title and musical content of IT DON'T MEAN A THING . . . display a certain cultural schizophrenia. "It Don't Mean A Thing . . . If It Ain't Got That Swing" is the title of a popular/jazz tune written by Duke Ellington in 1932. By appropriating the first half of Ellington's title, I have meant to imply the second half - this piece should indeed "swing," with as much raw, almost vicious power the players can muster. However, the actual musical content of the piece has nothing to do with 1930's jazz. Rather, it is based on the sound and martial spirit of the Japanese Taiko ensemble. The role of the "O-Daiko" (the "Great Drum") is here played by the bass drum, which initiates and concludes all the major sections of the piece. The bass drum behaves like a drill sergeant, goading, bullying, commanding and cajoling the other players into various sorts of action across the span of the piece.

There are essentially two different sorts of sections in IT DON'T MEAN A THING . . . : those sections underlain by ostinato patterns and those explosive, less continuous sections which are not. All the sections are based on some version or versions of the rhythmic pattern heard at the very opening of the piece, consisting of three fast strokes. IT DON'T MEAN A THING . . . is scored for a conductor and six percussionists playing a variety of instruments: six timpani, eight tom-toms, four roto-toms, two sets of bongo drums, four snare drums, three brake drums, a tenor drum, a bass drum, five temple blocks, four wood blocks, four cymbals, a sixteen inch Chinese gong, and a tam-tam. The score requests that the piece is "To Be Played With Energy, Fury, and the Greatest Possible Precision Throughout!"

IT DON'T MEAN A THING . . . was composed between May and December, 1990. It is dedicated to my former student Luis Gutierrez and the San Francisco Conservatory Percussion Ensemble.