

# Déja Vu Again

BY KYLE GANN

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Petri Servio conducts the choir Huutajat.

photo: Tara Engberg

The Bang on a Can Festival still puts on a good show, but the thrill of continuous discovery is gone. The causes appear to be less ideological than economic. Forming the Bang on a Can All-Stars years ago as a house ensemble was a great idea, but the December 10 marathon at BAM gave a distinct impression that the group no longer has the time or resources to learn new repertoire, because they played John Halle's *Operation Chaos* again, and Lois Vierk's *Red Shift* again, and Elena Kats-Chernin's *ProMotion* again, and Tan Dun's *Concerto for Six* again. And Steve Martland came from England again and performed, though with his own ensemble, *Horses of Instruction* again. All good stuff and worth repeating, but where BOAC used to define the newest currents around, it's beginning to look like the Museum of Great 1990s Music.

Meanwhile, interstices between ensemble works were filled with solo performers, some of them from non-Western traditions, like Hassan Hakmoun from Morocco, and Indian tabla player Talvin Singh, and Czech singer-violinist Iva Bittova, and jazz pianist Matthew Shipp. These always get loads of applause, because the authenticity of a traditional music rings especially confident amid the self-conscious vulnerability of new music. And Pamela Z, with her always surprisingly operatic voice, did one of her charming, digitally delayed performance pieces *again*, and Phil Kline set up all his boomboxes and did something startlingly clever *again*. And somehow the only ensemble works newly commissioned for the occasion were those of the

SOMEHOW THE ONLY ENSEMBLE WORKS NEWLY COMMISSIONED FOR THE OCCASION WERE THOSE OF THE festival curators, two each by David Lang and Michael Gordon and one by Julia Wolfe. You'd think they'd try just a speck harder to make it not look so much like the Michael, David, and Julia show. Again.

But thrills of discovery were not entirely absent. New York new-music circles have been abuzz in recent years with talk of Iva Bittova, the Meredith Monk of the violin, and this was my first chance to hear her live. With theatrical poise and lithe control of her instrument, she walked onstage playing ostinatos and wandered from microphone to microphone, singing, interrupting herself, slipping into sexy Billie Holiday mode, and even at one point picking up a kazoo to perform on it. Her Eastern sense of melodicism made her exotic, but she does share Monk's combination of emotive abandon and musico-structural intelligence, so that when she was being funny and clever, she was never *merely* funny or clever. Her music delights you and makes you think at the same time.

The other anticipated splash was the Finnish shouting choir Huutajat, conducted by Petri Sirvio, who murmured, bleated, inhaled, slurped, and blasted out everything from Schubert to Delta blues to the national anthem with fanatical precision and facial expressions comical enough to match the sounds. Scrupulously professional, they were something of a collective one-trick pony, however, and after absorbing the explosive first two numbers, I found the next few somewhat predictable, and finally excused myself to go gulp down one of the BAM café's mediocre sandwiches.

Understandably, since it was new, the most exciting ensemble work was Gordon's *imreadywhenyouare*. He's heavily into intervals of a third now, and had Alex Sweeton sing up and down seventh chords as the strings of the new Michael Gordon Band hammered away against the beat in dotted-eighth-note chords, and Kermit Driscoll walked a bassline on a few pitches; joyously Daniel Lentz-ish, and over too soon. Lang's music has moved toward stasis in recent years, and his ensemble piece *Heroin* continued the trend. Expert vocalist Theo Bleckmann drew a sentimental vocal line over Maya Beiser's endlessly repetitive cello arpeggios as other instruments crooned a note now and then, with hypnotic effect.

I was glad to enjoy Kats-Chernin's jaunty tonal pointillism and Martland's new *Kick*: variations on a folk tune with a square I-IV-V-I progression spiced up with a 5/8 meter superimposed by the percussion. And I was curious to hear a new English DJ named Scanner, although his booming drones and ambient ostinatos seemed unremarkable considering everything else that's happening in the genre. But I wish someone would pour enough money on the festival—if that's what's lacking—to enable them to go out and find 50 new composers and five new movements we haven't heard yet, and shock us with that old BOAC electricity.



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