

# After Ugly Music

By Kyle Gann

## Bang on a Can

**Bang on a Can** began six years ago as a peculiar minifestival that thought nothing of programming works by such polar opposites as Milton Babbitt and Steve Reich back to back. Today, as the festival celebrates its seventh season this week at the Kitchen, BoAC's influence is intercontinental, its activities span the calendar, and it's defining a new generation of American composers. In coming months, BoAC will present marathon concerts at the Holland Festival (June 19), the Huddersfield Festival, and London's South Bank Centre. The festival's spin-off ensemble, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, recently played at Walker Art Center and in Toronto for New Music Across America, and is looking to start a year-round schedule. Volume II of *Bang on a Can Live* (CRI) hits the stores this week. Organized from the beginning by composers Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David Lang, BoAC is giving new music a good name.

They're doing it through a combination of visionary chutzpah and a no-nonsense curatorial policy that dispels the gloom of other recent festivals. All three studied at Yale with Martin Bresnick, a composer of high polish and ecumenical tastes. "Martin founded an ensemble at Yale called

Sheep's Clothing," explains Wolfe in her and Gordon's homey apartment south of Delancey Street. "They gave all-night marathon concerts, like happenings, in unusual spaces that people would check out at three in the morning. He's not at all stylistically biased. That kind of spirit shaped our thinking."

The three curators bounce off each other. Lang continues, "When we started BoAC, we looked around and the concerts we saw weren't exciting. If you went to hear *Speculum Musicae*, there was invariably one composer doing great stuff in an ugly language, and the others were bad composers working in the same ugly language. Same thing Downtown: there'd be a free, sonic piece by a really good composer and a bad sonic piece right behind it. Pieces were being grouped by ideology, not quality. We thought, 'What would happen if you had the best academic piece, the best static piece, the best minimalist piece, the best improv piece, whatever, all next to each other?' At the first festival we played Milton Babbitt's *Vision and Prayer* next to Steve Reich's *Four Organs*. Musicians knew that if they liked one they weren't supposed to like the other, but the audience didn't know that."

Setting out to showcase the best of all styles, Gordon, Wolfe, and Lang soon realized they had unleashed a new force, a music New

York didn't know about because it had no previous outlet. "In the '80s," Gordon says, "if you weren't interested in improvised music, there was no place to go. The improvisers weren't the continuation of the scene around Reich and Glass, they came more from jazz and rock. Our generation, the postminimal generation, heard classical music, pop, jazz, folk, world music from different cultures. We were open to all these influences."

The trio puts out a yearly call for tapes, ignoring scores and bios. They listen in a blindfold situation, and won't program any piece they can't get behind unanimously. "It sounds naive," admits Gordon, "but we want to be as artistically pure as possible." While far from homogenous, BoAC's music exhibits general similarities suggesting directions younger composers are moving in that, so far, only BoAC has tuned into. Most of the music is notated, with a renewed emphasis on form and structure. Wolfe: "Music that's well worked-out in advance by one person has a vision, and can be shaped in ways that go beyond what you can do spontaneously." Rhythmic and structural complexity are common, especially in a movement some Downtowners are calling Totalism, a music of overlaid steady beats and tempo structures, best represented on this year's BoAC by the Ben Neill/David Woj-



Lang, Gordon, and Wolfe dispel the gloom.

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narowicz theater piece *ITSO-FOMO*. As terms go, Lang considers *dissonant minimalism* not too far off:

"But it's really just simple dissonance. Twelve-tone music tried to hide the fact that it was ugly. It didn't say, 'Here's a really ugly sound, isn't that exciting?' It made believe that its ugliness was the only language possible and tried to figure out what it could make beautiful in that ugly context. What interests me is, now dissonance is dissonance again. The minimalists made dissonance possible, because their music is so beautiful."

Gordon elaborates, "I think of my music as postugly music. Academic music wasn't dissonant, because to have dissonance you need to imply consonance. Now that minimalism has simplified all those parameters, the disruptions can stand out. BoAC music tends to have dissonance not just in the pitch language, but in the

rhythm, the structure, and the form."

Success brings establishment, and, in their mid-thirties, Wolfe, Lang, and Gordon already worry that they aren't sufficiently tuned in to composers in their twenties. (The festival will include a tribute to Eric Qin, a talented New York composer recently killed at 25 in a bike/car accident.) But unlike New Music America, they don't feel answerable to anyone, and aren't about to compromise their vision under pressure. "People now come to BoAC to stand at the back and complain," boasts Lang. "They tell us, 'You're not representing our music.' We say, 'Well, when we started out, no one was representing our music. Go out and start your own festival.' The more festivals we have, the better." ■

*Bang on a Can continues through May 30, at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, 255-5793.*

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