

Ain't Misbehavin'

By Kyle Gann

**Bang on a Can
American Festival of
Microtonal Music**

How can we knock Lincoln Center on its butt? I know—let's give some well-polished performances of works by famous Europeans! Bet they haven't heard *that* before!

I'm sure no such train of thought chugged through the minds of Bang on a Can curators David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon. Still, sitting through an April 11 program that shouldn't have raised eyebrows even on 66th Street, I felt like it might as well have. The opening installments of this year's Boac, March 14 and April 11 at the Walter Reade Theater, centered around the festival's house ensemble, the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Out of 16 works, three were by the codirectors, one by an ensemble member, and 10 by composers over 50. Shaking the place up wasn't the first priority.

For example, the April concert showcased three pieces by a Boac favorite, the Dutch master Louis Andriessen. He writes charming process pieces, but his postminimal structures can be a little obvious, and my enthusiasm for Boac won't survive its turning into an annual homage to him. In Andriessen's *Hout*, Evan Ziporyn's sax melody was echoed quickly by marimba, guitar, and piano in turn, like a tune played through a delay unit; very pretty, but if it

was written after 1978 there's no reason to gush over its originality. Plenty of more intriguing postminimalists (American and Dutch) have yet to appear on Boac, not to mention entire generations of unheard younger Europeans.

Part of the problem this year is the Lincoln Centerization of Boac's ensemble concept. The All-Stars' six superb instrumentalists haven't yet gelled into an ensemble, and so fall into the kind of note-perfect, gutless, unelucidating playing that has been endemic in the classical mainstream for 20 years. Cellist Maya Beiser and bassist Robert Black writhed their way through a Scelsi string duo; their restless glissandos were perfectly faithful to the score, I'm sure, but not intense or internalized enough to seethe. Reich's *Four Organs*, enlivened by swirling inharmonicities from the clash of the synthesizers, was gorgeous, but the heroic measures the group needed to stay together were distracting. Worst of all, a revival of Rzewski's wrenching political tirade *Coming Together* split up the text among the six ensemble members rather than bring in the theatrically powerful soloist the work needs. Though they recited better than musicians usually do, it was an emasculating distortion of a rarely heard classic.

The fiery, self-assured performances were either solos or the type of rhythmically punchy work that holds the group together well. The former included Lang's *Anvil Chorus*, a cheery postminimal mallet-fest that Steven Schick

banged polyrhythmically on metal bars, drum, cymbal, and brake drums. Wolfe's *Lick*, a rock wannabe piece, received a brash, well-rehearsed reading; perversely counterintuitive, it fragmented its rock beat into bits broken by silences, lapsing into a swing only in the final measures. The festival's one big surprise so far was *Arapua* by Brazilian jazz patriarch Hermeto Pascoal, a wild minimalist jaunt whose kaleidoscopic rhythmic tricks brought Antheil's *Ballet Mechanique* to mind.

Other composers suffered in this slam, bam, thank-you-ma'am type of presentation. Alison Cameron's *November* came off as a yawn despite a fine central idea. Its languid chords, sprinkled with carelessly descending lines in the piano, needed reorchestration in rehearsal to get Cameron's sensuously yin mood across. Similarly, Mary Wright's *Dad Left Before You Got a Chance To Meet Him*, whose unison rock-rhythmed bangs Schick marked off with a baseball bat on a metal garbage can, was a rousing original, anger-motivated gesture, but the clumsiness of its instrumentation blunted its spiky edges. Even experienced composers often need postpremiere revisions to make a work sound effective, and to present new works by young composers with an unseasoned ensemble is to hope for miracles in the glaring spotlights of Lincoln Center.

That's not to say it shouldn't be tried. Getting that music to the public is the whole point. Boac doesn't owe it to the music com-



JACK VARTOOGIAN

Not a whole of shaking going on: the Boac All Stars

munity to be "representative," but the festival owes it to its audience not to blend into Lincoln Center's faded woodwork. Independent to the point of solipsism, the festival is maintaining its purity, but losing its sense of long-underground roots, that sense that the curators listened to a million tapes to distill the best of what's going on. If the May 8 Alice Tully Hall marathon can make me eat these words, I'll down 'em with relish.

For all its problems, it was Johnny Reinhard's American Festival of Microtonal Music (April 8, St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia) that provided the month's exciting discoveries. The program unearthed the earliest microtonal music published in Europe: Two Concert Pieces for cello and piano from 1907 (!) by Richard H. Stein. The style was pure Mahler/Strauss, but the melody was edged with soulful quarter-tones that cel-

list David Eggar delineated with exceptional clarity. The concert also commemorated the recent death, at 76, of pioneer Ivor Darreg, who had rigorously explored dozens of possible divisions of the octave. Darreg's computer music has a weird, dour sensibility. His pastoral *Lullaby for a Baby Computer*, however, scored in 34-tone equal temperament, was played on flute and bassoon, and though Reinhard and flutist Andrew Boltowsky drew meticulous pitch distinctions, it takes more than two lines to get a feel for a 34-pitch grid.

The program climaxed in *Vision*, an early conceptual score by La Monte Young that had bassoons wailing and strings glissandoing from the balconies, with long silences and joyous confusion. Penned in 1959 and never before performed, it wasn't 35 years ahead of its time, but it was easily 15. ■

TOWER RECORDS/VIDEO

WADCA & CDOW/RAD