

Alive at Zero

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

Bang on a Can has more than taken up where the New Music America festival left off. Now wrapping up a month of events, BOAC projects a futuristic vision that NMA long ago abandoned in favor of obsequious pluralism. On May 11, the New Music Alliance—NMA's loose-knit coalition—met before BOAC's marathon concert to try to revive NMA. (The last NMA festival was in 1989, and no city has made a serious bid for another.) Members agreed that NMA as currently organized (with a nearly million-dollar budget) is not feasible in the recession. Down-scaling, they laid groundwork for the October, 1992 event New Music (Across) America, to take place in a dozen cities, emphasizing low-budget events and local composers.

Let's hope the alliance took some tips from the younger BOAC mavericks. Recent NMA audiences have been a sorry sight: jazz fans snored through the classical pieces, 12-toners walked out whenever a rock beat started. In contrast, Bang on a Can's hundreds of cheering fans endured stifling humidity at the May 12 La Mama marathon, several dozen staying (after 12 hours) for the final 2 a.m. decrescendo.

Problems this year lay not with the audience, but in the venue; on April 1 the Archdiocese of New York kicked performances out of

the RAPP Arts Center, where the first four BOACs had taken place. Moving to La Mama and Circle in the Square Theater on less than three weeks' notice cost BOAC tens of thousands of dollars, according to Michael Gordon, one of three composers who run the organization out of their apartments. Despite that staggering setback, BOAC proceeded without loss of integrity or attendance, and ultimately justified the words with which Cage opened the marathon: "We are starting again from zero. . . . Our arts are coming alive."

BOAC's affection for European minimalism climaxed in a May 9 gala concert at Town Hall. Louis Andriessen's *De Tijd*, splendidly pulled off by a large pickup orchestra under Reinbert De Leeuw, was an attempt, the composer said, to capture "a continuous present," with sustained tones dotted by splashes of mallet percussion and harp echoing from one stage side to the other. As the orchestra distilled essences of Messiaen and Boulez, sopranos from the New York Virtuoso Singers crooned a single, angelic note. I found the piece, like much Eurominimalism, too safe and frame-ready for the music museum, too reluctant to compensate tonal austerity with rhythmic interest. It sounds better, though, in my memory than it did while listening to it, like a landscape tedious to drive through but romantic-looking from afar.

Michael Nyman's *Think Slow*,

Act Fast, for London's oddly instrumented Icebreaker ensemble (an electronic group including two well-used amplified pan pipes) had a lot more going on, namely asymmetric minimalist patterns interrupted by jagged keyboard flurries. Crass, awkward, and rhythmically engrossing, it was the best Nyman piece I'd heard, music you might have hoped Philip Glass would have written by now if he hadn't sold his rhythmic soul to Columbia. The concert anticlimaxed with Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*, which I'm particularly tired of in the anemic violin-and-piano version that even vigorous Gregory Fulkerson couldn't bring alive. Americans too quickly attribute spiritual profundity to Soviet composers, and I suspect that if Pärt (1/20th the composer Terry Riley is, and that's still a compliment) had been born in Kansas he'd still be unknown at Tower Records.

The May 12 marathon was far more challenging, probably BOAC's best yet and the hardest to characterize. Less evident were the one-man percussion extravaganzas, the dissonant postminimalist epics, that made previous festivals easy to sum up. More than anything, BOAC's bias negates recent downtown tendencies, especially performance sloppiness. Expert ensembles set the standard. The Cassatt Quartet is a low-key wonder; last year they negotiated Conlon Nancarrow's frighteningly demanding First Quartet without batting an eyelash, this year they drew a web of pinpoint glissandos in Julia Wolfe's *Four Marys*. Besides Icebreaker, a newcomer this year was Oberlin's Contemporary Music Ensemble, which spun breathtak-



The Cassatt Quartet, a low-key wonder

ingly around hairpin-turn rhythms in excerpts from Conrad Cummings's new opera about Vietnam.

Carcass by Paul Reller, also played by the Oberlin Ensemble, was the most quintessential BOAC piece. Reller called it "feel good music" written to emulate the Brahms Violin Concerto, but its shrill postminimal dissonance, a few harsh violin pitches set off by percussion blasts, was abstract without being entirely atonal or arrhythmic. It didn't make me feel good, but I liked it. Scott Lindroth's Duo for Violins was a creamy-smooth postminimalist's dream about Corelli, and the echoing repetitions provided a rare vanishing point in which

uptown/downtown differences were no longer audible.

An applause meter would have crowned Stephen Montague's *At the White Edge of Phrygia*, a weightless scherzo reminiscent of Berlioz's "Queen Mab" played at lightning speed by Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne. An American expatriate in England, Montague is a superb postminimalist, but *Phrygia* was so traditional and so wildly cheered that I thought a Mendelssohn symphony might have brought down the house. By contrast, Michael Maguire's *Discipline, Obedience, and Submission*—the day's dirtiest and most original work by a good margin—left the audience at a loss. I'll tell you why next week. ■

LONA FOOTE