

Ballad of Lincoln Center

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

"People point to Reading Gaol and say, 'That is where the artistic life leads a man.' Well, it might lead to worse places." The words were Oscar Wilde's, spoken by pianist Anthony de Mare about an hour into the Bang on a Can marathon May 21. The piece was Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis*, based on Wilde's long, self-exposing letter from prison. Besides spinning out virtuoso piano gestures, de Mare emitted sharp breathing sounds, slapped his cheeks and chest, knocked his skull, and rapped the keyboard cover. As silly as such extramusical antics can seem in some works, here they exquisitely captured the self-abasement with which Wilde purified himself during his humiliating ordeal. Not one artist in a thousand can bare his heart before the public the way Wilde, Rzewski, and de Mare did to create this deeply affecting performance. It was worth the entire rest of the marathon put together with a couple of New York Philharmonic seasons thrown in.

One such place the artistic life can lead to, Wilde might have noted, is Lincoln Center. On the surface, knee-jerk complaints that the move to Alice Tully Hall made Bang on a Can too "establishment" contain little truth. Neither the tone of presentation nor the aesthetic strategy has materially changed from the good old R.A.P.P. Arts Center days. What has changed is the marathon's length—from 12 hours down to eight—and that alters everything. It



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Bouncing Czechs: Agon performing *Rent a Ricercar*

made curators Julia Wolfe, David Lang, and Michael Gordon distill the day down to BoAC's essence, so that once the fest's basic agendas were satisfied there was little room left over for the luxuriant variety that used to spill into odd aesthetic corners. Arguably, the music has never been so consistently good, but while disappointments were banished, so for the most part were pleasant surprises. BoAC's vision is its success, but over the years that vision has stagnated into a narrow and arbitrary chunk of what's going on.

One obvious instance is the perennial emphasis on Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. His *Hout*, played with flair by the BoAC All-Stars, represents a stage of postminimalism I call *motoric eighth-note music*, a

one-step-past-minimalism phase that seemed cutting edge around 1985. It was exciting eight years ago that BoAC gave postminimalism its first major outlet in America, but by sticking with Andriessen and his imitators, the festival sounds like it's running in place. My favorite motoric piece was *Horses of Instruction* by British BoAC regular Steve Martland, whose galloping textures are at least more bristling and complex than Andriessen's. Of the ensembles that the marathon was organized around this year, two were European: the gorgeously well-rehearsed Orkest de Volharding from Amsterdam, and smaller, spunkier Agon from Prague. Volharding's spectacular performance of Andriessen's *M is for Man*, *Music*, *Mozart* didn't save the piece

from being a tedious, 30-minute example of what happens when Europeans try to appropriate an American vernacular hipness.

It used be that the typical BoAC works were revelatory. This year, only the most atypical were, such as *Rent a Ricercar* by Czech composer Martin Smolka. With meticulous precision, Agon's wind and string players whirled ratchets, honked kazoos, poigned flexatones, blew whistles, and bowed the same obnoxious glissando again and again, delineating a sonic landscape of cat-

tle and birds dying of indigestion; hilariously funny, but intelligently and imaginatively so. Evan Ziporyn combined electric guitars and synthesizers with the Gamelan Galak Tika—MIT's Balinese-style ensemble. The effect of blues chords interrupting gamelan patterns was incongruous and the form ungainly, but it helped that the blues ostinato was the Balinese ostinato turned upside-down, and the piece was rousing enough performed to receive a tumultuous standing ovation. And in the midst of much brainy cleverness, Annea Lockwood's *Thousand Year Dreaming*, like Rzewski, provided a heavy dose of spirituality with its primitive conch-shell calls and didgeridoo meditations.

Otherwise, Downtown music didn't come off well in terms of audience response, largely because of the Uptownish, concert-oriented approach to time limits. It was silly and somewhat demeaning to do all the setup for Bobby Previte's sextet just so he could play a slim six-minute piece that hardly began to show his superbly suave musicality. The inimitable Glen Velez swept through a kind of *Reader's Digest* version of his *Doctrine of Signature*, spending mere moments on complex frame-drum patterns that, in normal performance, he develops for 15 minutes or more. One isolated counterpoetry song by Mikel Rouse, rather than his usual set, seemed enigmatically out of context, and didn't give the audience time to warm up to his incredible intricacy. Come on, guys: Downtowners don't all think in terms of a *piece* framed in a *concert*, the way Europeans and typical BoACers do. Diverse as the Downtown pieces were, they had in common that they stuck out from an otherwise homogenous program.

And, well, so what? No festival is going to feel like home to all types of music. But in the early years, BoAC marketed itself as a kind of wild and woolly East Village phenomenon. Even today, a proportion of BoAC's audience is Village musicians who got hooked on the marathon habit, some of whom wonder why this Eurocentric Uptown festival still benefits from a Tompkins Square cachet. BoAC slept with Downtown, and Downtown might be forgiven for having overestimated the seriousness of the commitment. Perhaps it was equally naive to hope that BoAC's excitement, diversity, and unpredictability would survive the efficiency, professionalism, time limits, and Eurocentrism of Lincoln Center. Wilde had a point. ■

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