

KYLE GANN

*A Sadder But Wiser
Bang on a Can*

Bang Out an Old Soft-Shoe

Breaking Mahler's Record

At around 63 minutes, Maria De Alvear's *World for two pianos and orchestra* was the only single, continuous orchestral movement I know of to surpass the finale of Mahler's Eighth Symphony in duration (unless you count Johnny Reinhard's 74-minute completion of Ives's *Universe Symphony*). This made it a tremendously demanding work for both players (Petr Kotik's heroic S.E.M. Orchestra) and audience, but also a musical universe in which one could wander around at leisure. The piece opened, May 15 at Merkin Hall, with a quiet chaos of dark, low tones dotted with percussion, crescendoing at last into quasi-minimalist repeated seventh chords. After a short silence, soloist Hildegard Kleeb's piano entered surprisingly in a simple tonal chorale as if asserting its own divergent reality, a chorale whose return 40 minutes later was equally unexpected.

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Bang on a Can
May 18
Alice Tully Hall

I ran into Spanish German composer Maria De Alvear (see sidebar) at the Bang on a Can marathon and elicited her impressions. Thoughtfully, she asked me three questions about Downtown-type American music: Why does so much of it sound like Philip Glass? Why do Americans only use one idea for an entire piece? And why do Americans explore only the bright, superficial side of life, and never the dark side? To answer the first, I asked her why, at European festivals, every piece reminds you of Stockhausen? "True," she replied, satisfied.

Snapp, the festival's publicity director, who died a few weeks ago of cancer at 50. The latter was well deserved; if critics gave awards to publicists (and maybe we should), endearingly enthusiastic Snapp would have won year after year as Most Likable and Easiest To Deal With.

Yet if Boac didn't look back to its past, neither did it seem to predict the future. Perhaps that's inevitable and even salutary. When the fest started in 1987, a vast repertoire of music by composers born after 1950 had been arbitrarily suppressed by various Up- and Downtown establishments, and when Boac unleashed that force all at once, every piece seemed to offer evidence of a separate new universe.

licks, catchy in themselves, were so complexly strung together that they erased themselves in your memory as they went by. In a welcome update, the token Downtown Wild Man was John Myers; the writhing and resolving glissandos of his electric-guitar sextet *Blas-tula*, so familiar to East Village ears by now, were still edgy enough to send a few Lincoln Center new-music wimps dashing for the exits. The nontraditional-instrument piece took a refreshing spin with David Warson's *Kilter* ensemble, consisting of five bagpipes and drums. It's my feeling that the bagpipe is an inherently avant-garde, push-the-envelope type of instrument no matter what you play on it.

Past these known figures (known Downtown, anyway), the few unknowns offered only diluted versions of more of the same. What I've always savored at Boac, though, are the controversies, the pieces that send opinions flying in all directions, and luckily there were still a few:

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of *Yo Shakespeare* to a pinnacle of torture or ecstasy, depending on how you took it. Endlessly, it bombarded us with high-decibel three-against-four and eight-against-nine rhythms, never returning twice to quite the same permutation. At the 28-minute mark swelled a glorious rock-inspired climax, then a collapse into dissonance followed by many more minutes of sampled, chaotically chanting Arabic voices. I felt oppressed, harangued, run through a wringer, while everyone else stood up at the end and cheered (well, almost everyone). I had stood in the lobby defending Dolden from listeners who were wishing a painful death upon him; now I found myself damping the enthusiasm of people raving about one of my favorite composers. I bought a BoacT-shirt, but I wish they'd had one that read "I survived *Trance*."

Bunita Marcus: Taking over the role once played by Rzewski's *De Profundis*, Marcus's piano piece *Julia* was the emotional high point, weaving velvet textures around chords from a John Lennon song with ineffable sadness. Lisa Moore played the intricate, Chopin-esque figurations with loving care as the audience hushed under the impact of deeply communicated feeling. Compared to *Julia*, every other piece I heard—in the past year, let alone in the marathon—seemed to aim for nothing deeper than a kind of brash intellectual cleverness. Why do American composers so meticulously hide their emotional life from the



which one could wander around at leisure. The piece opened, May 15 at Merkin Hall, with a quiet chaos of dark, low tones dotted with percussion, crescendoing at last into quasi-minimalist repeated seventh chords. After a short silence, soloist Hildegard KleeB's piano entered surprisingly in a simple tonal chorale as if asserting its own divergent reality, a chorale whose return 40 minutes later was equally unexpected.

Meanwhile, quarter tones from Joseph Kubera's piano, hidden in the orchestra, set up a deliciously bent counterpoint. Drumbeats echoed from opposite sides of the stage, jingle bells fluttered nervously, and vesian fragments of melody bubbled up from the texture as it boiled over. Kotik, faced with a dauntingly unconventional conducting challenge, succeeded in keeping the orchestra tightly together through an incalculable, Le Sacre-like sounding chords, and allowed the players to drift when they were supposed to drift.

Inevitably, the remaining three works, interesting enough in any other context, sounded old-fashioned by comparison. Alvin Lucier's *Sweepers* swept the orchestra through a writhing mass of glissandos, and Kotik's own *Adagio*—a reworking of a 1980 composition—was joyantly sad despite its gleatorically overlapping counterpoint. Pauline Oliveros's *From Unknown Silences* seemed an inexplicable rip-off of 40-year-old Cage ideas, with players making noises at random—snorting, dropping music stands, and so on—in a field of silence, providing the only sour notes in an epic program.

—K.G.



A chaotic mess, but a really interestingly articulated chaotic mess

JACK VARTOGIAN

The one-idea piece, I explained, was a reaction against serialism and the Euro-romantic ambition that a composer has to address everything in every piece—an American tendency, descended from Thoreau, to find universes in grains of sand. After rejecting some clichés about the Holocaust and the infrequency of wars on American soil, though, I realized I had no answer to the third question. But isn't angst overrated?

At 10 years old—that's about 40 in human years, and New Music America survived only a year longer—Bang on a Can celebrated its anniversary in a subdued mood. Absent were the long and predictable obeisances to Louis Andriessen and Steve Reich, the attempts to establish pedigree. Nor was the Downtown aura diluted by performances that paid Uptown devils their due. The directors' manic promotional gags were replaced by earnest pleas for the People's Commissioning Fund (you donate money that goes into commissioning fees, replacing the defunct NEA composers' grants) and a reminiscence of Bette

Watching the dam break was a thrill, but the ensuing flood was bound to be anticlimactic. The number of neglected geniuses in a given generation is finite, and it is BoaC's achievement as well as its liability that it seems to have already exposed us to the current majority (though they've also unaccountably neglected some seminal postminimalist figures, notably William Duckworth and Elodie Lauten). It would be quixotic to think that level of new discovery could be sustained, and remaining BoaCs may have no better purpose than to map out the historical moment they've already made audible.

And so the marathon offered, rather than excitement or surprises, a sense of consolidation, and even the best pieces—like Mary Ellen Childs's *Kilter* for two pianos and Julia Wolfe's *Believing* for the BoaC All-Stars—began to feel not challenging, but as comfortable as a pair of old shoes. The Crazy Dutch—or-East European Postminimal Piece, a BoaC staple, was represented this year by only one example: Martijn Padding's *Fix-Us*, whose unison jazz

possibly make out individual lines. Admittedly, his *The Frenzy of Banging on a Can* was a makeshift attempt to work live instruments into his mix, and the Bang on a Can All-Stars, for all their hectic virtuosity, pretty much disappeared into the taped cacophony, presumably as planned. It was a chaotic mess, but a really interestingly articulated chaotic mess, and as with all of Dolden's music, you had to admit that his mind-boggling computerized detail creates timbres possible in no simpler way. The resulting noise-fest left some listeners ready to wring his neck, others (like myself) stunned by the pandemonium.

Michael Gordon: The piece that most brought Glass to mind, and pushed its single ideas to the greatest duration, was Michael Gordon's 50-minute-plus *Trance*, played by Holland's Icebreaker ensemble. I've been a Gordon fan from day one, but I do prefer his melodic works like *Four Kings Fight Five* to his more austere, more purely rhythmic explorations like *Yo Shakespeare*. *Trance* pushed the premises

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After 10 years of running like clockwork, BoaC hit its first snafu: technical problems put the marathon 75 minutes behind schedule, and since union stagehands refused to keep Alice Tully open past 11, two works had to be dropped. Luckily, they're on disc, so I'll describe what we missed. *Slow Movement* is my favorite David Lang work, his most mystical and minimalist, a swelling continuum of shimmering and shifting chords. The concert was to close with its one historical homage, Gavin Bryars's *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. In this 1971 British minimalist classic, the ensemble is tasked to accompany a looped recording of a hymn sung with maddeningly irregular rhythm by an old bum. It was gracious of Lang, as festival codirector, to sacrifice *Slow Movement* so that Watson's bagpipes could play instead, and the gesture capped a wiser and quieter Bang on a Can marathon. **V**