

A Tribute to Art and a Tribute From the Heart

DOG FOOD FOR JUSTICE

BY KYLE GANN

The Bang on a Can Festival still puts on a good show, but the thrill of continuous discovery is gone. The causes appear to be less ideological than economic. Forming the Bang on a Can All-Stars years ago as a house ensemble was a great idea, but the December 10 marathon at BAM gave a distinct impression that the group no longer has the time or resources to learn new repertoire, because they played John Halle's *Operation Chaos* again, and Lois Vierk's *Red Shift* again, and Elena Kats-Chernin's *Promotion* again, and Tan Dun's *Concerto for Six* again. And Steve Martland came from England again and performed, though with his own ensemble, *Horses of Instruction* again. All good stuff and worth repeating, but where BOAC used to define the newest currents around, it's beginning to look like the Museum of Great 1990s Music.

Meanwhile, interstices between ensemble works were filled with solo performers, some of them from non-Western traditions, like Hassan Hakmoun from Morocco, and Indian tabla player Talvin Singh, and Czech singer-violinist Iva Bittova, and jazz pianist Matthew Shipp. These always get loads of applause, because the authenticity of a traditional music rings especially confident amid the self-conscious vulnerability of new music. And Pamela Z, with her always surprisingly operatic voice, did one of her charming, digitally delayed performance pieces *again*, and Phil Kline set up all his boomboxes and did something startlingly clever *again*. And somehow the only ensemble works newly commissioned for the occasion were those of the festival curators; two each by David Lang and Michael Gordon and one by Julia Wolfe. You'd think they'd try just a speck harder to make



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by Petri Sirvio, who murmured, bleated, inhaled, slurped, and blasted out everything from Schubert to Delta blues to the national anthem with fanatical precision and facial expressions comical enough to match the sounds. Scrupulously professional, they were something of a collective one-trick pony, however, and after absorbing the explosive first two numbers, I found the next few somewhat predictable, and finally excused myself to go gulp down one of the BAM café's mediocre sandwiches.

Understandably, since it was new, the most exciting ensemble work was Gordon's *im-readywhenyouare*. He's heavily into intervals of a third now, and had Alex Sweeton sing up and down seventh chords as the strings of the new Michael Gordon Band hammered away against the beat in dotted-eighth-note chords, and Kermit Driscoll walked a bassline on a few pitches; joyously Daniel Lentz-ish, and over too soon. Lang's music has moved toward stasis in recent years, and his ensemble piece *Heroin* continued the trend. Expert vocalist Theo Bleckmann drew a sentimental vocal line over Maya Beiser's endlessly repetitive cello arpeggios as other instruments crooned a note now and then, with hypnotic effect.

I was glad to enjoy Kats-Chernin's jaunty tonal pointillism and Martland's new *Kick*: variations on a folk tune with a square-I-IV-V-I progression spiced up with a 5/8 meter superimposed by the percussion. And I was curious to hear a new English DJ named Scanner, although his booming drones and ambient ostinatos seemed unremarkable considering everything else that's happening in the genre. But I wish someone would pour enough money on the festival—if that's what's lacking—to enable them to go out and find 50 new composers and five new movements we haven't heard yet, and shock us with that old BOAC electricity. ▣

THE SOUND OF THE CITY

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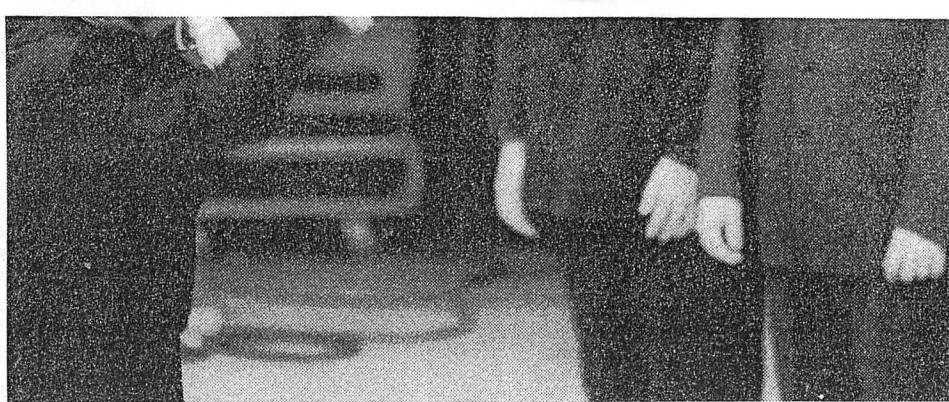
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But thrills of discovery were not entirely absent. New York new-music circles have been abuzz in recent years with talk of Iva Bittova, the Meredith Monk of the violin, and this was my first chance to hear her live. With theatrical poise and lithe control of her instrument, she walked onstage playing ostinatos and wandered from microphone to microphone, singing, interrupting herself, slipping into sexy Billie Holiday mode, and even at one point picking up a kazoo to perform on it. Her Eastern sense of melodicism made her exotic, but she does share Monk's com-

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bination of emotive abandon and musico-structural intelligence, so that when she was being funny and clever, she was never *merely* funny or clever. Her music delights you and makes you think at the same time.

The other anticipated splash was the Finnish shouting choir Huutajat, conducted



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THE SOUND OF THE CITY

The People's Choice

The Situationist promptly situated us: "There's no product to sell, there's no point in being here." Typically sarcastic, Jon Langford disproved the second part of his opening line with a whiplash set at Mercury Lounge on December 15—though the first bit was something of a whopper too, since nobody commodifies his dissent so prolifically. This year Langford fit in Mekons and Waco Brothers full-lengths and a limited-edition record with Sally Timms, as well as an Other Music exhibit, which opened the following night, of what he called "my tiny tiny paintings"—folk-art c&w iconography by a Volkpunk iconoclast.

Jonboy played with two of his five fellow Waco sibs as 6 Proud Walkers, occasioning plenty of qualifying prologues whenever they took a cauterizing quicksilver blade to songs off the recent *Electric Waco Chair* (the sleeve gives a shout-out to Illinois Artists Against the Death Penalty, www.aadphome.com) and the ragged-glorious *Cowboy in Flames* from 1997. "We're going to play half a Waco Brothers song now," Langford would say, but these tunes weren't incomplete so much as gorgeously unvarnished—a steely-eyed country bride stripped bare by her bachelors, shimmering mandolins and steel-guitar daubings forsaken for skintight essentials, peaking with the suitably incendiary "See Willy Fly By" and a gale-force rendition of Johnny

Cash's "Big River." Drummer Steve Goulding maintained a merciless tempo while bassist Alan Doughty flung his spidery limbs every which way and shouted manic backup vocals like he'd just stumbled in from the bleachers of a soccer match (screaming "I LOVE A MILLION-AIRE!" with wild-eyed glee on the Mekons chestnut, his rosy neck tendons nearly popped loose).

Ringleader Langford took requests (for "20th Century Boy," he made his guitar howl in pain and organically vocoderized his voice into an uncanny Bolan death rattle), and offered a few moments of restorative calm. But these interludes were equally breath-snatching: the reverent, ethereal waltz-time of "Tom Jones Levitation" ("Where we come from," said the Chicago transport from Leeds, "Tom Jones *always* wins the popular vote. He doesn't need a *junta*"), the wistful balladeering of "Anything Can Happen." The latter was a suggestion from a fan whom Langford knew by name—Tammy from Chicago, who just got married. The acerbic, beery bloke then crooned her a wedding present that perfectly tempered the hopeful with the world-weary, the bitter with the sweet: the sound of pure devotion. —Jessica Winter

Season's Bleepings

Christmas is a crass love affair. Even before the Thanksgiving leftovers have had a chance to rot, we are deluged by holiday jingles—a wea-

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ried frenzy of prepackaged cheer. Hence the chutzpah of Christian Marclay's *The Sounds of Christmas*, a monthlong installation at the New Museum that features DJs remixing old X-mas vinyl. "I wanted to do something to react to this sound. There's so much of it around this time of year, we get kind of nauseated," says Marclay. During four performances, he and other veteran soundsmiths plundered selections from more than 1000 pieces of vintage schlock.

At the opening on December 14, Toshio piled Chipmunks carols on top of Pac-Man carols, filtered "Silver Bells" into sickly bleeps, reduced a birth-of-Christ narrative to a desolate field of static. Darryl Hell countered with a lyrical cacophony of glee, crossing gospel with Elvis, juggling two copies of "O Come All Ye Faithful" until they sounded like a heavy-metal riff. Marclay—an artist who's long explored the cultural significance of vinyl as both object and medium—offered a more polished excursion. Balancing two Technics 1200s, two old phonographs, wah-wah pedal, and a sampler, he spun twinkling chimes, Ray Charles blues, and Wurlitzer grooves, looping samples into lonely echoes of "Noel, Noel." It made me flash on the Whos of Dr. Seuss singing their "dahoo dorai" refrain. Overhead, video monitors showcased gaudy classics by folks like Glen Campbell and Perry Como, as images of the DJs flickered on wall screens. A techno yule log. (When Marclay debuted the show last year in San Antonio, it was a big hit on the Christian youth channel.)

You can watch videos of these and other sets by Olive, Hahn Roe, and Marina Rosenfeld during museum hours (noon to 8 p.m.). The show closes December 30 with hip-hop turntablists 5th Platoon, at 6. Spiked eggnog recommended. —Sarah Ferguson