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Gang Bang

Bang on a Can All-Stars
Knitting Factory

Ursula Oppens and Aki Takahashi
Merkin Hall

BY KYLE GANN

The Bang on a Can festival began in 1986-87, the year I joined the *Voice*, and I guess it says something about how much we've both aged that they opted not to give a marathon this year and I was happy not to sit through one. Instead, they distilled their offerings into one six-work concert and, by biting off less than they might have chewed, presented one of their most compelling events ever. The intended highlights were the results of their "People's Commissioning Fund," whereby curators Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David Lang use the money you donate to commission new works for their ensemble, the Bang on a

have tripped up and didn't was Phil Kline, although his piece wasn't one of the new commissions. As I've often detailed, Kline usually works with boomboxes either recording each other or moving through space to create amazing textures. In *Exquisite Corpses*, though, he had the All-Stars play in sync with a taped background of bell sounds increasing in richness and complexity. The postminimalist patterns on guitar, bass, piano, and so on were vigorous and catchy, eventually enlivened by Steven Schiff's rock drumming. But the most gorgeous moments, with an effect like the heavens opening up, were when the ensemble slowly faded out and the taped bells, hitherto all but drowned out, emerged ringing in bright, sensuous cacophony. Kline has proved once and for all that he is a major new composer.

Other pieces, if less ecstatic, were still rich. Among the commissions, Dan Plonsey's *The Plonsey Episodes* was chaotically comical, fusing pop and neoclassic elements in a riotous satire. I loved the opening of Virgil Moorefield's *Arrival of the Crows*, in which the players sustained growling tones that throbbed like the beating effects in an Alvin Lucier close-frequency experiment. Other works I've reviewed the All-Stars playing before, including Nick Didkovsky's *Amalia's Secret* and Glenn Branca's densely microtonal *Movement Within*, were performed with a gutsy panache that showed how solidly the All-Stars have matured as an ensemble. Marathon again next year? Maybe, but these small, concentrated doses are filling enough.



Bay Area electronic performance artist Pamela Z

Can All-Stars. As clarinetist Evan Ziporyn said in introducing the concert, this puts the power to commission in the hands of the people. Well, not exactly, because Wolfe, Gordon, and Lang still choose the actual composers, but I'll concede that by bypassing major institutions they open up the field to some rabble-rousing newcomers who otherwise might get zilch.

Not true of Bay Area electronic performance artist Pamela Z, however. She came to her BOAC commission fresh from having won the highly selective and quite lucrative Herb Alpert Award. One danger of commissioning ensemble works from do-it-yourself Downtowners like Z is that it might invoke the Peter Principle: composer of perfectly nice electro-songs finds her level of incompetence in trying to orchestrate for chamber group. But Z can keep searching for her incompetence level, for her *The Schmetterling* drew from the All-Stars a cheery texture of ostinatos as charming and whimsical as her solo songs. As the gang plunked away at bouncing melodies, Z described an insect called the Schmetterling (German for butterfly, but more evocative if you didn't know that), easily mistaken for a flower. Having caught one one day, she crooned, she accidentally gasped and breathed it into her lungs, from whence it eventually escaped, and the song was over.

Another composer the Peter Principle could

impressionist and neoclassic influences that no longer have any connection with new American music. Works by both Haruna Miyake and Fuji Takahashi (Aki's brother) jumped among surrealistic march phrases with a Satie-esque disregard for continuity. Equally wild but more intuitively comprehensible was *Gathered/Scatter* by Ushio Torikai, which elicited an athletic maelstrom of tone clusters and massive noise textures from Takahashi, ending with balls bouncing inside the piano.

My favorite work on the program was, predictably I guess, American: Richard Teitelbaum's... *dal Niente*... ("from nothing," as opposed to the usual musical direction "al niente"), in which the composer accompanied Takahashi at the computer. His electronics surrounded the piano's ambiguous melodies and swept chords with a halo of subtle tones. In the middle came a sound that didn't seem to belong: the lush C-major triad of a Macintosh rebooting, after Teitelbaum's screen froze. (He later explained that Takahashi's high-speed virtuosity, being input to the computer, jammed the software.) The computer rejoined the beat just in time to play a lovely melody in canon with the piano, saving one of the most dramatic snafus I've seen at any electronic concert. You couldn't have told from Teitelbaum's businesslike calm that anything had gone wrong. He's a pro.

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