

Had to skip the first Bang on a Can festival last year, partly because it fell on Mother's Day, partly because I thought the one thing New York *didn't* need was another new music marathon. The second Bang on a Can, May 8 (Mother's Day) at R.A.P.P. Arts Center, proved me wrong on the second count. Brilliantly curated by Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe, Bang on a Can concentrated on mostly notated, usually accessible chamber music, creating a forum for a mass of fine music that is rarely accurately perceived here because it needs a context that neither uptown nor downtown categories allow. You wouldn't think that finding excellent performances of well-structured new music that sounds good would be a tall order, but in New York's unrelenting conflict of ideologies one virtue is too often sacrificed for another. Bang on a Can went straight to the heart of the void, the missing center, and threw in some token pieces from each side to make the comparison stick.

Bang on a Can's 12 hours of musical activity were remarkably nonfatiguing, but too varied to describe in detail. Here are a few events that stuck in my mind for one reason or another:

Philip Glass: Glass and Michael Riesmann opened the show playing the former's 1969 classic *Music in Similar Motion*. Two men, at synthesizers, single-mindedly involved in a focused process, reminded me why Glass used to be my favorite new composer. His early rhythms—subtle, uncountable, and ever-changing—sustain a pleasant level of tension with small jolts to the mind. Far from faded, the piece made the intervening decades, including Glass's operas, sound flabby and reactionary by comparison. Those early works need to be resurrected from the old Chatham Square discs and transferred to CD. I'd give anything to hear Glass once again write something this disciplined, this fanatical, this conducive to rhythmic ecstasy.

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Bang on a Can

The Missing Center

BY KYLE GANN



pressed joy continuing despite conflict—but a thoroughly engaging one.

Other performers: There was no lack of instrumental transformations. Percussionist Steve Schick took an austere serial piece, Iannis Xenakis's *Psappha*, and turned it into a one-man explosion. With the complex score in his head, he danced inside a framework of wood, metal, and membranes, hitting everything almost at once in frenetic but elegant choreography; one would never have guessed that Xenakis is an "intellectual" composer of "abstract" music. Robert Black read, improvised, and played the contrabass simultaneously in Tom Johnson's hilarious concept piece *Failing*. The combination was designed to trip him up, but he nearly failed to fail. David Lang's *Illumination Rounds* was intended to give an aural impression of shells exploding and leaving a vapor trail. It did. Rolf Schulte fiddled arpeggios furiously, and Ursula Oppens was right behind him, rippling piano textures in incredible near-unison. Clarinetist David Ocker enlivened Arthur Jarvinen's cumulative-process piece *Goldbeater's Skin* with fluidly expressive portamento. Percussionists named Pugliese were as ubiquitous as Kontarskys at Darmstadt, each one a powerhouse. All that was missing was for the entire cast to assemble afterward, sans conductor, and sightread *Turangalila*.

On the whole, only the California E.A.R. Unit was inconsistent. Even with soprano Elaine Russell banging a metal plate, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's turgidly static recitative *Din Tavshed* nearly put me to sleep, though the Unit was exquisitely precise in Michael Torke's *The Yellow Pages*, a cutesy attempt at a decorative, chamber minimalism in G major. They shined especially in that California staple, Terry Riley's *In C* of 1964, the piece that took a cue from LaMonte Young, inspired Steve Reich, and started a movement. Modulating through 53 gentle phrases from C to E to C to G, E.A.R. Unit offered a mellow, even delicate performance, all performers carefully listening to each other and echoing in delightful canons. The harmonica was a nice touch, too.

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son. Those early works need to be resurrected from the old Chatham Square discs and transferred to CD. I'd give anything to hear Glass once again write something this disciplined, this fanatical, this conducive to rhythmic ecstasy.

Michael Gordon: Gordon's music—his *Borinage* was played at Bang on a Can, and I heard two other works the previous Wednesday at Experimental Intermedia—flows from repetition and formal recombination of austere, dissonant, irregular patterns, like a Carl Ruggles turned minimalist. The thing I like most about the music is its economy: not one of the three works contained a note that didn't need to be there. One clue to the music's cleanness is its orchestration. The Michael Gordon Philharmonic consists of violin (Ted Kuhn), viola (John Lad), electric guitar (Jon Fields), clarinet (Tim Smith), percussion (Michael Pugliese), and Gordon on keyboard; the best material is given to the amplified strings, the bass clarinet thickens the texture, while the drums and guitar are used with a restraint many New York composers should copy. This was a minimalism truer than Glass's: Gordon *means* everything he says.

Borinage set a touching letter from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother—"There may be a great fire in one's soul and no one ever comes to warm himself by it"—a plea (one Gordon must feel personally) for sympathy toward an apparently useless career. Aside from Ashley and Diamanda, few composers should sing their own music, and Gordon, who ventured into quarter-tones on every high note, is no exception. Yet *Borinage* was a compelling and palpably sincere work, covering some of the same ground as Elliott Sharp's music, only with a clearer focus. I was impressed that, though all three of Gordon's works used the same ensemble and materials, each had its own personality. There's a little revision to do here (*Thou Shalt/Thou Shalt Not* was too long, though charmingly funny), but this compositional virtuosity and keenness of musical vision are amazing in so young a composer.

Pianoduo: Bang on a Can came close to being a new music festival in which the performers upstaged the pieces. The pia-



PETER SESLING

The Michael Gordon Philharmonic: They mean it.

nists who call themselves Pianoduo, Gerard Bouwhuis and Cees van Zeeland, mesmerized every time they stepped onstage. They played John Cage's 1945 monument *Three Dances* for prepared pianos, with steady, contagious, rocklike energy that drew cheers. The duo applied a warmer, more subdued virtuosity to the almost-tonal arpeggios and moody, Scriabin-esque trills of Lam Bun-Ching's *After Spring*. Steve Martland's aptly-named *Drill* was penetrating—a machine-like assemblage of textural blocks in search of an Italian Futurist film to accompany. Like one pianist with four arms, Bouwhuis and van Zeeland echoed Coplandy rhythmic gestures with precision, fol-

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lowed pauses with sharp attacks in exact unison, and even alternated heavy chords in fast, motoric rhythm, switching off between up- and downbeats as if it were child's play. Jazzy, granitic, highly polished, *Drill's* sound sculpture is one of the most gripping works the postminimal aesthetic has produced.

Christian Marclay: I once knew a guy from an old Jewish theatrical family who couldn't appreciate Mel Brooks. He claimed Brooks simply put onscreen all the corny jokes that Jewish actors made backstage, gags they would never have thought to use publicly. Similarly, Marclay's turntable juxtapositions of Muzak, film music, sound effects, avant-garde works, etc., are too close to the games of "Name the Quote" and "Wouldn't It Be Funny If You Juxtaposed X With Y?" that my friends and I used to play in high school.

Sure, there's some intelligent choosing involved, and Marclay's festival collage of church bells, pointillistic violining, a snatch from *The King and I*, and lapping water had an unusually subdued (for Marclay) impressionist continuity. But it seemed so cheaply achieved; the bald fact (especially in electronic music) is, sounds that cost the performer nothing are rarely interesting for long. Marclay once notated one of his collages for ensemble after the fact, and *that's* the piece of his I'd like to hear. I suppose these disc mosaics are justified because musically untrained people find them funny and even adventurous. But those of us who combined radios and spun records backwards as teenagers wonder what this music wants to do when it grows up.

Anthony Coleman: In a recent review I complained that Coleman's *By Night*, based on Balkan melodies, was too diffuse to get a reading on. What changed more, my perception or his piece, I'm not sure; but by Bang on a Can all such problems had vanished. Coleman preluded the gig with a description of *By Night's* inspiration, the Balkan states where each tribe harbors undying enmity for every other tribe within a few miles radius. Guy Klucevsek on accordion and Doug Weiselman on clarinet played mournful Balkan folk tunes, while drummer Jim Pugliese banged away for extra tension, his part much more tightly conceived than before. Coleman's own improvisations blended in better on piano than they had on synthesizer, and the muddled drone of his arpeggios seemed to gather the others together and comment in deep, philosophical tones. *By Night's* Voltairian heroic parody is an odd sensibility—the interrupted folk songs ex-

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Bang on a Can might signal the breakdown of New York's uptown/downtown polarity, a helpful distinction 10 years ago, but one that has spawned isolation. The slickly professional pointillism of Linda Bouchard's *Transi-Blanc* was rooted in East Coast avant-garde chamber writing, but the romantic passion of its tonality begs for a larger audience than Merkin Hall can provide. And where else in New York could Martland's kinetic frieze, full of uptown textures and downtown influences and formal concepts, feel at home? The most patent sign of Bang on a Can's timeliness was the wild cheers that greeted good performances of the most mediocre works, as though new music audiences are starved for excellent execution.

The next thing Bang on a Can needs to do is, tomorrow, go to a major funder, fix him in the eye, and croon with guileless innocence, "We can't possibly continue this festival at its present level of quality for less than a mil." Settle for half. Appoint Wolfe, Lang, and Gordon curators-for-life. Expand the festival to two days, buy a page in the *Times* (and two in the *Voice*), pay performers outrageously generous fees. Have someone donate design and printing for a glossy program, and quit having each composer introduce his piece. (The only person who pulled it off without looking amateurish was accordionist Guy Klucevsek, who flatly announced, "This piece is entitled *Scenes From a Mirage*. It's probably the greatest piece ever written, and it'll change your life." He was right.) Bang on a Can's already a dynamite festival with a strong concept, good music, smooth production, and an enthusiastic audience. It fills a gaping void in New York and deserves, in every respect, to be major league.

The other thing Bang on a Can needs to do, as only Jalalu Kalvert-Nelson acknowledged, is leave Mother's Day alone. Not everyone's mom is a new music fan. ■