

**Y**es, Virginia, there is a new music, and it arrived not a moment too soon. Credit the finely tuned ears of Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang for picking it up over the general din. They're the curators of Bang on a Can, a 13-hour festival that enjoyed its third triumphant year May 7 at the R.A.P.P. Arts Center. (The festival spilled over into the following week too, though too late for this column.) Boac has no starry-eyed notions of being all-embracing. Sure, there are other musics on the planet, but these impresarios have an insight, a point of view, a vision that provides an unusually intelligent, coherent context for the music. Boac isn't splintered by the favors to repay, the factions to satisfy, that have diluted New Music America and made it so disappointing (if necessary) year after year. In short, rather than diffracted by desperate compromises, Boac is focused.

More specifically, Boac has plugged into a current that has hummed across North America (Canadians made a refreshing presence) without much notice. The unignorable similarities of at least a dozen of Boac's 25 performances point to widespread collective changes in how American music is made. There was more variety here than you'd get from any single decade of the 19th century, but there was still a feeling of diverse views converged on the same patterns and materials, an experimentation with common language not unlike the chaotic birth of the symphony in the 1730s and '40s. Over three years Boac's personality has become, if anything, more concentrated and recognizable; yet it hasn't repeated itself, the quality is inching upward, and I know of composers from Fairbanks to Miami whose music would fit right in. This vaguely defined language is a far-flung grass roots movement, and its only major outlet in New York is Boac.

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Bang on a Can

# Out of the Din

BY KYLE GANN



The non-ozone-layer-harming California E.A.R. Unit

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conceptualist Ken Gaburo traced the festival's genealogy in case you couldn't hear it, and the Ives Three Quarter-Tone Pieces made a prayer to the adventurous American spirit from whom all avant-garde blessings flow. The single string quartet by Ruth Crawford, music's first documentable woman genius, under-

**BUNITA MARCUS:** Marcus's *Adam and Eve* occupied the opposite pole. Played with sincerity but a little loosely by the California E.A.R. Unit, this was a soft, undulating fabric of descending chromatic scales, heartbreaking suspensions and appoggiaturas, and an arpeggio figure that wandered from key to key as if searching for something. The confusion implicit in male/female relations was the subject, according to the composer, and the sadly determined mood called to mind the Adagio from Mahler's Ninth, the same modulating suspensions forcing new beginnings from crushed hopes. The materials, however, were Marcus's own, and only the marimbas' resigned half-step ostinato at the end reminded you that she studied with Morton Feldman. It was never sentimental, just honest and vulnerable, a piece you wanted to take home with you and comfort.

**PIANODUO:** For the third time, Boac brought us Holland's Pianoduo, the incredible combination of Gerard Bouwhuis and Cees van Zeeland, who have never played in America under other auspices. A little flat (forgive the pun) in Ives's pieces for two pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart (the piano-tuner got a round of applause), they're at their best when their motoric energy and telepathic precision are given full play. Their most exciting offering was van Zeeland's own *Paraaaf*, an extraordinary continuum of dissonant but lucidly melodic gestures. Wild as fireworks at first, then retreating into softer, slower textures, the pair reeled off one flourish of small clusters after another, a blurred tonal tone poem: like a cross, if you can picture this, between Nancarrow, Reich, and Stockhausen's Klavierstück X. I recently asked where the new music was that had learned something from Stockhausen's *Mantra*, and here it was.

**KAZUE SAWAI:** Sawai had just come from Japan to perform Maki Ishii's *Drifting Island* with percussionist Steven Schick (also to play with her koto ensemble, which I missed when I ran out for spicy pork with bean thread). At first their plucked strings and shimmered cymbals created a generically spooky atmosphere, but soon they broke into flying

grass roots movement, and its only major outlet in New York is Boac.

How do you describe a five-year-old new music? I won't speculate what this tot will look like as an adult, but the most obvious assumptions concern the ensemble conception. The new music, if one can read it here, takes its instrumentation from early Philip Glass: winds (reeds and flutes) smoothly but pungently blended with keyboards (synths and sometimes piano for a classical air), plus mallet percussion, the latter drawn from Steve Reich with a hint of *Le Marteau*. Strings are optional and always solo (hard to drag those violinists away from Mendelssohn). The prototypical ensemble of this type is Philadelphia's Relache, but Bang on a Can relied on three similarly expert groups: the California E.A.R. Unit, New York's Abandon, and Toronto's Sound Pressure.

*New Tonal* seems to be the designation the composers prefer, though the music sometimes plays off the old tonality, and even when it's downright atonal the pitch spectrum is discretely marked off in some way. The playing, especially for reeds, is highly informed by Coltrane and Steve Lacy, sometimes to the point of quotation; the rhythms might come from African or Balinese music, but are never as constant. The logic, appropriately for our pluralistic society, is self-explanatory, often process-oriented and stemming from Reichian minimalism. Repetition, however, is out, out, out. Pattern is in, in a limited way, and only when fluidly evolving. The frenzied virtuosity associated with both decaying American serialism and neojazz improv rarely appears (it sounds so tired these days); what's replaced it is a new emphasis on ensemble unity. Instead of showing off individually, counting beats frantically, or inhabiting separate sound worlds, these players create precise but flexible collective effects, often in rhythmic unison, always with a shared beat and purpose. Best of all from where the audience sits, you can tell on first hearing how good each performance is, and this crowd's recurrent cheers (and the fact that several dozen sat through the whole schmear) showed how much they appreciated being let in on the composers' secrets.

### The non-ozone-layer-harming California E.A.R. Unit

To characterize half the festival's pieces this way, though, isn't to say they were redundant. It's no paradox that similarities can enhance individuality. On the contrary, those shared assumptions free the medium from being a message in itself, and let you hear each piece not as a generic example (as so often happens at New Music America), but as an individual content expressed *through* the style that might disagree with the one you just heard. At dead center, David Lang's *Dance/Drop* (played by Sound Pressure) roped pulses into unpredictable groupings, and summed up the general rhythmic approach. Arthur Jarvinen's *Egyptian Two-Step* (E.A.R. Unit) inhabited

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the quirky fringe; he used spray cans (non-ozone-layer-harming, he conscientiously pointed out) for rhythmic accents, and soloed in a slick, blues-inspired harmonica part. The bittersweet drama of Julia Wolfe's *Sleeping Child* (E.A.R. Unit) drew subtle tendrils to a musical past with the stripped-down romanticism of unresolved chords. Jeffrey Mumford's *a pond within the drifting dusk* for Abandon's alto flute, cello, and harp, as both title and instrumentation give away, was almost impressionistic with its delicate, introverted spirals. The crescendoing pulsations of Lois V. Vierk's *Go Guitars* offered weird connections to both Japanese gagaku and artrock, while David First's *Plate Mass*, intoned by his own World Casio Quartet, added the beat-producing power of microtones to a Ligeti-ish continuum. Even within definable limits, that's a big variety of opinion on how to make this new language and what you can say with it.

Boac's homages to tradition add further intelligibility, too, though they seem to become fewer and less necessary every year. Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*, played aggressively by Double Edge, a few songs done personally by Meredith Monk, and a theater/percussion piece by electronic

conceptualist Ken Gaburo traced the festival's genealogy in case you couldn't hear it, and the Ives Three Quarter-Tone Pieces made a prayer to the adventurous American spirit from whom all avant-garde blessings flow. The single string quartet by Ruth Crawford, music's first documentable woman genius, underscored Boac's admirable, if still insufficient, commitment to woman composers. Overall, of the fest's 25 performances, I heard 20; three I wouldn't care to hear again, the rest I'd love to, and I'm stunned by the percentage. Here are a few more too odd to be summed up by general categories.

### THE VANCOUVER COMPOSITION THAT

**ATE MANHATTAN:** I'll try to describe Michael Maguire's *Seven Years* (actually only 40 minutes, but it tried): a thick band of *tonal* computer noise (on tape), full of industrial sounds, whooshes, and voices, and yet somehow melodically contrapuntal. Conducting with headphones from a click track in one of those bulldozer performances that have given her an awesome underground reputation, Linda Bouchard led her intrepid Abandon ensemble through the chaos, enhancing the computer melodies in unison with all-over-the-range virtuosics. (The marimba part, too terrifying for one player, was divided for two, and the horn part had to be played on synth.) The only person you could consistently hear was phenomenal pianist Lisa Moore, who pounded melodies in a new register every .07 seconds.

*Seven Years*—arrogant, noisy, too loud—sped aimlessly forever; yet somehow it cohered, swallowed you up, made cosmic sense, and sounded like nothing I'd ever heard. All those wildly proliferating melodies, disjointed but in the same key and tempo, issued from some almost-audible center that I couldn't locate for the life of me, and the piece spoke a language too overloaded with meaning for the conscious mind. I hadn't been this irritated and this spellbound since *Einstein on the Beach*. That's 13 years, folks.

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**EVAN ZIPORYN:** Sound Pressure was an oddly instrumented group—bassoon, sax, piano, and percussion, with occasional violin and synth. In from California, Ziporyn joined them on bass clarinet, and set a fluid, three-movement reed trio over the deadpan pulse of piano chords and a wooden hammer on nipple gong. One movement was dedicated to Lacy, but Ziporyn subscribes to the Erik Satie/La Monte Young "Who needs contrast?" philosophy, and in all three movements the reeds growled in intricate counterpoint over the piano's and gong's impassive beat.

Over and over I heard audience members rave about how many consecutive pleasant surprises the festival held, how new and fresh the works sounded, how many of the best were by people they had never heard of. What Boac wisely *avoided* was equally refreshing. Only one piece was based on fractal geometry, *Scientific American's* most expendable contribution to music since the Doppler effect. And Todd Brief's aptly named *Idols* was the only example of those extremely yang pieces men write (and occasionally women) to prove that they've learned every compositional, pitch-structuring, and instrumental technique under the sun, and can use them all in one piece. At almost any other contemporary festival in America, that work would have blended in with the wallpaper, but here it stuck out like a maraca in a Schubert piano trio. That's why I love Bang on a Can. ■