



Holland's violently cathartic duo: Zeeland and Bouwhuis

LONA FOOTE

## Vision in a Can

By Kyle Gann

### Bang on a Can

**Bang first:** The Bang on a Can festival offers the most consistently good work of any new music festival in America. In particular this year, the festival (May 12 through 17) defined itself in terms of a few phenomenal groups such as Piano Duo and the Kazue Sawai Koto Ensemble, and the performances flashed even when the pieces fizzled.

**Bang second:** Boac is the most audience-friendly of any recent new music festival. Every piece, every setup change, runs like

clockwork. More fluently than they used to, composers tell you about the music, and the audience is never left wondering about anything except the music's larger meaning. It pays off; Boac again drew a cheering audience, savvy enough to rave about Kazue Sawai's pinpoint precision, and also to boo the one lethargic set, a pitifully unrehearsed Fred Frith Guitar Quartet. The crowd seemed reduced, or at least altered, by this year's move to a churchly uptown venue, the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Too bad such a hot little festival can't find a congenial home.

**Bang third,** and most impor-

tant: Boac has the Vision Thing, in a music world that has conspicuously lacked direction in the last 12 years. When Boac began in 1987, the directors had the 1990s mapped out. The central, but by no means exclusive, aesthetic would be postminimalism—a style grounded in slowly evolving harmonies (as opposed to 12-tone music's frenetic pitch overload), ethnic rhythms and tunings, and gradual processes that are global, textural, and playful, rather than strict and linear as in minimalism. By programming Cage's *Four Walls*, Morton Feldman's *Three Voices*, and Gorecki's *Lerchenmusik* back-to-back, Boac slyly made all three pieces sound postminimal.

Boac's postminimalism isn't dogmatic or partisan, but universal and omnivorous, by turns fiercely dissonant (in Tania Leon's music), statically mellow (Evan Ziporyn), or contrapuntally modal (Elizabeth Brown). This year highlighted further developments toward heterophony (Rocco di Pietro) and collage (Daniel Lentz). So vividly has Boac brought music's subterranean currents to the surface that it's puzzling that only one other organization has picked up on them: once-stodgy CRI Records, who just released two discs of Boac composers (David Lang's *Are You Experienced* and *Bang on a Can Live, Volume I*). Hey, BAM and Lincoln Center, the future's over here.

What was wrong this year? Well, too much success, maybe, because Boac began to look clubby. It started when all my friends got Boac's postcard in the mail and complained, "D'you see what Bang on a Can's doing this year?"

Same old lineup they do every year." It wasn't quite true, because this time around I discovered and enjoyed Rocco di Pietro, Juliet Palmer, Jeff Brooks, and Ichiro Higo. But it was true in the sense that Boac's unarguably winning formula—kotos, Xenakis, the directors' postminimalist pals, percussion extravaganzas, and a chamber work by an important African American—is beginning to look engraved in granite.

Worse, a hierarchy appeared: the regulars like Steve Martland and Ziporyn, a second tier of underappreciated New York minimalists like Daniel Goode and Mary Jane Leach for context, and a few onetime "little people" to fill out the program. The low point was when Joshua Fried, limited to eight minutes by the directors, could play only half of his *Travelogue*. It was still a gripping piece: Dora Ohrenstein, listening over headphones to a tape we couldn't hear, was tasked to reproduce vocally everything she heard, an audibly anxiety-fraught feat. Maybe it sounded vague on the audition tape, but it mesmerized the crowd. (Some of the dullest pieces went over 20 minutes.) Fried was treated shabbily.

Boac keeps bringing back its most exciting composers, but vision loses its breadth when the names repeat too much. Boac's always painted a picture of a scene more vigorously healthy than anyone realized, a vast supply of composers unknown only because they didn't fit in downtown improv clubs or uptown 12-tone virtuoso groups. I think the picture's accurate, that there are dozens of good people that only Boac is in a position to discover. Endless reruns make Boac's new

movement seem smaller and more peripheral than it is.

Maybe that's an aficionado's viewpoint; Boac knows its higher priority is what New Music America forgot, working a lay audience. I didn't look forward to Boulez's tired old *Structures*, but the violently cathartic performance by Holland's Piano Duo (Cees van Zeeland and Gerard Bouwhuis) overwhelmed me. Feldman makes safe programming these days because everyone's suddenly realized he was a genius, but non-musicians need a chance to hear what the fuss is about, and Boac offered three nights to find out. (I missed the big Feldman night because I went to Meredith Monk's *ATLAS* at BAM intending to leave after Act I; it was so heavenly I couldn't move, not even for Feldman.) The history in which Boac grounds its aesthetic takes up more program space every year, but it's intelligently sculpted.

Sometimes the history is unexpected. Argentine serialist Mario Davidovsky said more than he meant to when he commented on *Synchronism X*, his first piece for guitar: "I thought of the guitar more as a music lover rather than a composer; that's very different." Maybe for the beauty-deaf pitch-class-counters of Davidovsky's generation it's different, but Boac was full of music-loving composers who drew no such distinction. Thank God (or Cage, if you prefer) that music is required to sound good again, and thank Boac for reminding us with its one annual offering to the uptown deities of the horrors we've recently survived.

Next week: specific Boac highlights. ■