

When in Rome . . .

By Kyle Gann
Bang on a Can

My favorite music is being made by composers of my generation, born in the mid to late '50s. They've got a distinctive sound, drawn from having been educated in the '70s during the demise of serialism, the rise of minimalism, and the explosion of world musics. The major institutions continue to ignore this generation. In the '80s BAM got as far as the Downtown improvisers, then chickened out and scurried back to Glass and Reich.

For years I've championed the annual Bang on a Can festival, primarily because it's been those composers' only high-profile outlet. Boac's move to Lincoln Center this year promised to be the first institutional recognition that my generation has something important to say. But then I received the marathon program listing, and saw that Boac curators Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang had told the best minds of my generation to get lost. Boac went without its groundbreaking young composers is just Bang on a Sponge.

You might have feared that Lincoln Center would impose on Boac a shift toward older, more established composers, but the change came from Boac itself. The curators decided to stake out Lincoln Center turf with a historical review of new music's pioneers. Nice idea, but it was condescending to expect that any Boac audience would need a refresher course

in Glass, Reich, Monk, Rzewski, Ashley, Stockhausen, and Scelsi, or that you would need to hear that music before understanding anything newer. As a result, the marathon was heavily diluted with figures you didn't need to go to Boac to discover. The only obscure old-timer was Giya Kancheli, the current winner of Nonesuch Records's contest to see which Eastern European mystic can write the slowest symphonies. I used to hustle to grab a sandwich in between the great Boac marathon pieces; this year I took a two-and-a-half-hour dinner break and didn't miss a single composer whose work I wasn't thoroughly familiar with, nor one under 50.

The sole representative of the wrangling, self-contradictory, younger Downtown scene was good old Nick Didkovsky, who carried his significance brilliantly. His *Amalia's Secret*, commissioned and performed by the Boac All-Stars, molded randomly repetitive jazz fragments and Hendrix guitar licks into a 10-movement suite. Raw and raspy, it was also cogent and so musical that I was shocked to read afterward in the program that he had used computer software to compose it.

The other exciting young composers were both Dutch, Damian Le Gassick and Chiel Meyering, whom the Boac people presumably met preparing for their Amsterdam marathon last year. Meyering's *Flying Buddhas*, dashing ripped through by the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, mixed vocal noises and harmonica chords

over crazy postminimal ostinatos with hilariously unselfconscious abandon.

Otherwise, representation of unknowns felt like a lottery. The Boac curators make a big deal out of their nonbiased selection process, which involves listening to tapes in a blindfold situation. This year, director Bette Snapp told me, they received around 400 tapes. But if you subtracted the famous composers and Boac's Dutch imports, hardly more than five of the marathon works could have been selected from that 400, and some of these were so bad it was ludicrous to think they were picked by listening. For example, London resident Javier Alvarez rattled out nondescript rhythms with maracas over a loud tape of electronic bleeps; at the end, the tape lapsed into Latin pop music, as if to say, "Don't worry, just a joke."

Annie Gosfield was picked by tape and sounded like it. Her synthesizer tunings and raucous keyboard style were so intriguing that seconds into the tape, yelling, "Yeah, this is wild! Let's do this!" Heard live and in their entirety, though, her tiny improvised vignettes were so brief and unrelated as to leave no impression at all. Interesting but unformed, Gosfield was ripe for a trial run at Roulette, not a Lincoln Center showcase. Judging music from tapes is like curating a painting exhibition by looking at one side from each artist. Tapes offer objectivity at the great expense of context; concert-



Why was Nick Didkovsky Boac's only young Downtown?

going is more time-consuming but more reliable. Selecting young composers by tape and older ones by reputation imposes a two-tiered system with conflicting criteria, and this festival was heavily loaded on the top tier.

Then there were the Boac curators, for Gordon and Lang programmed themselves on the marathon as well as on the March and April Bang on a Can All-Stars concerts. I have no objection to curators programming themselves; those who do the work need to get a little glory, as long as the glory doesn't drown out the service rendered. What emitted a self-serving odor was the coincidence of the move to Lincoln Center, the curators expanding their own presence on the program, and decimating that of their peers and colleagues. There's a danger to composers being the sole curators of an ongoing

festival: they are loath to program works better or more forward-looking than their own, unless those works are by composers sufficiently older to pose no competition. The Pulitzer and similar Uptown prizes have been stuck in that trap for decades, and I don't want to watch Boac fall into it.

Oh, it was an intermittently pleasant concert, a trip-down memory lane, about as good as the New Music America festivals tended to be in their waning years, but not nearly as exciting as what Roulette and the Kitchen have been presenting lately. The Meyering and Didkovsky works were the only ones that recalled the excitement of previous marathons. Once again the forgotten generation was prepared to crash onto the world stage, and once again they were told to wait—this time by their own contemporaries.

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