

# LIMELIGHT

## “I got into a fight with John Cage,” says Bang On A Can founder

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By Melissa Lesnie

### New York composer David Lang talks punch-ups and prepared pianos.



Photos by Jamie Williams



Whirlies



Toy piano on the Sydney Opera House boardwalk. And is that ABC Classic FM presenter Julian Day ...

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It was 25 years ago that David Lang, then a young American composer and founding member of the fledgling ensemble Bang On A Can, “had a big fight” with his hero John Cage. “It was at our first festival,” he recalls. “We invited him to the concert and we had no idea if he was coming or not. He showed up extremely early because we had programmed his piece at 1am and he said that it was past his bedtime.

“My job at the early Bang On A Can festivals was taking the tickets at the door. I got into a fight with John Cage because I refused to let him pay. He said he wanted to support us and I said ‘absolutely not’, so there was this gigantic standoff at the doorway. He stayed at the first festival for 4 hours, and he really loved it. We felt we were on the same page as him and had the same openness to the world.”

That openness led the Manhattan-based group to program at least one piece by John Cage – some of them world premieres – every year until his death in 1992. This year for the great iconoclast’s centenary, these intrepid performers are taking the music of John Cage, and the younger avant-garde composers he inspired, to the Sydney Opera House for a sprawling two-day festival.

Lang, a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, says that all American composers have benefitted from Cage’s legacy, which includes pieces for ‘prepared piano’ laden with nuts and bolts and the famous piece of silence (or the illusion thereof), *4’33’’*.

“He is the grandfather figure of American independent, oddball inventor-composers,” Lang explains. “The thing about America is that we like the fact that we have this tradition of independent weirdos like Charles Ives, Henry Cowell and Harry Partch. It gets filled with these rugged, odd, maverick, renegade, loner geniuses. Cage really was the greatest living example of that when we were young; we really looked up to him. If you can look to Cage as your model then you can imagine doing any strange thing in a concert.

“He was so philosophical about everything that he pushed every question as far as it could go and by doing that he left a huge amount of room for the rest of us to pick and choose how far we wanted to go on that scale. It’s an incredible gift, a great way for us to approach the world.” And it’s not just classical musicians – the rock star and producer Brian Eno has drawn from Cage’s approach in his ambient *Music For Airports*, which Bang On A Can performs in Sydney and Melbourne.

But given the elements of chance and noise used in his work, was Cage more of a philosopher and inventor than a composer? “That’s absolutely wrong,” Lang insists. “He’s not an innovator just for innovation’s sake. I think all of his ideas are musical. What he is really asking is ‘where is the music in music?’”

Lang believes that “we can be very sheep-like about music; we like to agree with other people in the audience.” But Cage tends to polarise people, as the Bang On A Can founding member witnessed at one memorable concert that he describes as “one of the great experiences of my life”.

“I was in the audience of the LA Phil playing his *Renga* and *Apartment House 1776*,” he begins. “It was crazy, hilarious and wild, and someone starts booing in the middle of the performance. And then the man sitting behind him starts yelling at him to get him to shut up. Then not before long there are people in the aisles of the LA Phil concert hitting each other with their fists. I’ve never seen that before! I thought, ‘Hooray for Cage; to have people fight so much about what the definition of a piece of music is shows that they care so much and will fight about it.’

“In music we study how great it was to be in Paris in the early 20th century and earlier with the riots of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and the composer George Antheil coming to concerts with a gun to protect himself. When’s the last time you saw a riot at a classical music concert? I always felt like I was born too late.”

It’s in this anarchic spirit that Bang On A Can launched its annual 12-hour new music marathons, which attracted 10,000 concertgoers in New York last year. “The very first year we ridiculously called it the first annual bang on a can festival then laughed ourselves silly because we thought we would never do all this work twice; we are never going to do this again. We had so much fun that we did decide to do it again. People had so much fun in this space which is open and not hyper-intellectual and dry. It hit a nerve.”

Twelve hours of continuous new music is impressive but, as Lang points out, the patriarch of American experimentalism has them beat. “Cage has a piece being realised in Germany that’s going to take 600 years to play. I really love that idea. How long should an experience be? Longer than a human life.”

With music we are very sheep-like; we like to agree with other people in the audience.

**Bang On A Can All-Stars play the music of John Cage, David Lang, Brian Eno and other composers at the Sydney Opera House **John Cage Festival** on November 2–3, and at the **Melbourne Recital Centre** November 5 & 7.**



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