

NEW FROM ONLY



NORTH AMERICAN FOCUS

All things weird and wonderful

Founded to explore the esoteric and avant-garde, New York's Bang on a Can movement has found a large and devoted audience for music's experimental side, as *Brian Wise* explains



It's been nearly 25 years since three irreverent young composers assembled at the Exit Art gallery on Lower Broadway in Manhattan to present a 12-hour marathon of music by 28 different composers, many of whom were considered stylistic adversaries at the time. There were the uptown forces – established, academic types who mostly clung to the doctrine of serialism – and downtown upstarts shunned by the establishment for their mix of rock and improvisation. There was Milton Babbitt's *Vision and Prayer* alongside Steve Reich's *Four Organs*; a two-piano version of Stravinsky's *Agon* preceded by John Zorn's zigzagging accordion piece *Road Runner*.

The marathon was designed partly as a symbolic truce between the city's avant-garde factions, but the unifying characteristic was any music that was approvingly 'weird'. Bang on a Can, the composers called it – a name suggesting the exuberant embracing of possibilities.

More than two decades later, the three original can-bangers – Julia Wolfe, 53, her husband Michael Gordon and David Lang, both 55 – are running a much larger organisation, and the musical establishment they set out to challenge has embraced them. Their

conglomerate not only includes the annual marathon festival but also a house band (the Bang on a Can All-Stars), a summer institute for young composers, a record label, an education arm and even a marching band (the Asphalt Orchestra). In September they will partner with the US State Department to launch a one-month exchange programme for some 50 young musicians.

'We never set out to become the Wal-Mart of experimental music,' says Lang in an interview in his Soho loft. The goal of the organisation remains 'to make sure composers and people interested in experimental culture and weirdness have a place to go where they can meet each other, a place to go where they can feel supported.'

Especially for composers who emerged in the 21st century, Bang on a Can represents a model for creating one's own opportunities. 'They pointed out that you can be a composer and not sequester yourself in the academy,' said Judd Greenstein, a composer whose music has been performed by the All-Stars.

As Bang on a Can has grown to include a six-member staff, a PR Firm and a \$1.5m budget, questions have also arisen about whether the renegade organisation has shifted its focus towards famous names



ALL-STAR LINE-UP: (from left to right) Mark Stewart, Robert Black, Ashley Bathgate, Vicky Chow, Evan Ziporyn and David Cossin; (below) David Lang

and away from quirky unknown upstarts. 'Their initial claim to fame was they were doing Uptown and Downtown on the same concert,' Kyle Gann, a former music critic of the *Village Voice* who followed the collective from its start, has reflected. 'That kind of range fell by the wayside pretty quickly. Once they had gotten successful they narrowed in to do a very small slice of composers.'

Some young composers complain privately of a narrow, clubby aura around Bang on a Can's commissioning, in which large swathes of Downtown music are overlooked. Wolfe, Gordon and Lang say that they never claimed to represent all of the Downtown scene, and that their international focus has expanded. 'In terms of programming internationally, we've tried to present certain composers that we feel are unknown or not represented in the US or should be,' says Gordon. He points to their recent advocacy of Fausto Romitelli, a late Italian composer who created wild and colourful pieces like *Professor Bad Trip* and *Index of Metals*.



Bang on a Can's latest recording, *Big Beautiful Dark and Scary*, is emblematic of their current range. Released on the house Cantaloupe Music label, it includes commissioned pieces by David Longstreth of the Brooklyn rock band Dirty Projectors, the Australian composer Kate Moore, plus music by Conlon Nancarrow, Louis Andriessen, and the members of Bang on a Can itself. Similarly, a five-concert tour by the All-Stars of the UK and the Netherlands in March will feature seminal works by Andriessen (*Workers Union*) and Steve Reich (*Music for 18 Musicians*) and several who straddle the pop-

classical divide (Brian Eno, Tyondai Braxton and Nick Zammuto). The Bang on a Can All-Stars came together in 1992, when Lang, Gordon and Wolfe asked six musicians to form an amplified ensemble that would 'serve as a house band and an emissary' for the annual festival. Robert Black, the bassist from the start, joked, 'it was kind of like the Monkeys or a boy band'. Soon the assembled musicians developed a repertoire by commissioning composers. ▶



THE BIG BANG:
The Bang on a Can All-Stars
in 2009; (below) Julia Wolfe
and husband Michael Gordon

Twice during the mid 1990s Bang on a Can found itself at a crossroads: the first time occurred when it brought its annual marathon to Lincoln Center and some eyebrows were raised. A couple years later came Gordon's transcription of Eno's *Music for Airports*, a piece of 1970s ambient electronic music. While the music divided some listeners and critics, it also drew a larger audience, and the All-Stars even played it, fittingly, in England's Stansted Airport terminal in 1998.

Lang concedes that the mix of famous with undiscovered composers remains a tricky balance. 'Some of the touring is driven by famous people,' he says. 'That's unfortunate. To this day, one of our most successful tours ever was a 15-city tour with the Bang on a Can All-Stars and Philip Glass.' Although Lang begrudges Glass nothing, he admits that 'the odd thing is when you go on tour with Philip Glass, most are coming to hear Philip Glass'.

A more fundamental challenge that Bang on a Can's directors confront is their own ability to stay on the leading edge. Several observers interviewed for this article noted that the organisation's core sound is very much rooted in the 1990s, a time when its founders reached artistic maturity. Greenstein, the owner of New Amsterdam Records, said that when he founded his label it was immediately pigeonholed. 'People would say, "Oh you're doing that Bang on a Can thing" because there was an electric guitar or repetition in there.'

When two members of the All-Stars announced their departure in 2008 and 2009, the organisation hired recent graduates of top music schools: Ashley Bathgate, a cellist who studied at Yale University, and Vicky Chow, a pianist trained at the Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard. Neither was entrenched in the New York new-music scene with its old internecine battles. 'Having not gone through all those phases, I was like a kid in a candy store,' said Bathgate of her arrival. 'All the sudden I had all these gizmos and gadgets around me. I'd never played with an electric guitarist before or I'd never improvised.'

The organisation is looking to a more youthful market in another significant area. Lang wants to entice musicians who once studied classical music but decamped for the rock world. 'These people have excellent classical roots and my field didn't look that interesting



**'When I was young,
composers were not
nice to each other...'**

to them. So they left.' Lang points specifically to Longstreth of the band Dirty Projectors, but also to members of The National and My Brightest Diamond (In January, these and other musicians premiered *death speaks*, a piece by Lang, at Carnegie Hall).

How Bang on a Can chooses composers for its endeavours is somewhat inscrutable to the outside observer. In its early days, the directors would programme the entire marathon in a weeklong session of listening to music on unlabelled cassette tapes. Today it's a more layered process, said Gordon, and they try not to be swayed by fame or prejudice: 'I don't know there's any kind of formal criteria except it's a personal process that the three of us do together.'

Gordon also acknowledges the fact that there have also been occasional complaints that Bang on a Can gives undue emphasis to composers who studied at Yale University, where he, Wolfe and Lang all met in the 1980s. The school continues to have a highly respected composition faculty. 'It's not that we favour Yale because we went there,' Gordon says. 'It happens that at a certain time through the 1980s

and '90s in the US, Yale had one of the most progressive and open composition departments in the country.'

Meanwhile, the number of new-music ensembles that have got a boost from Bang on a Can enterprises continues to grow, including the string quartet Ethel, the percussion quartet So Percussion and the collective Alarm Will Sound. The directors are eager to discuss the Summer Music Festival at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in July. 'The Bang on a Can Summer Festival has really charged me back up, because when I was young, composers were not nice to each other, players and composers did not mix,' says Lang.

The festival, which includes three weeks of workshops and concerts, is a destination for composers who don't fit in neat categories. 'People meet each other, they're optimistic and they're happy, they're not old enough to know that the world is ugly and they should be miserable,' he continues. 'We don't want to tell them that. Maybe if they meet each other they can live their lives without hearing that. That's something that's given me enough charge to last another 25 years.' ■