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For Young Ensembles, an Entrepreneur and an Audience 'New Voices, New Music' From David Lang at Zankel Hall

By Steve Smith

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Welcoming the audience from the Zankel Hall stage brightly on Wednesday night, the composer David Lang said that when Carnegie Hall presented him with a range of possible activities to undertake as the newest holder of its Debs Composers Chair, he had responded that he wanted to do them all.

Thus, his residency will include both a family concert with the Bang on a Can All-Stars and a chamber-orchestra program, and concludes in April with "collected stories," a gloriously eclectic six-concert festival.

"I mean, I would be happy to sell beer here," he said. "In fact, maybe I'll ask to do that."

It figures. As a founder of the trailblazing collective Bang on a Can, Mr. Lang knows about variety, enterprise and gumption. That, as well as the lofty imprimatur of his 2008 Pulitzer Prize, makes him an ideal ambassador for a conventional institution seeking to engage with an entrepreneurial new wave of composers and performers.

"New Voices, New Music," the program Mr. Lang hosted on Wednesday, was the culmination of a six-day workshop that matched four young ensembles with as many emerging composers. He enlisted the International Contemporary Ensemble to help with the coaching, and — showing an atypically broad view of music's social ecology — also embedded four aspirant music journalists, supervised by the Los Angeles Times music critic Mark Swed.

Nicholas Deyoe's "Lullaby 4," played by the startlingly versatile gnarwhallaby, a California quartet in matching black outfits, murmured and pounced with the spontaneity of free improvisation, yet always conveyed the sense of a firm guiding hand.

At the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum was "This Should Feel Like Home," an eloquently scripted sequence of vignettes evoking Mary Kouyoumdjian's complex feelings about visiting Armenia, her ancestral homeland. Hotel Elephant, a New York chamber ensemble that Ms. Kouyoumdjian helped to form, gave a deeply felt account of her emotionally wracking piece, which deftly integrated ambient sounds and traditional-music performances recorded in Armenia.

Mivos Quartet, another New York group, brought out an appropriately hallucinatory chill in Robert Honstein's shivering "Arctic." And Eastman BroadBand, based at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, expertly handled the aural illusions of Carlos Iturralde's enigmatic "Fata Morgana," in which a ghostly wind trio in a balcony faintly haunted the knocks, moans and judders of an onstage string trio.

To ward off competitive pressures among the performers, Mr. Lang said, he combined them in three pieces with playfully indeterminate scores: "Stamping in the Dark" by Daniel Goode, "13 Changes" by Pauline Oliveros and "Serenata per un satellite" by Bruno Maderna. Camaraderie was palpable, and infectious — especially when Mr. Lang's "power-mad" request for audience participation during a repeat performance of Mr. Goode's piece brought amused compliance.