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From Roars to Rhythmic Mallets, a Day for Savoring Exploration

The Bang on a Can Marathon, With Steroidal Energy

By ZACHARY WOOLFE JUNE 23, 2014

Displaced last year by construction, the annual Bang on a Can Marathon was back at the glass-enclosed Winter Garden at Brookfield Place on Sunday. This meant the event's singular vibe was back, too: both attentive and easygoing, art and commerce.

After last year's foray to a "real" theater, the Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, the free marathon, nine hours this time, returned to a space defined as much by the people who stumble upon it as by those who choose to be there. Once again, there was an endless parade of babies in strollers and puzzled passers-by, of tourists who caught a few seconds while sailing up the escalator toward the new Hudson Eats food court.

There was the frisson of eccentricity that defines Bang on a Can, like the wild-haired man who insisted on playing his ukulele — inaudibly, thank goodness — during the performance of Andrew Norman's "Try." It tells you everything you need to know about the marathon that no one seemed to pay him much mind, let alone asked him to leave.

The event is still hands-on for the three Bang on a Can founders — Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe — who run the organization's sprawling new-music advocacy operations and traded off M.C. duties on Sunday. As the decades roll by, the marathon remains inspiringly rangy, a mix of old and young composers, ensembles and listeners. (A healthy sprinkling of audience members raised hands when Mr. Lang asked who had been at the first marathon, in 1987.)

All in all, it's an irresistible show, whatever the quality of the music. And with Sunday's consistently excellent performances, it was possible to judge that

music on its own terms. So Percussion lavished its talents on Bryce Dessner's intensely pretty, utterly inert "Music for Wood and Strings." The ensemble Contemporaneous attacked, with passion, the syrupy, listless lyricism of selections from Jherek Bischoff's "Cistern."

Why was an interminable set devoted to Mr. Bischoff's work, when the vocal octet Roomful of Teeth had time for only two of the four movements of Caroline Shaw's gorgeous "Partita for Eight Voices"? The winner of the Pulitzer Prize for music last year, "Partita" seems increasingly certain to become one of the classics of our time.

Written for Roomful of Teeth by Ms. Shaw, a member of the group, the performance was arresting in the soft, humming gulps at the beginning of the "Sarabande" passage, and it filled the space with a mighty roar at the climaxes, unleashed in a way they weren't at the premiere of the complete "Partita" in November.

This year's marathon was the rare major new-music event without a single brand-new work. The event was instead devoted to the more difficult, and just as noble, task of helping music worm its way into the cultural bloodstream after an initial exposure.

The opportunity to take another listen was a pleasure when it came to "Partita"; the piquant miniatures of Armando Bayolo's "Caprichos" (2010), which opened the marathon at 2 p.m.; or Mr. Norman's "Try," first played in New York on a 2012 Contact! new-music program by the New York Philharmonic. Feverishly varied, "Try" was given a ferocious, focused performance by Contemporaneous and its conductor, David Bloom, that ended, after 10 minutes of fury, in a sinuous melody for piano, then barely audible breathing through the clarinet and flute.

The program was heavy on the steroidally hard-driving, rock-influenced music — including Marc Mellits's "Machine V," Brooks Frederickson's "Undertoad" and J. G. Thirlwell's "Anabiosis" — that has, for better or worse, always been a signature facet of the marathon's aesthetic. More rewarding were sets devoted to that aesthetic's progenitors.

In the D.J. and producer Jace Clayton's "Julius Eastman Memorial Dinner," live electronic processing brought out the epic, raging qualities in piano music by Eastman, the pioneering composer who died in obscurity in 1990. Meredith Monk, venerable and vibrant, brought her remarkably serene presence and lucid

voice to selections from her “Facing North” (1990), a reminder that she has spent decades using the exotic vocal techniques — throat singing and the like — currently all the rage among young ensembles like Roomful of Teeth.

As night fell, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the organization’s resident ensemble, gave a spiky, savage performance of “Hoketus” (1975-77), by Louis Andriessen, a strong artistic influence on the collective’s founders. Earlier on Sunday, Mr. Lang had been represented by sections of his mediievally inflected “love fail,” its radiant harmonies captured by the vocal quartet Anonymous 4, and the All-Stars played Ms. Wolfe’s “Big Beautiful Dark and Scary,” a long, seething churn.

Mr. Gordon followed Mr. Andriessen and closed the marathon with his 50-minute “Timber,” performed from memory by the six members of Mantra Percussion. They stood in a circle and used fingertips and mallets to beat out rhythmic crosscurrents on wooden beams laid across stands. Lights flashing in time with the beats, it was as seductive and accessible a spectacle as the marathon itself.

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