

## Music for airports lost and found

**Bang on a Can takes an oblique strategy towards Brian Eno's masterwork.**

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By Michael Dwyer



The Bang on a Can All-Stars: "They become a kind of emotional centre of piece that went out of its way to get rid of its emotional centre."

FOUND sound was ground zero for Bang on a Can. There was tonnes of it lying around New York in the late 1980s, when Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe and David Lang were "young composers just out of school".

"No one was really clamouring after our work at that time," says Lang dryly (though he recently enjoyed a historic kind of validation when his *Little Match Girl Passion* won a Grammy and a Pulitzer).

"We had a lot of time on our hands so we spent it just looking around at things we thought were strange about the music."

Uptown, academic classicism ruled. Experimental music rang between the art galleries and downtown apartments of Philip Glass and Meredith Monk. The Knitting Factory was all intellectual post-jazz improv.

"What was weird was that within each of those scenes there were people doing interesting, innovative things and people who were doing very conservative things," Lang says. "Same with pop music. Same with world music."

Bang on a Can found their place in this matrix of style and purpose with their first, 12-hour festival in 1987, which the three young composers programmed like this:

"Instead of separating the world by what the music sounds like, maybe we can separate things by what the composer was intending in terms of his relationship with the past."

The inherent insistence on progress would make room for a vast catalogue of new works over the next 25 years, as the trio commissioned pieces from Steve Reich, Ornette Coleman, Lee Ranaldo, Michael Nyman and countless others for marathon events that could last 26 hours.

Between comic book operas, DJ-driven oratorios and multimedia mutations, they have also, for the last decade, invited young composers from all over the world to push the envelope at their annual Summer Institute of Music in Massachusetts.

So when Bang on a Can decide to look backwards, specifically at Brian Eno's debut "ambient" work of 1978,

The famously sterile but weirdly hypnotic album was the product of intentionally non-obtrusive tape loops designed, Eno wrote on the inner sleeve, "to accommodate many levels of listening without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting".

In a live setting, ignoring is out of the question for musicians and audience. Which is what makes the Bang on a Can All-Stars' interpretation a whole new experience, says Lang.

"Eno's record is set, like a kind of glacial movement. Not much happens, it's made by machine, it's meant to play itself out. That coldness, that distance, is part of what's attractive.

"What happens with live players is that they become a kind of emotional centre of a piece that went out of its way to get rid of its emotional centre. It becomes a very moving experience."

The unusual experience of adapting a composition also inspired something altogether new. *Field Recordings* is a multimedia work commissioned from nine composers, each presented with the same conundrum, much like one of Eno's infamous "oblique strategy" cards.

"Normally, when you write a piece of music, you start with your musical ideas and then you fill them in with musicians," Lang says. "The problem we gave people was to find something that already existed — it could be somebody talking, it could be other music — then use your live music to find a way to investigate that thing."

Lang's investigation involves menacing Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* with an old recording of sharpening knives he had lying around. Wolfe threw new parts at an Appalachian folk song. The Christian Marclay piece asks the ensemble to respond to fragments of Hollywood films. Pop collage artist Nick Zammuto and electronic artist Mira Calix have different strategies again.

"Because everyone is independent and everyone is coming from different musical sensibilities, they all solve the problem very differently, but the pieces are still related because they all solve the same problem," says Lang.

He's gutted that neither he nor the other artistic directors, Wolfe and Gordon, will be travelling to Australia next week. The virtuosic All-Stars have been translating their designs on stage for more than 20 years, but someone has to stay home and think.

"Bang on a Can is a kind of warehouse of ideas that might help contemporary music find a home," says Lang.

*Field Recordings* is at the Melbourne Recital Centre next Monday (free); *Music For Airports* is on Wednesday November 7. Details [melbournerecital.com.au](http://melbournerecital.com.au)

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/music-for-airports-lost-and-found-20121028-28dif.html#ixzz2BMwn8Znb>