

# The New York Times

Monday, November 23, 2009 Last Update: 11:40 AM ET

Music Review | Bang on a Can All-Stars and the Trio Mediaeval

## The John Henry Who Might Have Been



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Trio Mediaeval (from left, Linn Andrea Fuglseth, Torunn Ostrem Ossum and Anna Maria Friman) joined the Bang on a Can All-Stars on Saturday at Zankel Hall for a work by Julia Wolfe.

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

Published: November 22, 2009

Most listeners accept it as a given that folk song has been a powerful influence on composers of art music, from the authors of the parody Masses of the 1500s through Haydn, [Beethoven](#) and Bartok to [Aaron Copland](#) and George Crumb. Often composers drawn to folk melodies either provide accompaniments in their own styles or simply allude to them, weaving strands of their musical DNA into larger structures.

Julia Wolfe's "Steel Hammer," which the Bang on a Can All-Stars and the Trio Mediaeval performed at Zankel Hall on Saturday evening, makes an object lesson of this deeply rooted relationship. At the heart of Ms. Wolfe's score is the venerable "John Henry," a song recorded by hundreds of singers, including Lead Belly, [Woody Guthrie](#), [Johnny Cash](#) and [Bruce Springsteen](#). It has also been set by Copland and was the subject of a memorable comedy sketch by the Smothers Brothers.

Ms. Wolfe's piece is not a conventional setting. You barely hear the traditional melody, though fragments waft past occasionally. Instead Ms. Wolfe has undertaken an obsessive study of the song's many versions and has made an expansive, eclectic setting of the results. One of the nine movements, for example, lists

the 11 states and cities that variations of the song say Henry was from. Another lists competing descriptions of him: he was tall, small; black, white; 24, 35 or 50 years old; 6 feet tall or 5 foot 1. A third describes his woman Polly Ann — or Mary Ann, Sally Ann, Ida Red or Maggadee — and what color clothes she wore.

The score draws heavily on classic Minimalist moves. Ms. Wolfe's opening movement, "Some Say," breaks down the phrase "Some say he's from," in ways that recall [Steve Reich](#)'s early tape pieces "It's Gonna Rain" and "Come Out." But where those works are based on plain speech, Ms. Wolfe turns the repeating words and phrases into sweetly harmonized vocal lines. Oscillating minor thirds and cycling, syncopated rhythms turn up elsewhere in the piece.

But Ms. Wolfe's musical language reaches well beyond Minimalism. The third movement, "Destiny," is couched in dark dissonances that veer on cacophony. "Characteristics" is underpinned by what might have been a flamenco rhythm, stamped out by Mark Stewart. Mr. Stewart otherwise provided banjo and dulcimer lines that injected a bluegrass sound into this wild hybrid, and gentle electric guitar figures that added a hint of spookiness. And in the finale, "Lord Lord," the vocal lines sounded like plainchant, briefly.

The Trio Mediaeval sang the English text with remarkable clarity and a bright, appealing tone. And the musicians — David Cossin, percussionist; Ashley Bathgate, cellist; Robert Black, bassist; David Friend, pianist; Evan Ziporyn, clarinetist, and Mr. Stewart, who shared the conducting with Mr. Ziporyn — played the work with an enlivening vigor.