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A Marathon Meant for the Ears, Not the Feet A Long Bang on a Can Concert for New-Music Fans

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

Bang on a Can Marathon, a daylong new-music festival in Lower Manhattan, this time at the Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, included performances by Shara Worden, center, with Ashley Bathgate on cello.

Stroller-pushing parents, tourists and harried traders in search of coffee were not to be seen at this year's Bang on a Can marathon. Construction in the World Financial Center's Winter Garden forced this annual new-music extravaganza to decamp on Sunday to the Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, where there was none of the random walk-through business that has added touches of surrealism to the proceedings at the Winter Garden.

Then again, this year's audience was entirely made up of people who wanted to be there — and it was sizable, tenacious and welcoming to the broad spectrum of contemporary music on offer. By the time I arrived at 7 p.m., in the midst of the Talea Ensemble's performance of Hans Abrahamsen's quietly intense "Schnee," a substantial contingent had been there since kickoff at 1 p.m.

Twenty-six years ago, when Bang on a Can was founded as a composers' collective by Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon and David Lang, its mix of amplified acoustic and electronic instruments was groundbreaking. As I listened to a half-dozen performances over a three-hour period, it occurred to me that that aesthetic has become the new normal, while generating wildly different kinds of music.

Three members of Hotel Elefant performed Angélica Negrón’s airy “Drawings for Meyoko,” blending the sounds of acoustic instruments including harp, mandolin and flute with prerecorded ambient noise. In another, untitled performance, Cabaret Contemporain, a five-member group from France, created a deeply rhythmic and texturally intricate sound that might best be characterized as improvised acoustic techno.

The Bang on a Can All-Stars took to the stage alongside the singer-composer Shara Worden with a new arrangement of Mr. Lang’s “Death Speaks,” a quiet and eerie song cycle set to texts from Schubert songs in which Death speaks in the first person. The work was originally scored for voice, violin, electric guitar and piano, and though the expanded arrangement still has a somewhat anemic quality, the sensitive dabs of color provided particularly by the ensemble’s new clarinetist, Ken Thomson, made the sonic landscape a little less bleak.

In Annea Lockwood’s “Vortex,” the All-Stars created a dark and atmospheric sound world that included heavy use of gongs.



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From left, Bassam Saba, Maya Beiser, Shane Shanahan and Matt Kilmer, performing at the Bang on a Can marathon.

The former All-Stars cellist Maya Beiser offered a full-blooded performance of Tamar Muskal’s “Mar de Leche” in the company of her Provenance Project Band, an oud-and-percussion-fueled ensemble dedicated to excavating the common roots of traditional and contemporary Middle Eastern music.

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