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Hour by Hour, Celebrating an Eclectic Festival Bang on a Can Marathon at Winter Garden

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By Steve Smith



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

Bang on a Can Marathon The ensemble Newspeak performing at the World Financial Center's Winter Garden.

However quixotic the notion of mounting a 12-hour concert is, and however impractical it can be to attend one in its entirety, I feel guilty when I am unable to be at the annual Bang on a Can Marathon from start to finish. I feel obliged to meet a challenge on its own terms, as I did when Bang on a Can celebrated its 20th anniversary with a 27-hour event in 2007.

That said, practicalities do sometimes get in the way. And happily, there are ample thrills to be had by the more casual attendee, a category that presumably included most of the audience that filled the Winter Garden at the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan on Sunday. According to numbers provided by Arts Brookfield, which helped to present the marathon, along with the River to River Festival, an estimated 10,000 attended the free event.

I most regretted missing Lois V Vierk's elemental "Go Guitars," played by Dither at noon, and Gérard Grisey's "Noir de l'Étoile," performed by the percussion ensemble Talujon as midnight approached. But the nearly six hours I took in, from around 4 to 10 p.m., aptly demonstrated the expansive, inclusive approach to modern-music programming characteristic of Bang on a Can's directors, the composers Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe.

That breadth seemed even more impressive, given that this year's marathon, the final New York event of Bang on a Can's 25th-anniversary season, felt less rangy than its immediate predecessors. Art-rock bands, electronica auteurs, Kyrgyz jaw harp players and most of the artists associated with the New Amsterdam record label were in short supply. What I saw and what could be extrapolated from the remaining program had something of a friends-and-family air.

Perhaps that was to be expected, given the elaborate season that preceded the marathon. In any event, hearing David T. Little's "Sweet Light Crude" and Mr. Gordon's "Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!" in swift succession was illuminating. Apart from instrumentation, the pieces were dissimilar in style and tone. Still, you sensed that Mr. Gordon's 1983 jackhammering litany had in some ways made Mr. Little's 2007 chamber-metal power ballad possible.

As ever, some newcomers made strong impressions. Kaki King showcased her sophisticated fingerpicking style on 6- and 12-string guitars in four richly harmonized, appealing original compositions. Akiko Ushijima, a young Japanese composer based in the Netherlands, had the seasoned Bang on a Can All-Stars beaming with the rollicking stop-start momentum and hot-potato note-tossing of "Distorting Melody," heard in its American premiere.

Three peak performances used modern technology to evoke the ineffable. Pauline Oliveros and her Deep Listening Band offered spacious meditations on conch shells, didgeridoo, antique cymbals and Tibetan horn, with digital processing by Jonas Braasch replicating a cistern's cavernous reverberations.

Alvin Lucier intoned his seminal sound-art piece, "I Am Sitting in a Room" ("the same one you are in now," he said in his script, amended for live performance), with James Fei's software enacting a seemingly alchemical transformation on the speech, turning it into pure resonance.

And Michael Harrison's "Just Ancient Loops," an appealing mix of live and recorded cello lines, raga-inspired drones and Minimalist rhythms performed by Maya Beiser, was enhanced by Bill Morrison's film, recorded on archival and decaying celluloid, and repurposed for Georges Méliès-style fantasy and sublimity.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/arts/music/bang-on-a-can-marathon-at-winter-garden.html?_r=3