

Live: The Bang On A Can Marathon Turns 25 With Six Pianos, A Cosmic Drum Circle, And Someone Sitting In A Room

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Maya Beiser performing Michael Harrison's *Just Ancient Loops*; film by Bill Morrison.

Bang on a Can Marathon
World Financial Center Winter Garden
Sunday, June 17

Better than: Any other new-music marathon around.

You could sense a tightening of the belt at this year's 25th-anniversary edition of the Bang on a Can Marathon. Conspicuous by their absence were the guest orchestras and exotic foreign guests the collective often imports, making the day much more New York-centric than usual. A key late-night slot was even filled by a DJ, Envee, who had the decidedly unenviable duty of following Steve Reich during the 12-hour, 31-work "carnival," as one Banger characterized it.

If you were a fan of pianos, however, you were in luck, insofar as the six Steinways parked in front of the stage were put to increasingly inventive use throughout the day. BOAC co-founder Julia Wolfe's *my lips*

from speaking was a crashing, vamping, fragmented examination of the memorable piano figure Aretha Franklin bangs out at the beginning of "Think." Busier if less involving, Kris Davis's *Massive Thread* featured exquisite improvised passages from players like Russ Lossing and Vijay Iyer before coming down for a long noodling landing in the upper registers. If the evening had a headliner, however, it was Steve Reich, who signed autographs before and after a nearly rhapsodic rendition of *Six Pianos*. Phases shifted and tonal centers relocated as the Grand Band unspooled Reich's 1973 minimalist masterpiece as a locomotivated Trans-Steinway Express whose influence on motorik music quickly became apparent.

Evan Ziporyn arranged four Conlon Nancarrow player-piano studies for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, who illuminated the deep swing lurking within Nancarrow's (no longer) rhythmically irrational constructions. In fact, I'd heard subtle boogies, not to mention woogies, already in both Ziporyn's dense *In Bounds*, performed heroically by pianist Vicky Chow, and Ruben Naeff's idea-crammed *Bash*, performed by the NYU Contemporary Music Ensemble. For old-fashioned rhythm, however, it would be difficult to beat Philippa Thompson, who served up Ringo Starr's single official drum solo, on spoons, as the backbeat to Ruby Fulton's Beatles tribute/cover *The End*.

The musical elephant sitting in the room, however, was Alvin Lucier, who soberly presented his 1969 process hit *I am sitting in a room*. Lucier sat in a chair onstage and recited a handful of sentences that, on record, begin "I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now." Lucier, who wore a dark suit and bright red socks, altered the line to state that we were indeed all in the same room, then sat stock still for the next half-hour while repeated playbacks of his words decayed into pure electronic sounds outlining the unique resonant characteristics of the Winter Garden, a mad architectural contradiction of glass-paneled vaulted ceiling and tall fake palm trees.

Earlier, Pauline Oliveros and her Deep Listening Band replaced the Winter Garden's natural acoustics with a software simulation that re-created the rich reverberations of their favorite performance space: a water cistern in Washington. *Land of Snows* evoked alpine landscapes with conch shells, didgeridoos, and composer Brian Perti's telescoping Tibetan horn. The a cappella work *From Now On*, by Oliveros and bandmember Stuart Dempster, concluded in a deep, shimmering, overtone-rich chord you hoped would go on forever. Cisternhood is powerful.

The Bang on a Can Marathon is always good for a spectacle or two. The day's glitziest work was Michael Harrison's *Just Ancient Loops*, which cellist Maya Beiser performed along with some 20 electronic versions of herself. The accompanying video work by Bill Morrison, I'm afraid to say, overwhelmed the music with a 40-foot-high decayed images of star gazers, planetary bodies, and Jesus ascending to heaven.

The marathon climaxed, as it were, with the late French composer Gérard Grisey's epic *Le Noir de l'Étoile*, a 75-minute cosmic drum circle inspired and punctuated by the sound of pulsars, i.e., rotating neutron stars emitting beams of electromagnetic radiation that can be manifested acoustically. The piano, you'll recall, is essentially a percussion instrument—so percussion sextet Talujon's big bangs were a fittingly primal end to a keyed-up day.

Overheard: "It should be illegal to have that much fun." —Blair McMillen as he rose from his stool after performing *Six Pianos*.

Random notebook dump: Surprised by the lack of politically motivated music in this election year. Only Jeremy Beck, introducing his *Awakening* for trombone quartet, linked his work to political, and not simply musical, radicalism.

http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2012/06/bang_on_a_can_marathon_june_18_review.php