

Banging the Drum For New Classical Composers Who Nurtured Genre Mark a Milestone

April 27, 2012

By CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

On a recent Sunday morning, the three founding composers of Bang on a Can were sitting in a TriBeCa loft nursing mugs of coffee as they took stock of New York's evolving new-music scene. Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon, who are married to each other, were at home; David Lang had walked over from his loft in SoHo.



Peter Serling

Bang on a Can founders David Lang, Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe

"In the '70s the entire city was at the bottom of this huge decline," Mr. Gordon said. "And the music scene was so stifling, it almost felt like you were in prison here. Contemporary classical music was the thing you said to get everyone to stay as far away from you as possible. It was like: I've got the measles." The others laughed. "More like: I have the plague," interjected Mr. Lang.

The three composers can take credit for the fact that a passion for contemporary art music no longer spells social doom. No further proof is needed than the 5,000-strong crowd at one of Bang on a Can's annual dusk-to-dawn music marathons. (This year's will take place June 17 at the World Financial Center.) Founded 25

years ago, the organization has become one of the most formidable forces in contemporary music in the U.S. On Saturday, it celebrates its anniversary with a concert at Alice Tully Hall.



Associated Press

The avant-garde marching band Asphalt Orchestra

It's a change from the music festival at Aspen in 1977 where Messrs. Gordon and Lang first met—and took an instant dislike to each other. The problem, said Mr. Lang, was that they liked the same music—Philip Glass, Steve Reich, La Monte Young—but disagreed over what it meant and what made it great.

"I just didn't like him," deadpanned Mr. Gordon. "David was from the West Coast, knew everything and had written a hundred pieces of music. I was from Miami, which might as well have been outer space, and had written one piece."

When the two found themselves in the same Yale composition class several years later, they became friends; Ms. Wolfe, coming from a folk-music background in Michigan, joined them soon after.

"We were all really open-minded and curious," Ms. Wolfe said. The music they responded to was the kind where "you'd go, 'Wow, what was that?' rather than 'that was very well done' or 'that was hip.' We were all looking for something wild and crazy and fun, and that drew us to each other."

When Mr. Lang was invited in 1984 to give a concert of his music at Cooper Union, he included music from Mr. Gordon and other composers. Asked to provide a one-sentence description of the event for the college's newsletter, Ms. Wolfe suggested "a bunch of composers sitting around banging on cans." When the three friends produced their first marathon—400 people showed up, including John Cage and Mr. Reich—they settled on the name Bang on a Can.

The three have also collaborated on compositions, including an opera, "Carbon Copy Building" (1999), and the oratorio "Lost Objects" (2000). Mr. Lang's music often features playful textures with a melancholic undertow; Mr. Gordon finds unsettling ways of destabilizing an established tonality, while Ms. Wolfe taps into folk and rock traditions. What they have in common is a postminimalist approach and a sound blending acoustic and amplified instruments.

On Saturday, they will present a collaborative work written by 10 composers, working found-sound and video into a single multimedia performance. It's a celebration of Bang on a Can's ethos that sees individual creativity strengthened by a mutually supportive community. "In the '80s, you would see composers at the back of concerts and they would be sniping at each other," Mr. Lang said. "Or they just wouldn't go. Now composers support each other and performers go to see other performers.

"Every time you put a note on paper, you are saying something about your relationship to the player—and to the history of that note and who should listen to it and where it should be heard and what the proper environment is and what role it has in society," Mr. Lang added. "Just the action of putting that note on the paper is a vote for the kind of world that you want to live in."

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303459004577361902035729124.html?KEYWORDS=bang+on+a+can>