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Critic's Notebook: As Bang on a Can Returns, a New Generation Rises

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By Seth Colter Walls

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — Venturing back to live performances and finding a classical music institution in rude health can be like putting on a pair of old jeans and discovering, with relief, an easy fit.

That's how it felt to attend Bang on a Can's LOUD Weekend festival, held throughout the Mass MoCA complex here on Friday and Saturday, a return to form for the new music collective after 15 months of hosting streamed concerts.

With over 20 hours' worth of performances, you could see one familiar look after another — all of them hallmarks of the fabled, free Bang on a Can Marathons in New York City. But here, in a two-day, paid-ticket environment, there was more time for each musician's set to take on an individual character. And even though a few artists copped to first-day-back jitters, most appearances unfurled with crisp, defiant polish — as if they'd spent no time away from audiences.



From left, Sasha Yakub, Annaliese Kowert and Nathalie Joachim in a set at Bang on a Can's LOUD Weekend on Saturday. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



Members of the Kronos Quartet with the guest Soo Yeon Lyuh, center, performing in her own work. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

That was particularly true of pianist Lisa Moore's show on Friday, which featured pieces by Philip Glass, Don Byron, Martin Bresnick — and a world premiere from Frederic Rzewski, who died in June. The set was confirmation of the interpretive insights she has brought works by these composers on her recordings. And the Rzewski premiere — “Amoramaro,” subtitled “Love Has No Laws” — was bittersweet: an alternately seductive and prickly reminder of all the music of his that can no longer be written.

“Amoramaro,” commissioned for Moore by her husband, is nonetheless something to treasure (and, surely, record). Its occasionally lush chords — half-remembered and half-

transformed from the American Songbook — commingle with austere, flinty runs that make trapeze-swing connections between distant registers. And its climactic, banging clusters could have been inspired

by Rzewski's experience playing Stockhausen's "Klavierstücke." That it all held together, over 15 minutes, was evidence of both Rzewski's peculiar and personal palette, and of Moore's keen feel for it.

Elsewhere, the festival delivered on boldface names: It's telling that this weekend had audience members asking one another, "Which Kronos Quartet concert was better?" For me, it was the one on Friday night, a somber yet intense set that began with Jlin's "Little Black Book" and ended with Jacob Garchik's "Storyteller." That performance was more coherent than the one that followed on Saturday, which was well played but more diffuse, including the premiere of Terry Riley's "This Assortment of Atoms—One Time Only!" — an attractive but modest addition to the composer's significant body of work for Kronos.

As at past Bang on a Can Marathons, contemporary and modernist trends from across the globe were present and accounted for at the LOUD Weekend. These included French spectralism (in the music of Gérard Grisey); Minimalism (Riley, Glass and their descendants); and collective improvisation (from Banda de los Muertos, a jazz ensemble inspired by the music of Sinaloa in Mexico).

And there were solo acts throughout.

The violinist, improviser and composer Mazz Swift brought Saturday night to an early peak with a presentation of her "Sankofa Project," which she has described as "re-imaginings of so-called slave songs, as well as freedom songs and my own versions of what I'm calling modern-day protest songs." When Swift used subtle electronic processing to augment a few chest-voice notes — or when she looped a striated violin passage to create a hazy cloud that supported spitfire solo lines — her range of effects proved as protean as it was powerful.



Mazz Swift brought Saturday night's programming to an early peak. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In addition to the starry headliners, there were also students from the Bang on a Can summer institute, who were given moments to shine. A few of them seemed ready to build ensembles of their own, and perhaps return for future festivals. The saxophonist Julian Velasco, for example, excelled as part of a mixed professional and student ensemble in Julius Eastman's "Femenine" on Friday, and as part of a duo playing Shelley Washington's "BIG Talk" on Saturday.

Ken Thomson, Velasco's seasoned pro of a partner in the Washington, was a virtually omnipresent force across both days, including as a member of the organization's house group, the Bang on a Can All-Stars.

Thomson and his fellow All-Stars made good on their moniker most forcefully on Friday, with a ripping take on "Workers Union" — a Minimalism-influenced classic by Louis Andriessen, who died in July. And while the band's capstone set on Saturday night — which doubled as the festival's finale — was crisply and energetically played, its program was mixed.

That concert featured a new arrangement of Terry Riley's "Autodreamographical Tales" (soon to be released on an All-Stars recording), a work that seems destined to be a curio in the legendary composer's output. Or a curio on top of a curio, since this version has roots in an obscure piece that Riley recorded in the 1990s.

Its text comes from a dream journal that Riley kept for a time. There are moments of low-key humor, and the "Tales" skewers musical ego in a winning way; we get a sense of how often Riley's dreams involve other



*The Bang on a Can All-Stars in Terry Riley's "Autodreamographical Tales."
Credit... Tony Cenicola/The New York Times*

Nathalie Joachim (singing and playing flute on excerpts from her celebrated album "Fanm d' Ayiti"), to a concert of Pandemic Solos, commissioned by Bang on a Can for its virtual marathons during the pandemic.

I couldn't bear to listen to those livestreamed marathons in the moment. I tried, but the troubled audio — inevitable when artists were streaming from so many locations — registered as micro-tragedies that distracted from the works themselves. I told myself I would hear some of them in the future; and I did on Saturday.

A string of works for All-Stars bassist Robert Black opened the day, including Maria Huld Markan Sigfusdottir's spectral, spooky "Pending." And after Joachim's set, I heard a trio of searing and distinct pieces by Aeryn Santillan, Rudresh Mahanthappa and Anna Clyne, all written for Thomson.

This is a stealthy strength of Bang on a Can. It draws audiences in with grand names. But if the legends disappoint in a given hour, as Riley did, there's always the next set — and the next generation — to save the day.



Robert Black in a set of Pandemic Solos. Credit... Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/02/arts/music/bang-on-a-can-mass-moca.html>

musicians complimenting his work. But the piece also rambles, and isn't always as clever as the subconscious might have hoped — in the way recounted dreams tend to be.

"Tales" nonetheless offers stray pleasures, particularly whenever Riley dreams up a vamping blues or rock number — joyously arranged here by his son, Gyan Riley. The guitarist Mark Stewart took on vocal duties, since Riley has been in Japan since the start of the pandemic. (He did make a brief appearance in the form of a live, lighthearted video introduction.)

In the final hours on Saturday's lineup, listeners could sprint from a short set by the rising star