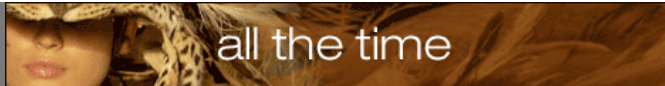


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SHALL WE ROCK

by ALEX ROSS

Composers getting funky.

Issue of 2003-06-30
Posted 2003-06-23



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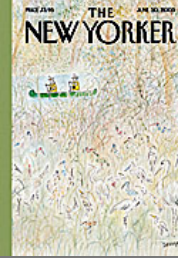
In the nineteen-twenties, various composers, not a few of them French, set out to write music inspired by jazz. The idea was that jazz would serve as raw material for the ultra-sophisticated imagination of the classical flâneur. It did not occur to these brave explorers of the musical wilderness that jazz was a new art form that had no need to be elevated by the European mind. Their conception of African-American music was opaque at best, racist at worst. “These entertainments are not art,” Jean Cocteau wrote in an influential manifesto. “They excite like machines, animals, landscapes, danger.” A scant two years later, Cocteau was declaring that jazz was over. In the end, all products of this sensibility, Stravinsky’s jazz pieces included, pale next to the three-minute masterpieces of Armstrong and Ellington.

The phenomenon of *le jazz* serves as an object lesson for composers who wish to adorn their works with the trappings of pop. It came to mind during the annual Bang on a Can festival, at Symphony Space. Bang on a Can is a loose association of self-consciously edgy composers and performers whose stated aim is to write music “too funky for the academy and too structured for the club scene.” They speak of their formative years this way: “We had the simplicity, energy and drive of pop music in our ears—we’d heard it from the cradle. But we also had the idea from our classical music training that composing was exalted.” This too-neat division of labor—funky fun on one side, serious structure on the other—threatens to repeat the mistake of Paris in the twenties. It undersells both the wildness of composition and the wiliness of pop. Try telling James Brown that his music isn’t structured.

If Bang on a Can’s slogans show a trace of high-mindedness, its programs are generally free of it. The two-day festival—an evening concert followed by a daylong marathon—offered music that could variously be called rock or classical or world music or none of the above. There were electric-guitar noisescapes by Thurston Moore, of Sonic Youth, and an ambient set by the downtown sound artist DJ Spooky. Steve Reich bestowed his impeccable coolness. The defining moment—the biggest bang—came when James Tenney rigged fifteen gongs around the hall and had them reverberate from silence to noise and back again. The climax was as loud as any unamplified sound I’ve ever heard, and it did wonderfully strange things to the brain.

The minimalists were the first generation of pop-savvy composers. When Steve Reich wrote stripped-down process pieces like “It’s Gonna Rain” and “Four Organs,” he was listening to Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, and Junior Walker, all of whom played powerfully within the frame of one or two chords (“So What,” “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” “Shotgun”). But whenever Reich discusses the nonclassical sources of his music he adds a

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caveat. He has written that a composer needs to study the structure of, say, West African rhythm instead of simply imitating the surface. Otherwise, he says, it's just a case of "the old exoticism trip." In a classic Reich piece such as "Piano Phase"—given an electrifying, video-enhanced performance by David Cossin at Bang on a Can—you can perceive the influence of modal jazz or Motown bass lines more than you can hear them. This implacably original sound influenced much pop music in turn, and the composer eventually found himself with the unlikely title of "Father of DJ Culture." Various d.j.s, Spooky included, have honored him with remixes of his work.

Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David Lang, the founders of Bang on a Can, met while studying composition at Yale. They staged their first marathon concert in 1987, breaking free of the science-fair dullness of new-music concerts of the day. The roster of performers included an amplified ensemble called the Michael Gordon Philharmonic, which was similar in its makeup to Bang on a Can's current ensemble, the All-Stars. That group—Cossin on percussion, Robert Black on bass, Lisa Moore at the piano, Mark Stewart on electric guitar, Wendy Sutter playing cello, and Evan Ziporyn playing clarinet—can take on almost anything, from atonality to minimalism and on to a decent replica of Sonic Youth's art of noise.

The atmosphere of Bang on a Can concerts—there will be more of them at MASS MOCA, in the Berkshires, in July—is casual, unpretentious, convivial. No one sneers or stares if you wear jeans and a T-shirt. The crowd is encouraged to wander in and out, mill around, chat unobtrusively, and shout "Yow!" if something lively happens. This is how audiences behaved back in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before codes of concert etiquette evolved. People who complain that Bang on a Can's informality is a marketing ploy may have it back to front: perhaps the dress-up ritual is the artificial construct, the one that values fashion over music. In any case, Bang on a Can is—God forbid—fun.

Wolfe, Gordon, and Lang have developed a kind of house style, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by colleagues such as Eve Beglarian, Annie Gosfield, Mikel Rouse, Lois Vierk, and the multitasking Ziporyn. Although the minimalist influence is obvious, this music is never as hypnotically spacious as Reich's "Music for Eighteen Musicians"; instead, it roots around in the grimmest and grittiest sonorities that classical instruments can produce. You hear a lot of irregularly driving beats and syncopations, rhythms that expand and contract and stop on a dime, much thumping of percussion and squawking of clarinets. "There's a seedy undertow to everything I do," the young Irish composer Donnacha Dennehy said.

With contemporary music adrift in stylistic confusion, it is refreshing to have a group of composers working in tandem toward common goals. That said, a few hours of Bang on a Can can approximate the feeling of racing down Canal Street in a cab with bad suspension. Any piece that begins quietly is guaranteed to end in a pounding climax. At high volumes, the instruments tend to become a blurry shriek in the loudspeakers. (Rock bands generally get a crisper sound from their guitars and amps, which are made for each other.) One piece after another seems to pump its arms in the air and shout, "Classical music *kicks ass!*" At some point, the urge to confound expectations becomes self-defeating. If a composition tries too hard to sound like rock, it sounds only like a lame, tame version of the real thing.

The occasional quiet spells came as a relief. Ziporyn's "Shadow Bang," a theatre piece created in collaboration with the Balinese shadow-puppet master I Wayan Wija, began with a Bang on a Can-y overture full of spasmodic syncopations and

drum thwacks, but the middle sections, particularly the dreamlike underwater episode, moved into a world of shimmering, slowly shifting chords. Michael Gordon and David Lang have recently gone in a similar ambient direction. Large sections of Gordon's avant-garde film soundtrack "Decasia," issued last year on the label Cantaloupe Music, echo the cinematic grandeur of John Adams. Lang's most recent CD, "Child," recalls Arvo Pärt's stillness and Brian Eno's otherworldliness. Even here, though, wispy figures can become as unrelenting as heavy beats. Compare the classic pieces of Reich, in which slight changes become cosmic transformations, and something as basic as a bass line going down a half-step can send chills up the spine.

In the realm of radiant noise, none can outdo Thurston Moore. A lanky, shaggy-haired, eternally high-schoolish figure, he has been a mainstay of Sonic Youth since 1981, and before that he played in the minimalist electric-guitar orchestras of Glenn Branca. At Bang on a Can, he presented two conceptual works, "Stroking Piece #1" and "Pelvic Noise." The first of these re-created, with the help of the All-Stars, the hazy melancholia of Sonic Youth classics like "Schizophrenia." In the second, an homage to the Fluxus movement, he was joined by his wife, the bass player Kim Gordon. The two slowly walked toward each other from opposite ends of the stage, their amps cranked up to such an extreme that the tiniest movement set off caterwauling vibrations. Eventually, the couple met and embraced, as did the guitars. The piece managed to be both touching and terrifying—touching because it was a kind of lovers' ritual, and terrifying because the noise approached potentially ear-wrecking levels as the bodies joined.

DJ Spooky, by contrast, was the picture of digital cool. His real name is Paul D. Miller, and he is also known as That Subliminal Kid, the Ontological Assassin, and the Semiological Terrorist. As versed in the classical avant-garde as he is in d.j. culture, he uses turntables and laptops to create eclectic collages of sound, threading them together with silken dance beats. He is at work on an audiovisual deconstruction of "Birth of a Nation," part of which appeared at Symphony Space. Daniel Bernard Roumain added cadenzas on electric violin, dismantling "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in Hendrix style. In comparison with the d.j.'s other work, this set was a little too studiously spare, as if something had dropped out of the mix. You wished that the Bang on a Can All-Stars could have joined in, confirming the obvious relationship between Spooky's twenty-first-century aesthetic and the older mission espoused by John Cage—to "make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard."♦

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