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Report: Bang on a Can 25th Anniversary Concert

Jayson Greene breaks down last weekend's Lincoln Center gig, which featured compositions by Tyondai Braxton and Nick Zammuto

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By Jayson Greene



All photos by [Stephanie Berger](#) via [Bang on a Can's Facebook](#)

Bang on a Can's 25 years have been a story of unending metastasis: from a single marathon concert to a touring ensemble to a summer festival to a commissioning fund to a record label and beyond. "So what *is* Bang on a Can, exactly?" asked my concertgoing companion at the collective's 25th anniversary showcase on Saturday at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in Manhattan.

By now, Bang on a Can is a brand, although its bohemian founders David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe would shudder at the word. It's a brand that's synonymous with little else but quality and singularity of vision. These are impossibly vague virtues to lasso your organization's name around, but BOAC has done it through every phase of its eventful life. This weekend's concert gathered friends from every stop of the journey and felt like a party thrown for a beloved old patriarch.

The concert was separated loosely into three sections, each populated by a different wing of BOAC. The evening opened with Evan Ziporyn's "Tire Fire", a clattering, incandescent meeting between a full Balinese gamelan, electric guitars, and a keyboard. Ziporyn, a member of the crack new-music ensemble Bang on a Can All-Stars and a participant in BOAC marathons since their first concert, called the work a "celebration of possibility" in his program note, but it felt more like an exhilarating celebration of inter-genre friction, with different music types arguing with each other in a crowded mess hall. By the time it reached its chaotic conclusion, my brain felt tenderized, like it had been worked over by typewriter hammers.



The Asphalt Orchestra-- who call themselves an "avant-garde marching band," and there is no more accurate description-- charged out afterward. Spilling nerdy, joyful energy on all corners of the stage, they whirled through four pieces, the first an arrangement of Frank Zappa's "Zomby Woof" and the other three original works by Tatsuya Yoshida, composer and drummer for the post-rock band Ruins. I say "whirled," because they certainly didn't just "play": They jumped and mugged wildly, chased each other around like Keystone Kops. It was hugely infectious: It looked like gleeful insanity but was obviously as rigorously planned as a martial drill. All four pieces were clockmaker-intricate, but they felt like standing in the middle of a nine-person pillow fight.

The third, and longest, portion of the night brought out Bang on a Can All-Stars, who worked through nine new pieces, including works by Tyondai Braxton, formerly of Battles, Nick Zammuto, of the Books and Zammuto, the collage artist and DJ Christian Marclay, and others. All nine composers were asked to produce a work that manipulated a piece of recorded sound somehow. The best of these pieces made the border between recorded and live sound thrillingly porous.

Christian Marclay's *Fade to Slide* grouped together themed clips from hundreds of Hollywood films-- 20 quick-cut shots of running water, for example, or shots of actors smoking, of glass breaking, guns firing-- and edited them into his characteristic time-and context-annihilating fusillade. The All-Stars interacted with the video clips in fascinating and ingenious ways, commenting on or punctuating the onscreen action. When the stylus touched down on a record being played onscreen, for instance, they cued up the music. They provided the squeak of an onscreen chandelier, or simulated the rat-a-tat of chopped carrots on a snare drum.



The recorded source materials ranged widely. Florent Ghys's "Open Cage" used excerpts from John Cage's massive spoken-word project *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*, which collected eight volumes' worth of Cage's stray thoughts, recorded in his voice. (The title is drawn from one of them: "If you were asked to describe yourself in three words, what would you say?" "An open cage.") The ensemble drew musical phrasing from his placid, ruminative monotone, underlining the grace in his sly, lucid observations-- "government is a tree... its fruit are people... as people ripen they drop away from the tree." Cage's thoughts have always tumbled out like pure music in themselves, so there was a lovely rhyming logic to experiencing them this way.

In Tyondai Braxton's "Casino Trem", we heard the broken, arpeggiated sound of firing slot machines, recorded at the Resorts World Casino in Queens ("one of the saddest places on the planet," Braxton wrote in his program note) before the All-Stars assayed Braxton's brightly colored version of it. Nick Zammuto, in a characteristically humane and impish gesture, edited together reams of over-exposed, 1980s cable-access beauty infomercials, Marclay-style-- the section that grouped together endless shots of waxing/ripping was painfully eloquent-- and built a piece that remarked on its action; in one inspired passage, the women in the ads blinked blankly in tandem to snare hits from the drum kit. It was the kind of deadpan absurdism that "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!" tends to rely on, but lightened with Zammuto's affectionate touch.

In all this activity, Bang on a Can's founding voices slipped into the conversation quietly, folding their works among their students and friends. Julia Wolfe's "Reeling" built a lilting scrap of song from singer Benoit Benoit into a thrumming Celtic dance. Michael Gordon's "Gene Takes a Drink" followed Gordon's dog, who took us on a POV tour to a fountain in a community garden. Lang's "Unused Swan" took percussionist David Cossin away from the drum kit and had him methodically drop a series of different-length chains onto a loud resonant surface while cello, guitar, and bowed stand-up bass played a quietly mournful chorale. The effect was puzzling but undeniably charged.



Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe have offered maybe the most benevolent gift you can leave to music, more significant than a building with your name on the side, or an earmarked endowment fund. Through their curiosity and eagerness to work with anyone who understands them, they've shored up a sense of possibility in American classical concert life. In their introductory program note, they recalled the mini-tempest of hand-wringing that accompanied Bang on a Can's first Lincoln Center appearance.

Traditionalists eyed the downtowners with skepticism, while the crowd from downtown feared that BOAC's hardy spirit would be sucked into the Borg. From Saturday's happy remove, it seemed implausible that two sides of this equation ever even existed, let alone that they would suffer from their association. "We look forward to the next 25 years," they wrote. No matter what happens, it seems, they've already had a hand in it.

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