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MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE

The Live Music Blog

12th Annual Bang on a Can Summer Festival Marathon

By TRISTRAM LOZAW

August 8, 2013



Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, John Adams, and Terry Riley are among the modern music heroes that have been feted by Bang on a Can at their Summer Festival in the Berkshires. Tonight, electronic mastermind Aphex Twin gets the treatment – his trippy, transistorized clips translated into modern scores for classical instruments.

Crossing over musical genera to connect and mess with the work of Aphex Twin make perfect sense for Bang on a Can. The New York-based, downtown-modern collective has a penchant for pushing works that in turn stretch musical envelopes – just like its Summer Music

Festival home, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, pushes the boundaries of artistic creation. If you want to hear the future of music, now, you come to Banglewood. So here I am, for my 11th annual helping.

Besides being a destination for fans of new music, BOAC's Summer Festival is a place for budding talents to meet musicians with like minds. At its center are 35 selected fellows – “students” who are worked “super hard” by the 14 BOAC faculty members in residence. And today they join to present a six-hour marathon (it will be closer to seven) of 19 remarkable new-music works.



TRAIN KEPT A'ROLLIN': The finale of this year's BOAC Summer Festival – the 12th held at MASS MoCA – actually began last weekend with a performance by the Bang On A Can All-Stars of “Steel Hammer,” a stunning, 90-minute composition by principal member and cellist Julia Wolfe. Built from pieces of Appalachia (dulcimer, banjo, wood bones, body percussion) and the over 200 variations that exist of “John Henry” – the tall-tales song

about the steel hammer-wielding legend of the rails. Did John Henry have a nine-pound hammer? Ten-pound? Twenty? Two nine-pound hammers? That's just one set of the dozens of lyric/myth variations explored.

The strings, piano, drums, guitar, and clarinet worked through a mash-up of railroad-inspired sonics over the work's 90 minutes – flusters of angry notes and buzzes spelling out locomotive rhythms; steam-burst whistles; the sounds of train and track rubbing, grinding against each other; even string drones that emulated taking a slow curve around a bend.

One of the most inspired moments was provided by All-Stars guitarist Mark Stewart, who delivered a half-dozen minutes of tapping, train-centric soft shoe – literally dancing in his seat. But it was the chorus of three angelic female voices at the center of it all, trading harmonic tones and inventive wordplay, that kept all the disparate dissonances, fragments, and creative noise on the track, so to speak, and gave the piece its dazzle.

In a fitting segue – albeit seven days later – that railroad imagery is kept alive with the world premiere of Ken Thomson's "Music for Trains" – the opening set of today's Marathon featuring the metal-on-metal sounds of rolling thunder as filtered through Thompson's saxophone quartet.



HIGHS AND LOWS: Like Thomson's piece, several of tonight's arrangements are written to spotlight specific instruments. On the high end we have Bun Chiang Lam's "Piccolo Concertino." Or as she puts it, her first stab at writing an abstract piece for a small instrument. Superbly played, it ranges from sustained "somebody-please-get-that-tea-kettle" squeaks to the flit and flutter of its beautifully lilting trills.

At the other end of the spectrum is Gregg August's double bass quartet, "A Humble Tribute to Guaguancó." The BOAC-commissioned piece is typically delivered by cello, piano and violin, but here four basses trade moody notes and subtly percussive lines that jockey for the lead position in this tempered rumba. Ingram Marshall's "Muddy Waters," a great, rumbling lava flow of low-end energy, burrows even deeper. It hits its peaks during dynamic melodic pairings – yearning trade-offs between cello and bass, sax and guitar – and dambursts of sparkle from the marimba and piano.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT: Many of the pieces in today's marathon are 30, even 40 minutes long. But two shorter compositions impress just as much. "Drive," composed by Bill Ryan from Grand Valley State University (a musically adventurous Michigan school that partners with Bang On A Can), is a compact highlight, with minimalist repetitions framed against jazzy, syncopated conflagrations of horns, drums, violin and piano. Even shorter (around 6 minutes long) is the buoyant "Scale 9" which follows, a succinct "diagnostic measure of mania" by former BOAC fellow Sean Friar. The sextet's blissed-out, give-and-take performance mirrors Friar's obsessive subject matter.

IMPECCABLE POSTURE: Some might define the several string ensemble pieces performed tonight only by the incredible fingers-to-string action of the players. I'll throw some other physicality into that mix: posture. The players who are most strictly aligned are the ones who are throwing themselves into their parts with the craftiest of abandon. Meanwhile, I feel like I'm breaking the law as I do the music critic slump in my seat. So I sit up straight enough to watch said players in a few works where strings are among the featured instruments.

Julia Wolfe's impressive "Fuel" plays like the angry hyped-up soundtrack to a speedy time-lapse film of the loading docks in Amsterdam (which inspired the piece), interspersed with elegant breaks from the flurries of activity. A sharp arrangement of New York boundary breaker Annie Gosfield's "Almost Truths and Open Deceptions" hits me as a musical martial arts fracas, a shakedown performed by strings and percussion, and it's as unnerving as it is persuasive.

“Come Round” uses a sextet alignment often associated with Arnold Schoenberg – flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion – to deliver Jacob Druckman’s fractured fairytale in three discordant but never chaotic movements. David Lang’s “these broken wings” (a line snatched from the Beatles’ “Blackbird”) is a brooding gallop broken into sections of herky-jerky rhythms, whistling melodies, trance tones and, finally, the reward: a gallop of wonderfully circular harmonies that take us to its end.



CHILDLIKE: So far, this year’s Marathon set list has been heady and compelling but short on fun and games. “Bellows, Rhythms, Whirls and Hums,” played by the Orchestra or Original Instruments (all of the 2013 fellows plus leader Mark Stewart), remedies that. Featuring the one-of-a-kind instruments of Gunnar Schonbeck and other homemade contraptions, “Bellows” takes us back to the sandbox, when making music was a celebration of undomesticated singing and banging on things.

Stewart kicks off playtime by blowing into an eight-foot PVC pipe. His elephant calls send a signal to the herd of fellows, who enter the hall from the rear puffing into balloon horns and whistling plastic hoses whirling above their heads. Once on stage, they combine for a glorious cacophony organized around repeating syncopations and chants. At one point, Stewart is leading a singalong of “Old Man Tucker” as three dozen pairs of feet thump out the rhythm in a reprise of Stewart’s frolicking soft shoe in “Steel Hammer.”

It’s amazing what little joyful noise can do. And the audience is invited to join in between sets by trying out the homemade harps at the back of the hall, as well as the “totem boing video instrument,” a giant African thumb piano made from household objects for Stewart’s sync-up with filmmaker Gabriel Gomez, “What, and if so, why?”



An opposite cycle of emotions pours forth in Michael Gordon’s “The Sad Park,” a 40-minute, string-quartet meditation on the tragedy of September 11 set to manipulated tapes of pre-kindergarten schoolkids. Originally commissioned and performed by Kronos Quartet, it’s a somber, desperate work. With violin, cello and viola lines melting into one another, the piece quickly goes from childlike to sinister as samples of the kids’ emotionally charged words are electronically stretched and diced.

LINGER ON: It is indeed sad that Eleanor Hovda and Steve Marthland, two Bang On A Can-affiliated composers whose work is featured during today’s Summer Festival finale, had died within the last year. It seems appropriate that Hovda is remembered here with “Onyx,” her neo-ambient exploration of misty sub-currents of sound that come from within the reed, brass, and string instruments.

With his energetic “Horses of Instruction,” Martland must have been imagining what it would be like if Steve Reich had a rock band. Replacing the dulcet layers and drifting tones common in Reich’s work with forceful honks and blurts and anchoring them with furious piano and bass lines, “Horses” is a piece with real girth. By the time I get lost in the percussive Glass-ian phrasing from the marimba-guitar combo, I’ve already decided it’s my favorite piece on the 2013 program. And I couldn’t agree more when it receives a standing ovation.



THE MUSIC OF RICHARD D. JAMES (aka MR. TWIN): Rockers and pop artists have forever tried, with varying results, to add gravitas to their music by dressing it up in classical music trappings. Tonight, members of the innovative group Alarm Will Sound (including tonight’s conductor Alan Pierson) and several of the BOAC summer fellows are carrying that load for Britain’s Aphex Twin so he doesn’t have to. It’s not the first time; Mr. Twin himself once commissioned Philip Glass to create a modern orchestral version of “Icct Hedral.” And in 2005, Alarm Will Sound released its first stab at interpreting Aphex Twin material, “Acoustica.”

For tonight’s finale, four of Aphex Twin’s electronica bubblebaths have been dissected bit by byte. His keyboard- and computer-powered arrangements have been deconstructed into extended scores to be played by the most appropriate instruments in the 19-piece symphonette assembled for the occasion. The live performance of such material is easier imagined than realized. Whereas all of Aphex Twin’s electronic expressway of layered sweeps and beats are synced precisely to the same digital clock, human players are not similarly tethered.

The swooping orchestral themes distilled from Aphex Twin’s “Four” sound almost sweet set against the rest of the evening’s offerings. Meanwhile, AT’s rapid breakbeat pulses are being handled live by three percussionists, who have decidedly heavier hands than James’ drum machine blips and thus add a rock-like center to the vapor trails of “Meltphace.”

The gentle swelling treatments and echoing lines of “Cliffs, up next,” raise the aural bar. The symphonette’s textured atmospheres are now floating the melodies higher above the stage, setting the stage for the energy swirls that threaten to come lose at the seams on “Cock/Ver 10.” Driven and intense, “Cock/Ver 10” freaks like a Bang On A Can standard, with the strings pulling AT’s keyboard lines into sonic boom territory and the drums holding it all together. It’s a good way to close the 2013 Marathon as we all file out to the courtyard to send off another remarkable Summer Festival with a champagne toast.

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