

How Bang on a Can helped remake the world of new music

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By Joshua Kosman



Bang on a Can founding artistic directors David Lang (left), Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe. Photo: Peter Serling

Something possibly worth noting about the influential New York new-music behemoth Bang on a Can is that the name is, strictly speaking, a misnomer. There aren't any cans, and there's only a reasonable amount of banging.

Yet the name, which evolved out of a throwaway joke in an early grant application, does get at a distinctive aspect of this organization. Since its inception in 1987, Bang and its founding artistic directors — composers Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon and David Lang — have been hammering away at many of the artistic, economic and social structures underlying the world of contemporary classical music.

Or rather, they've challenged the assumptions that *used* to hold sway during the 1970s and '80s, and which have now largely receded into a murky past.

Like so many revolutionaries before them, the Bang leaders have moved beyond a period of strife to occupy a world that is, in part, one of their own making.

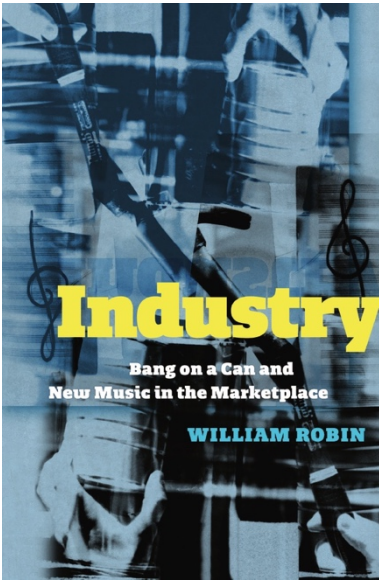
These days, Bang is a sprawling artistic conglomerate, with an annual budget of \$2 million to \$2.5 million, a dedicated record label, a virtuoso chamber ensemble (the Bang on a Can All-Stars) to carry its branding internationally, an active commissioning program, a summer residency and a distinctive performance format — the new-music marathon concert — that is practically a trademarked part of the organization's identity.

The Bang on a Can Marathon, in fact, is one of the few musical ventures to make a graceful transition to the COVID-era virtual concert hall. The latest installment is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 21, with four hours' worth of premieres by Eve Beglarian, Gabriel Kahane, Jakhongir Shukur, Alvin Lucier and others.

And the festival's three directors are, by any reckoning, now comfortably ensconced within the new-music establishment. They teach at Ivy League universities and have their work commissioned widely by major orchestras. Wolfe and Lang have won Pulitzer Prizes, and Lang was nominated for an Academy Award for his score for the 2015 film "Youth." But anyone who has watched the progress of this organization from the beginning — and I speak as someone whose personal and biographical overlap with certain of the Bang principals extends to before the festival began — can recall leaner and more adversarial periods.

The earliest marathon concerts (which, by the way, extended a full, shambling 24 hours) were delightfully scrappy affairs, hosted in whatever art gallery or performance venue in downtown Manhattan could be secured for the purpose. More to the point, there was a palpable sense of an aesthetic battle being waged — an attempt to break free of the strictures that had shaped the world of new music for too long.

Both stages of this narrative are laid out in elegant detail in "Industry," a sleek new scholarly history released this month by Oxford University Press. In it, the musicologist and critic William Robin, who has been a key figure in bridging the divide between academic and public discourse on music, explores the festival's evolution from both artistic and economic perspectives.



William Robin, "Industry."
Photo: Oxford University Press

Artistically speaking, the world of contemporary music in which the Bang composers came up was fairly bifurcated. On one side were the academic composers, writing in a mathematical and often arcane style that derived, ultimately, from the 12-tone theories of Arnold Schoenberg; on the other were the experimentalists, whose freer aesthetic was inspired by John Cage.

Notably missing — and this was as true for listeners like myself as for young composers in the last wave of the Baby Boom — was music that could combine the structural clarity of the one, the accessibility of the other, and the rhythmic urgency of the rock music that had shaped our earliest listening. The minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass was an important model, but it didn't go far enough.

The music of the Bang composers and their cohort served as a kind of generational manifesto, an insistence that all of these essential virtues could be combined into a single musical palette. (Kyle Gann, the brilliant critic and composer who chronicled much of Bang's history in the pages of the Village Voice, labeled this style "totalism," but like "fetch," the neologism stubbornly refused to take.)

In addition to the stylistic angle, "Industry" — which takes its name from the title of a Gordon score — also serves as a canny assessment of the economics of new music in this period. Even musicians have to eat, and Robin explains in precise but readable detail how the Bang composers helped change the funding landscape for new music.

The thematic through line here, at once simple and profound, is that Bang on a Can succeeded in chipping away at the abiding problem of 20th century music — namely, the lingering alienation and mistrust between composers and audiences.

The artistic and economic solutions turn out to be interdependent: To oversimplify just a bit, if you make music that people want to hear, they'll pay you to listen to it. That's not a complete road map for success, but it's a start.

"Industry"

By William Robin

(Oxford University Press, 320 pages, \$35)

Bang on a Can Marathon: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 21. Free. www.bangonacan.org

<https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/music/how-bang-on-a-can-helped-remake-the-world-of-new-music>