

# STRINGS

## Prophets of Possibility: Bang on a Can Is Building a Musical Cadre of American Experimentalists

APRIL 29, 2022

By Greg Cahill | *From the [May-June 2022](#) issue of Strings magazine*

Sometimes you have to take the bull by the proverbial horns. The composers Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David Lang—alumni of New York’s experimental downtown music scene—founded Bang on a Can in 1987 in response to the absence of new music in American concert halls. “Michael and Julia and I met when we were all students in graduate school,” Lang explains. “School can be an exciting time for young musicians—you talk about music all day with your friends, you can experiment, there are always other musicians around, you can have ideas and try them out. Then you get out in the world, and you find yourself immediately at the absolute bottom of the music food chain. No one seems to care about your ideas, it is hard to find people to work with, it is hard to make a living. After a few years of struggling to find a scene that would welcome us and the music we liked, we just decided to start building one ourselves.”

Thirty-five years later, Bang on a Can (the name came from an inside joke about an early grant application) is a major force in the new-music movement with a \$2.5 million annual budget, a record label (Cantaloupe Records), an impressive chamber ensemble (the Bang on a Can All-Stars), a vibrant commissioning program, a summer residency, and a string of yearly events that includes a sprawling new-music marathon. It is rooted in New York’s downtown experimental-music scene. “Bang on a Can has always represented some of the most creative and inspiring outlets of what modern music can be,” says violist Nathan Schram of the Attacca Quartet, which has performed at BOAC events. “As a string player, I am grateful that so many of the boundaries erected around us have already been stripped down by Bang on a Can. Their fostering of future musical generations only deepens the impact they will forever have on the sound of America.”



*Bang On A Can All Stars. Photo by Peter Serling*

At press time, Attacca was scheduled to perform at a [three-day festival dubbed Long Play](#), held April 29–May 1 in Brooklyn, and also featuring ETHEL, bassists Dave Holland and Brandon Lopez, cellists Iva Casian-Lakos and Zoë Keating, and dozens of other acts. Like BOAC’s other mega-events, Long Play is a much more ambitious affair than Bang on a Can’s first forays into festival promotion. “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,” San Francisco music critic Joshua Kosman recalled last year. “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.”

Bang on a Can’s history is laid out in “elegant detail,” Kosman adds, in musicologist and critic William Robin’s recent book [Industry](#) (Oxford University Press), a sleek scholarly history of the group’s evolution from both artistic and economic perspectives. The book takes its title from a Michael Gordon score. “The music of the Bang composers and their cohort served as a kind of generational manifesto,” Kosman adds, “an insistence that all of these essential virtues could be combined into a single musical palette.”

The Bang on a Can story, like its music, is evolving. “Unplugged, soft-spoken, and unchaotic—parents now, rather than children—is a good summary of the Bang on a Can founders these days, even as their energy is undimmed,” the *New York Times* opined in 2017. “Their work, once punkishly outsiderish, is now showered with mainstream accolades.”

These accolades include the Pulitzer Prize in Music, which Lang and Wolfe both have won, and to which Wolfe has added a MacArthur Fellowship. Gordon, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, has garnered numerous awards.

Experimentalism, and innovative avant-garde or new music, had been simmering since the early 20th century, though few chamber ensembles embraced it. But since the 1980s, it’s seen considerable growth, thanks, in part, to the Bang on a Can organization. “We have always looked at Bang on a Can as a place where music and musicians can experiment with doing new things,” Lang says. “Musicians get encouraged to put themselves into little categorical boxes—new-music composer, classical violinist, jazz improviser, opera singer, rock guitarist, etc. It is understandable—it makes it easier for people who like a certain kind of experience to find you and hire you and like you. But it is a narrow definition of what we all do—musicians are expansive and have a big vision of what music means to us. We use music to find something of ourselves that we need to share, and that often means there is a part of us that doesn’t fit neatly in one of those boxes. We have always thought that Bang on a Can is the box for all the musicians that don’t fit neatly into any of those other boxes.”

Of course, there have been obstacles over the years, he adds, and the biggest is always money. “Those boxes all come with venues and funders and fans and support networks,” he says, “so to go outside them means to go outside all the ways that art normally gets funded. So, we have been very active in building new networks for people who want to support something new.”

## **A Plan for Change**

In the beginning, Wolfe, Gordon, and Lang would gather every day for breakfast and make long lists of the things they wished would change in the music world. “Not just so that our own music would have a place, but so that we could support the music by other people that we wanted to hear,” Lang says. “And very quickly this raised a bunch of other questions about the music world: What is the right format for a concert of music you have never heard before? Is there a different way to play it that might make its newness more accessible? Or a different place to play it? Or a different way to present it or talk about it? Or a different audience that might be open to new things and which hadn’t yet been reached? Once you crack open the door to doing things differently, you realize that there are a lot of things we take for granted in music, and that we might want to change in the world.”

Along the way, Bang on a Can’s co-founders met likeminded artists eager to collaborate with their artistic vision. “Bang on a Can’s influence on music in New York, in America, and around the world, cannot be overstated,” says Dorothy Lawson, founding cellist of the string quartet ETHEL, a longtime BOAC collaborator. “Their broadminded values and intensely personal styles have embraced and supported unique creative expression that fell outside of the mainstream canon, giving it a powerful voice and a wide audience. Among musical traditions, Western European classical strings may have been among the most resistant, but Bang on a Can took advantage of that rich heritage and encouraged new developments of application, sound, and technique. As philosophers, mentors, presenters, publishers, statespeople, and advocates, they have led, inspired, equipped, and connected. In their wake, one cannot address current composition or performance practice without considering all the musical modalities in the world, then questioning who is making the choices, and from what cultural perspective.”



*Bang on a Can artistic directors Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe.  
Photo by Peter Serling*

While the pandemic led to the cancellation of some popular events, Bang on a Can still found ways to provide a showcase for new-music composers and players. For example, in 2021, the organization scaled back its annual summer festival—a three-week concatenation of performances, workshops, and seminars (aka Banglewood) held at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, Massachusetts—to a two-day LOUD Weekend. There, Kronos Quartet shared the bill with violinist Mazz Swift, who performed re-imaginings of so-called slave songs, as well as freedom songs and her own versions of what she calls modern-day protest songs. “That was amazing,” says violinist David Harrington, co-founder of Kronos Quartet. “Not only did Kronos get to play live for an audience, I went to seven concerts. It was so wonderful. Music came flooding back in. I loved it. I had never heard

Mazz before, but we will be working together and that's a direct result of BOAC and that event."

Kronos has worked with Bang on a Can's co-founders since the beginning: the celebrated string quartet's 2022 tour includes Gordon's "Potassium," commissioned by Kronos and included on the 2018 album *Clouded Yellow*. Harrington points to BOAC's role in leading a cadre of American experimentalists and shifting sound through a diverse range of instrumentation. You might call them prophets of possibility. "I *just* had a phone call with Michael," says Harrington, speaking by phone from a tour date in Colorado. "We were talking about future things—he and I are always talking about future things. He's one of those people that I feel comfortable imagining things around. I feel that as a trio of composers, what a fabulous friendship and community they have initiated. And they have developed long-term relationships with so many vital composers through the work they are doing with young composers."

Indeed, the vitality of Bang on a Can events has influenced mainstream classical-music promoters as well. "There is a magnetic quality that has been created," Harrington says. "My feeling is that, contrary to what you might have read, things are getting better [in terms of the inroads new music is making in the classical realm]. When I think how tough it was in 1973 when I started Kronos and how tough it was for Bang on a Can when they started out, there is a little bit of valuable progress that's been made. The devotion and intensity that Bang on a Can puts into everything they do is really inspiring. It has an impact not only on the American music community, but also the international music community. We rely on that community—the community of listeners and the community of other musicians. We need a community to help keep us informed, and I rely on that all the time. All I can say is that events—like their annual music marathon—and People's Commissioning Fund, as well as their touring, have created a certain presence, something we can count on for all of these years.

"There's a solidity to Bang on a Can."

## The Banglewood Bump

That commitment to community pops up frequently in conversations with string players associated with Bang on a Can. "It is warm and welcoming and makes the experience of new music and experimentation thrilling, fun, and inviting—never pretentious or exclusive," says cellist Arlen Hlusko, a permanent member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars. "There are beautiful communities of musicians and supporters alike that have come together in such a joyful, human way through Bang on a Can's work—it's inspiring to witness and heartwarming to be a part of."

Its efforts are having global impact, as Bang on a Can has blazed a path for new organizations seeking to replicate their model. "Bang on a Can is a big ecosystem with a large reach," says BOAC All-Star bassist Robert Black. "Through all of its activities—concerts, commissions, summer institute, People's Commissioning Fund, record label, staged productions, festival productions, All-Stars, One Beat, Asphalt Orchestra, and streaming activities—it is an endless and thrilling source of personal and professional discovery, connections, and cross-pollination."

Building community remains at the heart of Bang on a Can's mission, and the ambition of its co-founders remains steadfast in that goal. "You have to do a lot of things to build a world from scratch," Lang says. "And there are parts of the ecosystem that are beyond us. A bank for musicians would be great. Insurance, retirement, etc. I have always wanted to build a city for experimental artists. I have a feeling I am not going to get to that. Still, to me, our biggest accomplishment is that composers and performers look at what Michael and Julia and I built and then decide to build something for themselves. That is the way it should be. We all got into the music world because we wanted to do something in it, something that means something to us, that we can believe in. And for a lot of musicians, the reality is that you aren't going to get to do that thing you believe in unless you make it happen yourself.

"People need to be active in building the world they want to live in, and it is gratifying to see how many ensembles and record labels and bands and festivals our alums have gone on to create."

*The [Bang on a Can Summer Festival](#) returns to MASS MoCA from July 11–31, culminating in a three-day LOUD Weekend.*





*Robert Black. Photo by Stephanie Berger*

## **Growth Spurt**

*Double bassist Robert Black has performed as a soloist and member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars since its inception, performing at every BOAC marathon. Strings asked him about the organization's status within the larger classical music world.*

“In its beginnings, Bang on a Can was unique—an unlikely combination of instruments that had no repertoire,” he says. “Acoustic instruments, but completely amplified; typically amplified

instruments, like electric guitar, but in a chamber-music setting; the desire to work with musicians from all musical camps; the understanding that a sound engineer was an equal member of the ensemble; the belief that this music was not strange and that there was an audience for it; the bedrock dedication to the living composer; the positive can-do attitude to go around obstacles and roadblocks—these things and more made Bang on a Can unique, singular. Over the years, Bang on a Can has been very influential, and many musicians and groups have been influenced by BOAC and reflect these ideas. For example, several people have told me that they have been aware of and listening to BOAC all of their musical lives.

*Robert Black composes a piece on bass with digital effects during a live event on March 4, 2022*

“[But] I think that the worlds of classical music and new music have become separate worlds, even though they share certain things. For instance, new music has developed its own groups of performers and its own audiences that are separate and distinct from the classical world. New music used to be viewed as the child of classical music, that it grew out of or developed from the classical world. It was a descendant. But now, that child has grown up, moved out of the house, and is living on its own. It still keeps in touch and frequently visits, but has its own adult life, too. So, in that regard, Bang on a Can is not on the fringe, but has been, and continues to be, front and center, leading the way.”