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Whither the avant-garde? Making a racket in the Berkshires.

Bang on a Can brings another LOUD Weekend of curious music to Mass MoCA.

Column by [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

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NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — If there’s a problem with “new music,” it’s that none of the words for it work.

“Avant-garde” presumes some intention of institutional nuisance or cultural rebuff. (It also sounds a little antique.) “Experimental” hints at the presence of a hypothesis, or some extramusical mechanism operating under the hood. “Weird” has been completely hijacked. And “new” tells you next to nothing about the music it modifies — beyond the fact that it soon won’t be new.

These, of course, are critic problems. None of the attendees at last week’s [LOUD Weekend](#) — a “fully loaded, three-day, eclectic super-mix of creative, experimental and unusual music” presented by the [Bang on a Can](#) collective at [MASS MoCA](#) — seemed too preoccupied with what to call the music. They were too busy listening.

Founded by Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe as a one-day marathon concert in SoHo on Mother’s Day 1987, Bang on a Can has grown over the decades into one of the contemporary music world’s primary centers of gravity — though gravity might not be the right word. Evident and animate throughout the group’s [own musical output](#), as well as its [commissioning initiatives](#), [residency programs](#), and not [one](#) but [two](#) annual festivals is an abiding belief in the creation of music as “a utopian act.”

The roots of the festival go all the way back to the blueprints of the MASS MoCA, a sprawling mill complex turned contemporary arts center which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. (Lang had to wear a hard hat for his first meeting with founding director Joseph Thompson.) Bang on a Can’s inaugural project with MASS MoCA was a co-production of Lang, Gordon and Wolfe’s comic-book opera “The Carbon Copy Building” in [August 2000](#).



The “Newest Voices” concert of world premieres on Friday at LOUD Weekend. (Greg Nesbit/MASS MoCA)

For the past 22 years, LOUD Weekend has served as the culminating event of the Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival, a professional development program which welcomes an international selection of 40 young musicians (and five “media fellows”) to North Adams for three weeks of intensive workshops, flash collaborations and fearless music-making.

The fellows’ work was presented in a pair of centerpiece “Newest Sounds” concerts — an eight-pack of world premiere pieces that demonstrated an ear-opening range of inspirations. Annija Anna Zarina’s “Unsaid” unspooled a sentence into a strand of letters sung by Keri Lee Pierson — a spellbinding spelling bee. Anak Baiharn’s “Contra” derived some of its structure from the cheat codes used to gain extra lives in the titular video game. Alex Groves’s “hottt” channeled underground techno into an energizing reverie.

“I think we’ve always looked at this place as being a complement to everyone’s normal education,” Lang tells me over coffee on Saturday morning. “Everyone’s normal education exists to prepare them to fit into the world that’s already here.”

Thus, the goal of LOUD Weekend is to imagine the world that’s yet to exist — one where composers and musicians work on equal footing, where programming is collaborative and challenging, where creation builds community, where audiences appreciate risk (and don’t mind a measure of surrender).

MASS MoCA makes an ideal and idyllic setting for the festival, not least of all because music already runs through its 300,000 square feet of gallery space. A video of cellist Jeffrey Zeigler performing Paola Prestini’s “[Zodiac: Poems for Cello](#)” resonates throughout the three-story exhibition space presenting “[Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing](#)”

[Retrospective](#).” Composer Jeremy Turner’s percolating score accompanies Chris Doyle’s colossal video installation, “[The Coast of Industry](#).” Raven Chacon’s ritualistic graphic scores adorn the walls of the group show “[Like Magic](#).”

Here, sound becomes just another medium for artists to push and pull and stretch and form — a clever means of disarming you to the offerings of LOUD Weekend.



Meredith Monk and John Hollenbeck perform Thursday at LOUD Weekend. (Greg Nesbit/MASS MoCA)



Shabaka, Bang on a Can All-Stars and Julia Wolfe perform Friday at LOUD Weekend. (Greg Nesbit/MASS MoCA)

A packed program included concert-length spotlights on living composers — this year showcasing works by Lang, Mathew Rosenblum, [Marcos Balter](#) and Meredith Monk. Monk was especially present over the weekend, kicking off the weekend with percussionist John Hollenbeck for “Duet Behavior,” a smartly reduced romp through her catalogue.

We heard reworked takes on pieces from “Songs from the Hill” (1975-1976), “Light Songs,” (1988), “Cellular Songs” (2017) and others, each buoyed by her exuberant vocalizations — shushes, hoots, whinnies and warbles. A bookend grand finale featured the Bang on a Can All-Stars performing their own arrangements of pieces from Monk’s 1984 sci-fi opera, “The Games.”

A pair of concerts celebrated the British jazz musician and composer Shabaka, who came equipped with an arsenal of hand-carved flutes. An extended new work presented on Friday revealed the composer’s knack for grand narrative, his playing lithe and assertive.

While concerned primarily with presenting new music from living composers, the weekend’s program also showcased milestones of minimalism, unearthed landmarks and homages to departed artists.

Cellist Maya Beiser’s entrancing hour-plus rendition of Terry Riley’s “In C” was supported by two percussionists and cleverly deployed looping software. A nine-piece ensemble helmed by Bang on a Can guitarist Mark Stewart unleashed a roiling interpretation of Julius Eastman’s “Gay Guerrilla,” an autobiographical open-score piece “for unspecified instruments” first performed on four pianos in 1980.

A performance of George Crumb’s spectral “Quest” brightened a rainy Saturday. And Beiser paid tribute to the late Dutch pianist and composer [Louis Andriessen](#) with a restrained but knife-sharp take on his “La Voce” — a solo piece constructed around spoken text from Cesare Pavese. (We also heard the mournful breath of Andriessen’s “Symphony for Open Strings” in a stunning Saturday performance.)



Lesley Flanigan performs “Resonances” Friday at LOUD Weekend. (Greg Nesbit/MASS MoCA)

The best parts of LOUD Weekend were the ones you just sort of stumbled into. Lesley Flanigan’s immersive “Resonances” installation surrounded listeners with isolated loops of her voice — silken threads forming an undulating tapestry of sound. (It also provided a breezy shelter from a torrential downpour.)

Flanigan’s husband, the composer and sonic experimentalist Tristan Perich, presented “Dual Synthesis,” a composition for harpsichord and one-bit electronics which found the fleet-fingered Karl Larson shredding his way through an icy wash of synthesized tones generated by a quartet of chips and speakers.

The world premiere performance of Jeffrey Brooks’s densely layered “I Can Hear It” required employment of the “Stein-o-Caster” — described as “an ingeniously amplified piano played with paint brushes.” And Thursday night wrapped with a courtyard invasion from the Orchestra of Original Instruments — i.e. a gaggle of Bang fellows armed with PVC horns, whirly tubes and dramatic group presentations.

If it all sounds a little silly, that’s fine — maybe even encouraged. An air of defiant joy charged every moment of LOUD Weekend, like the black thunderheads that barged over the hills. If there’s a single word to describe this music, it could be one that doubles as a descriptor for the audience: curious.