

MUSICAL EVENTS

BANG THEORY

New pieces from David Lang and Michael Gordon.

BY ALEX ROSS

Artists who join forces in their idealistic youth have a way of drifting apart, as the later history of almost any furiously unified avant-garde cadre or underground rock band will show. In the past quarter century, though, the composers at the heart of the New York-based Bang on a Can collective—Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David

Lang, which has been exciting and exhausting audiences since 1987. Their spirit has inspired younger colleagues, notably the twenty- and thirty-something composers gathered around New Amsterdam Records, in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The cult of genius has given way to a ritual of collaboration.

Perhaps the Bang on a Can compos-

cans.” All three were drawn to minimalist technique; all three wished to fuse classical tradition and pop techniques. Their early pieces had a punky, hard-driving character, and the titles exuded anti-academic insolence: “Lick,” “Cheating, Lying, Stealing,” “Yo Shakespeare.” Later, the members of the trio formed mature, distinct personalities, with Gordon drawn to densely roiling textures, Lang inclined toward spare vocal writing, and Wolfe apt to split the difference between shadowy dissonance and folkish simplicity. Yet they can still merge identities in multi-composer projects; the most successful of these is a kind of American-insecurity oratorio titled “Shelter,” a recording of which will soon be released on Bang



Members of Mantra Percussion pound on wooden planks in Michael Gordon's "Timber," at BAM.

Lang—have sustained what may be the most convivial vanguard in modern musical history. Essentially an extended family, with Wolfe and Gordon married to each other and Lang living nearby, they run an open-ended network of concerts, summer workshops, recording projects, and commissioning series, not to mention the annual Bang on a Can

ers prosper in one another's company because their mission has always been a little vague, allowing their paths to intersect or diverge at will. They made common cause in the mid-eighties, while studying at Yale. Struggling to describe what they were up to, Wolfe coined a phrase that stuck: “a bunch of composers sitting around banging on

on a Can's house label, Cantaloupe.

In December, BAM presented two arresting new creations from l'atelier Bang. First came Lang's “love fail,” a meditative theatre piece composed for the early-music vocal ensemble Anonymous 4. Lang, a Los Angeles native, discovered what might be called his neo-medieval style around the turn of

this century, and in 2007 it yielded an intimate religious masterwork, "The Little Match Girl Passion." (Anyone who clings to the prejudice that contemporary classical music is incapable of the most direct beauty should put down this magazine and go listen to the Theatre of Voices' recording. If you never come back, I won't blame you.) Lang's vocal writing owes something to Steve Reich's "Tehillim" and also to the latter-day devotions of Arvo Pärt, but it is more sensuous than either. The repetition of chantlike lines is not so much insistent as questing, questioning. It's the mantra of a vulnerable believer.

Having invoked Bach in "The Little Match Girl Passion," Lang takes an even bigger risk in "love fail," going head to head with Richard Wagner. The text, which Lang assembled, intersplices various tellings of the story of Tristan and Isolde—by Thomas of Britain, Gottfried von Strassburg, Marie de France, Thomas Malory, and the wizard of Bayreuth himself—with the flinty stories and poems of Lydia Davis. Proper nouns are removed, so that old and new blend in a timeless stream of "you," "I," "he," and "she." There are some jolting shifts, as the libretto jumps from chivalric plights ("It is not wine / It is our lasting sorrow") to suburban problems ("They can't talk about certain members of her family, his working hours, her working hours, rabbits, mice, dogs . . ."). Yet the continuities are just as striking. One Davis passage crystallizes the narrative: "Heart weeps. / Head tries to help heart. / Head tells heart how it is, again: / You will lose the ones you love. / They will all go."

The opening movement, "He Was and She Was," sets the mood: four singers rotate through the seven notes of the D-major scale, periodically colliding in bittersweet dissonances. The lowest voice stutters rapidly on "He was," forming a dronelike, almost electronic-sounding undertow. As in "The Little Match Girl Passion," the singers accompany themselves on percussion; those noises open a sort of forest space around the voices. Although Lang's pristine manner verges at times on mannerism, the atmosphere keeps getting deeper and darker: you realize that the grand medieval epic is serving as an allegory for the heightened emotions of

more ordinary lives. At BAM, that point was underscored, somewhat cryptically, by slow-moving video sequences of bohemian-looking characters in glam costumes and heavy makeup.

At the end, amid ominous bass-drum thuds, a voice haltingly intones the phrase "Mild, light / See him smile." Suddenly, we're listening to an abbreviated version of Isolde's ecstatic farewell in Wagner's "Tristan." Wagner's words alone come into play; the music is all Lang's, transcendently plain and stark. Twentieth-century music is full of ironic commentaries on the "Tristan" juggernaut, from Debussy's "Golliwog's Cakewalk" to Shostakovich's Fifteenth Symphony. Lang, who is Jewish and whose mother fled Nazi Germany, might have been expected to join the carping chorus, but, as if bestowing forgiveness, he treats Wagner as one more solitary, searching soul, waylaid by loss. It is as potent as quiet music can be.

Wolfe, the most stylistically mercurial member of Bang on a Can, had nothing new on offer in New York this fall, although in the spring Cantaloupe will release a recording of her biggest work to date: the 2009 cantata "Steel Hammer," a ninety-minute exploration of the legend of John Henry. Rather than try to resolve competing accounts of the story, Wolfe essentially includes them all: John Henry is variously described as tall, short, white, black, young, and middle-aged, and the music runs the gamut from medieval chant to dissonant rock. Like "love fail," it is a musical archeology of a familiar tale, one that preserves, even enlarges, its central mystery.

Gordon is Bang's resident experimentalist. His most celebrated composition, the 2001 movie score "Decasia," created for the conceptual filmmaker Bill Morrison, detunes the instruments of the orchestra and lets them loose in an apocalyptic howl. Having produced several other works in a similarly corrosive vein, Gordon felt an urge to "clear my mind of pitches and orchestration," as he said in a program note. So he set about writing an hour-long piece for percussion, a study in pure rhythm. Unsure of what instruments to use, he brought his sketches to the Dutch ensemble Slagwerk Den Haag. After a

failed attempt with tomtoms, a member of the group fetched a *simantra*—a long, thin slab of wood that, in Eastern Orthodoxy, is used to summon worshippers. (Iannis Xenakis imported the instrument to contemporary music in his 1969 score "Persephassa.") Gordon decided that six percussionists would hammer on *simantras* of varying lengths and timbres. His punning title was "Timber." When BAM presented the New York premiere of the work, in its sleek new black-box theatre, the Fishman Space, the *Times* critic Steve Smith dubbed it "pound on a plank."

Not any plank will do: Gordon and his co-conspirators found that a two-by-four cut of Douglas fir, available at any home-improvement store, produced the richest, haziest resonances, like the ringing of sullen bells. As repetitive patterns multiply and accelerate, swelling and fading in rapid succession, six-note melodies flicker out of nowhere. Early on, there's an electrifying passage in which Gordon takes an already complex polyrhythmic scheme—twenty-four pulses in a bar against twenty-one against eighteen against sixteen against fifteen against twelve—and doubles the quantities, so that a blizzard of beats ensues. The piece resembles "Drumming," Reich's percussion tour de force of the early seventies, yet it's more jagged and eruptive.

Cantaloupe has released a trance-inducing recording of Slagwerk Den Haag's version of "Timber"; in their hands, the music has a surprisingly airy feel. (The CD comes in a neat wooden box.) But other groups are eager to make their mark. The performers at BAM were members of Mantra Percussion—young dudes in dark T-shirts who favored a heavier, more bass-oriented sound. The really uncanny thing about this piece is that neither the composer nor the performers have full control over the pitches in play. Although the structure never varies, what you hear on any given night depends on what materials the players choose, how the sounds reverberate in the room, how the wood changes under pressure, and other factors that only a physicist could explain. In what may be the most remarkable display to date of Bang on a Can's collaborative spirit, the can now has ideas of its own. ♦