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Concert: Bang On a Can All-Stars

Bang On a Can All-Stars

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*“It is
my plan
to build
a school
of music
second
to none.”*

—William
Grant Egbert
(1867–1928)
Founder,
Ithaca
Conservatory
of Music

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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ITHACA COLLEGE CONCERTS 1999-2000

BANG ON A CAN ALL-STARS

Maya Beiser, violoncello
Robert Black, bass
Lisa Moore, piano
David Cossin, percussion
Mark Stewart, electric guitar
Even Ziporyn, clarinets and saxophones

The Manufacture of Tangled Ivory (1955) Annie Gosfield

Don't Stop (1996) James Sellars

5 Machines*(2000) Marc Mellits

INTERMISSION

Another Infinity* (2000) Edward Ruchalski

ProMotion (1966) Elena Kats-Cherin

Music for Airports
Eno/Wyatt/Davies
arranged by Michael Gordon

* World Premieres

Ford Hall
Monday, April 3, 2000
8:15 p.m.

PROGRAM NOTES

Bang on a Can Origins

Julia Wolfe: When David Lang, Michael Gordon and I found ourselves in New York in 1986, we didn't see an exciting outlet for our music. Things were very polarized—academic music uptown, with audiences filled with new music specialists, a very critical atmosphere and everyone in tuxes, and downtown, another uniform, black t-shirts and another serious pretension. Neither side was really fun, and there was a whole new generation of composers who didn't fit in anywhere.

We wanted to provide a place for new music in society. It wasn't like other art. People knew who the new painters were, the writers, the filmmakers. But music was perceived as this elitist thing—academic, clever, scientific, inaccessible. Nobody cared if people came to the concerts. And the music reflected that. It got so removed from life. It was important to us to find a new audience.

So we decided to make a happening. As a joke, we called it the First Annual Bang on a Can Festival and we held it in an art gallery in Soho. We didn't think there'd be another one. We put pieces together that were really strong and belonged to different ideologies or not to any ideology, defying category, falling between the cracks.

Most of the music we do is by unknown people or is music no one else performs. Over the years, we've commissioned fifty or more pieces by young composers. But we'd hear the work in concert once, then it would disappear. We want to give people an opportunity to develop in as many ways as possible. And there is a generation of performers now who are good enough to be classical music virtuosos and are interested in playing music by living composers. So in 1992, we got together a bunch of the best players we've had since we started the festival. Now, we can say to composers, here's this opportunity you can write for six players totally committed to the music—you can work with them, change the piece from one performance to the next.

The All-Stars explore the question: What is presenting music? They are revitalizing the whole process of playing music in front of people and we are able to combine our ideas of programming with the concert forum.

The Composers

Annie Gosfield: In my compositions, I generally start with the keyboard first. Then I often do improvisational work with percussionist Christine Bard and guitarist Roger Kleier, and parts of this piece were developed in our trio. As to the title, *The Manufacture of Tangled Ivory* refers to the keys of the piano. And tangled was a way of describing the detuned and altered piano sounds that I've been exploring for a long time. The notes are actually displaced on the keyboard. In this piece, I tried to increase the density and layers of these sounds and see what kind of contrast I could bring out. In the beginning solo keyboard part, some parts are rubato and others sound like a player piano, fast and mechanical. In fact, the piece incorporates metallic, factory sounds, like some of the music of the Russian avant garde composers from the early twentieth century. That's where manufacture comes from. I was also thinking somewhat about my grandmother. She moved from Poland to the lower east side in New York at about the same time these composers were working in Russia. And she worked in sweatshops and factories. I've been in New York for three years, and I'm about in the same neighborhood. But the differences between her experience and mine are so vast.

James Sellars: *Don't Stop* is a circular piece—it goes through all twelve keys and all sorts of genres, from twelve century counterpoint to ragtime. There are repeat marks at the end but they shouldn't be taken literally. The initial ideas were the piano lick that opens the piece, a clarinet solo that happens pretty early on, and one other little lick. I was improvising at the piano, and they all came at once. I jotted them down in my sketch book and I put at the top of it, possibly for Bang on a Can All-Stars, and I put the sketch book back on the shelf. The musical material comes first, and then the question arises, how are you going to keep this going, so you build some kind of connection, and that's when I come up with the conceptual ideas. I'm very pragmatic, I don't have much of an ideology, and maybe that's not a good thing—I like all kinds of things, I don't get in arguments about which kind of music is best. I think the worst thing about composition in the United States—and this is changing—is that people use idioms or different styles as a litmus test for whether you're going to be a friend of theirs. It was terrible when I was in music school. I got a doctorate in composition, and I had to do whatever they wanted—I knew that from the beginning. But to me the basis of professionalism in a composer lies in knowing what all kinds of music are about. This doesn't mean you don't have a personality—it comes through in any case. When we have babies, we string these instruments over their crib, and they like to bang

on them, they respond to those sounds, and when you talk to a baby, they respond to the sound, sensuously—not the words, but just having a good time. That's what my music is connected too.

Elena Kats-Chernin: I've been working in theatre for several years, and it's changed my aesthetic completely—when you compose soundtracks you're actually allowed to write melodies! Before, very often I used to hold things back, keep ideas out that didn't conform to my original idea; but in this piece I wanted to have no barriers—if any part of me wanted something to change in the music, I changed it. I want to merge things rather than separate them. I'm interested in extremes, in breaking the rules, even though there aren't any rules in new music anymore. I use straight rhythms, very direct, and I also use the instruments in a conventional way. My aim is to make the normal sounds sound a little less normal. I was told that you should never be able to tell what instrument is playing, but later on I realized I actually wanted to hear each particular instrument in its particular way. And I have the whole group playing at all times—I could have held things back, perhaps kept the guitar out until half-way through, but I don't like to save things. The piece is always in motion, because people are always in motion, changing all the time.

I think composing should be human—the music has to have the same human aspect, never cold, and always from the stomach. Most of all I prefer writing for friends, because I know what they're like. In this case it was a bit harder, because I hadn't met most of the players—I don't even have a photo. I have my own ideas about what is Bang on a Can. So I'm interested to see if I was right.

Marc Mellits: *5 Machines* was written especially for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, with these specific players in mind. Writing for a group such as this one, I felt open to explore possibilities in music that I have long been interested in. For me, this is the ideal ensemble to perform my music and I exploited the potentials that I knew existed within this group. I treated each of the five short movements as a "machine", in that each player has a specific job to do that fits in with the others. The parts themselves do not reveal the overall musical structure; only when combined does the musical architecture come forth.

Edward Ruchalski:

The railroad cars are infinite in the stolen light of the moon.

The relationship has ended: the world has shoved off into another infinity, where there is not a name for anything.

(First stanza) of the poem, "Another Infinity" by Michael Burkard

When Michael Gordon called to tell me BOAC wanted to commission me, of course, I gladly accepted. First of all, it was my first commission. Second of all, they were my favorite band. The timing was great. I had just quit my job with the intention to "make a go of it" as a composer. So I had all the time in the world. With the commission money I bought a computer and Sibelius software. I convinced myself that I had to take on a new method of composing. So I began writing ideas on the computer, everyday for 10-12 hrs. After about a week of writing bad ideas, I began to panic, but continued writing and panicking for about three more months. I couldn't write. I was worrying too much about whether my ideas were too simple, and too easy to play. For the last ten years I've been making my own instruments, and teaching my friends how to play them. Outside of an occasional keyboard piece, I hadn't written for a "real" instrument since grad school. So I was in a real groove and writing came pretty easily. Now in desperation, I picked up my guitar and decided to play something, anything that felt good: and that was going to be the basis of my piece. What I played, was the opening guitar ostinato. As I wrote it down, I immediately, heard the melody. Once I had the opening, my intention became clear. Through repetition I wanted the music to resonate by sometimes slowly changing, and at other times taking leaps, but not by developing. I wanted to keep it simple and to let it breathe. I didn't want to clutter the score.

Brian Eno: When we first heard *Music for Airports* in the late seventies/early eighties it was like a door cracking open. This record-long piece was mesmerizing, dreamy, intense and meant to be played in or thought of as fitting into a specific environment. It was a redefinition of how we relate to music in our everyday lives. Brian Eno was exploring the question of where music could go. Could its home lie somewhere outside of the muzak of elevators and dentists' offices and outside of the concert hall as well? Could it exist somewhere in between?

Eno was essentially defining Ambient music. Twenty years ago there were no Ambient departments in record stores. There were no New Age or techno sections, no chill rooms. *Music for Airports* kicked off a whole web of musics that hadn't existed previously. But the unique factor about Eno's work was that although it could and can exist in the background of everyday life it is music that carries a potency and integrity that goes far beyond the incidental. It's music that is carefully, beautifully, brilliantly constructed and its compositional techniques rival the most intricate of symphonies.

What Eno didn't imagine was that his piece would be realized with live musicians. In his analog studio, methodically stringing out bits of tape and looping them over themselves, he hadn't anticipated that a new generation of musicians would take his music out of the studio and perform it on live instruments in a public forum. Over at Bang on a Can we have always searched for the redefinition of music, exploring the boundaries outside of what is expected. This project represents a further step in this exploration. After twenty years where does this landmark piece fit into our ever expanding definition? The effect has only begun. The *Music for Airports* revolution is just beginning to unfold.

The live realization of *Music for Airports* stays close to the source. To the core group of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, we've added voices, brass, winds and pipa, filling out the orchestra of sound that emerged in our minds from Eno's original synthesized recording. We have had the great pleasure of sharing the project plans with Brian Eno along the way. We are indebted to him for giving us the experience of getting inside and out of this monumental work.

The Performers

Maya Beiser: I grew up in a Latin American Kibbutz in Israel. The music of Bach and Brahms, which I studied and performed since early childhood, merged with the singing voices of the Muslim weddings from the neighboring Arab village and the Tango music coming from my parent's turntable. Late at night after hours of practicing the Dvorak cello concerto I would listen to Joni Mitchell and Pink Floyd. It was all music to me, I couldn't see the boundaries. It was all powerful and visceral, strong and beautiful. When I was twelve, I started playing concerts and I began an exciting life as a classical cellist—solos in Carnegie Hall, classical concertos with the Radio Berlin Orchestra and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, working with such artists as Isaac Stern and Yo Yo Ma, recording solo CDs. But somehow I was always drawn to working with composers, collaborating with and commissioning composers who want to extend the instrument beyond its traditional boundaries. Now, when composers write music for me, I ask them to forget what they know about the cello; I hope to arrive at new territories, to discover sounds I never heard before. I hope the music will change me.

Robert Black: This is a great time to be a musician. There are so many ways to make music; so many styles going on. It is invigorating. It's fantastic. I try to be involved in as much of this variety as possible. For instance, there is all of the activity that is Bang on a Can. We play

bold music for people who are ready for it. AND I work with my computer-assisted duo, Basso Bongo, composing, as well as commissioning composers; AND I collaborate with Yoshiko Chuma and her post-modern dance company, The School of Hard Knocks; AND I tour the globe playing solo bass recitals at festivals and in residencies from Japan, to Brazil to Europe, to North America; AND I teach at the Hartt School in Hartford (my alma mater) and the FUNDEC de Eleazar de Carvalho (Brazil); AND I make solo recordings; AND I occasionally play in an orchestra (it's a blast). AND in each of these situations I find that there are a lot of people who want to hear this music. It's really a great time to be a musician.

David Cossin: I was born and raised in Queens, New York and eventually made the big thirteen mile pilgrimage to Manhattan which is where I live now. Music, and more specifically percussion, has always been a major force in my life. I particularly enjoy specializing in the limitless realm of new music where I can combine my diverse interests in drumset, non-western hand drumming, composition, and improvisation to encompass a broad spectrum of musical styles. My variety of activities as a musician includes having recorded and performed internationally with Talujon Percussion Quartet, Newband (micro-tonal music played on the Harry Partch instruments), New Music Consort, Sudden Sight, and Blue Man Group. Most recently, have also been playing improvised percussion in hospitals with my friend Paul and with a German-accordion-polka-lounge band called B. Blush.

Lisa Moore: Raised not far from the Australian outback, Lisa has been living in New York since 1985. By performing new, old and unusual music since her conservatory days, and studying existing traditions while striving to invent her own, she has played all kinds of music with all kinds of musicians. She has played in the pit with the New York City Ballet, in the back with St. Lukes Orchestra and out front in concertos with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Sydney Symphony. She has performed classics on the stages of Carnegie Hall, La Scala, Paris d'Automne and the Musikverein. In addition to the All-Stars, she plays and records with the Da Capo Chamber Players and the Steve Reich Ensemble, and she has commissioned, premiered and recorded dozens of works for piano. Lisa explains, "I initially found exploring the 'new' gave me a rebellious freedom from the 'establishment', space to take risks and create my own sound. Bang on a Can continues to throw challenges at me. I've had to do things on stage I never thought I'd get a chance to do—screaming into microphones, playing under umbrellas—as well as demonstrating straight piano

chops. Now, I look back at older models with wiser respect and love. After all, history isn't so bad—Monk and Horowitz are my idols!"

Mark Stewart: Raised in "America's Dairyland" (Wisconsin), I spent days at a time making sounds on the multitude of instruments that could be found in my family's music room. My mom taught music and movement for the preschool child, so I grew up with cymbals, kettledrums, hand made African drums, harmoniums, xylophones of all sizes, guitars, banjo, violin, cello and hundreds of others. Over time I organized these sounds to embody the vernacular of various musical idioms. I am still involved in this same process. I went to the conservatory to study guitar and cello and I fell in love with the cello repertoire. When I came to New York I was looking for work as both a cellist and a guitarist but somehow the most interesting work was always on the electric guitar. I like to say that I'm hired for my conservatory head and my rock and roll hands. I play regularly with Fred Frith, Anthony Braxton, Steve Reich and Zeena Parkins, and I still live in New York City's lower east side, making my living playing and writing popular music, semi-popular music and unpopular music.

Evan Ziporyn: I knew early on that I would be a composer, and by the time I got to college I was doing as many different kinds of music as I could find: directing a new music ensemble, performing jazz clarinet in clubs and twentieth century repertoire in concert, conducting new operas by my peers, doing free improvisation for anyone who'd listen, haphazardly learning Ghanaian drumming and Shona mbira, and trying to figure out how to write a music that would somehow make sense of it all. My plan, to the extent that I had one, was to keep doing this as long as I could get away with it, and I've stuck to that plan religiously. But I was also somewhat confused and troubled by the new music scene as I understood it, for all the usual reasons. Luckily, I fell in love—with Balinese gamelan—and upon graduation I began travelling to Bali for extended stays as often as I could. I went there thinking about the music, but I came back thinking equally hard about music's place in a community, its connection to everyday life and its ability to connect people to one another. All of my work since then—composing for my own gamelan, arranging for the All-Stars, writing for Kronos or other groups, teaching at MIT and Yale, recording with Steve Reich, and developing a solo repertoire for clarinet and bass clarinet—has been colored by my experiences in Bali. I stay in touch with this by directing Galak Tika, a 25-member gamelan orchestra in Cambridge, which plays both traditional works and my own experimental pieces for gamelan and electric guitars. Working with the All-Stars is another part of this: as with gamelan, my goal is to make a music which can serve as a connecting thread, something that not only

engages and challenges but which conveys the respect the players feel for each other and the joy we get out of working together in such a cohesive, communal way.

Andrew Cotton: I started in the music business at school by playing trumpet and euphonium with the school rock, jazz and brass ensembles and engineering several records with them in local studios. My interest in contemporary music started in my early teens when I was working in my spare time at Snape Maltings Concert Hall on productions for the Aldeburgh Festival where, after finishing school, I became the house sound designer for a few years. I then moved into the more normal life of a sound engineer, touring with rock groups for a while and then settling my interests in jazz and contemporary music again as part of the London-based company Richard Nowell Sound Services. I now work regularly with artists/concert series such as Elvis Costello & John Harle, the BBC Promenade Series, Meltdown, Icebreaker, Carla Bley, Django Bates, George Russell and Hermeto Pascoal. I like diversity and a challenge so when I met up with the All-Stars in the United Kingdom in 1996, the group and I clicked in a very unique way. I enjoy working with them in a way that is rare in my profession—I am involved in not only the nuts and bolts of tour management and engineering but in developing the new and existing repertoire with the group and the composers whose work we perform. Beyond my work with the All Stars, Bang on a Can's three artistic directors have come up with many interesting and challenging productions on which I have worked over the past few years, both in the United States and Europe.

HEAR THEM AGAIN!

Renegade Heaven, Bang on a Can's newest recording, features haunting new pieces by Glenn Branca, Arnold Dreyblatt, Michael Gordon, Phil Kline and Julia Wolfe. *Music for Airports*, Bang on a Can's 1998 release on Point Music (Universal), combines innovative arrangements and unique instrumentation to bring life to Brian Eno's landmark ambient piece. *Cheating, Lying, Stealing*, the Bang on a Can All-Stars' 1996 release on Sony Classical, features works by Nick Didkovsky, Annie Gosfield, David Lang, Frederic Rzewski, Lois V Vierk, Evan Ziporyn and Hermeto Pascoal. *Industry*, the Bang on a Can All-Stars first CD on Sony Classical, features works by Louis Andriessen, Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe. *Bang on a Can Vols. 1, 2, and 3* showcase live highlights from past Bang on a Can Festivals and are available on the CRI label.

Bang on a Can Credits

Artistic Directors:

Michael Gordon, David Lang, Julia Wolfe

Administration:

Kenny Savelson, Production Director

Christine Williams, Development Director

Jennifer Johung, Associate

Andrew Cotton, Tour Manager

Bang on a Can's commissioning program, the People's Commissioning Fund, brings together hundreds of people to commission new works by young and emerging composers. During a time when foundations and government agencies are fearful of supporting individual artists, Bang on a Can is taking a step forward, creating a community of commissioners. For more information on how to become a member, please call Bang on a Can at 212.777.8442 or email us at: info@bangonacan.org

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