

New Music With a Bang, But No Cans

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 1987

BANG ON A CAN FESTIVAL 12-hour concert of contemporary music, Sunday afternoon through Monday morning. Works by Milton Babbitt, Steve Reich, John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, more than 20 others. Produced by Michael Gordon, David Lang, Julia Wolfe. Featuring the Alexander String Quartet; the S.E.M. Ensemble; Mimi Fullmer, soprano; Robert Black, double-bass; others. Exit Art, 578 Broadway, Manhattan.

THIS IS NOT a review, of course. It would take half of the Part II section to sum up the diversity of music that the "Bang on a Can" Festival presented at the Exit Art Gallery in SoHo Sunday. So the following is a collection of thoughts, quotations, hunches and premonitions, set down by a contented visitor.

The festival began at 2 in the afternoon with the austere minimalism of Phill Niblock's "Held Tones" and was scheduled to conclude 12 hours later with John Cage's "Ryoanji." Both men were in attendance, as were at least three-quarters of the other composers on the program. In all, more than 25 works were played, and they differed wildly in style and content — from the ethereal shimmer of Milton Babbitt's "Vision and Prayer" to the raw, scraping electric guitar of John

King's "Immediate Music," and on through representative works by George Crumb, Jacob Druckman and Pauline Oliveros. With the exception of Igor Stravinsky, all of the composers presented in the festival are living; more than half of them are below the age of 35.

And nobody banged on any cans (although there were, it seemed, anvils waiting to be struck later in the evening). Why the name?

"So people would ask us about it," David Lang — a composer who, with Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, produced the festival — said with a grin. "We wanted to confuse people, twist people's preconceptions. There have been a lot of new music festivals, but this is the *first* annual 'Bang on a Can' festival, and we wanted to be different." Different it was. The producers sent press re-



Double bassist Robert Black at 'Bang' festival

leases to artists, writers and dancers as well as the musical public. No program notes were provided because, according to Lang, "we wanted our audience to just *listen* to the music without thinking about where *this* composer went to school and what prestigious awards *that* composer had won.

"We're young composers interested in all the possibilities, all the directions that are open to us," Lang said. "And we wanted to combine the musics of different composers who don't usually share programs — put things side by side that you don't usually find side by side. You hear differently that way."

"In addition to the works by younger composers," Gordon said, "we wanted to play some works that changed the way the world listened to music." He named works such as Steve Reich's "Four Organs," a minute examination of a single chord, drawn out for nearly 20 minutes; George Crumb's

"Black Angels," eerie diabolism for electric string quartet and tape; and those by Stravinsky and the Greek "stochastic" composer Iannis Xenakis, whose music has a strong mathematical subtext.

It was a warm, clear Mother's Day, and it seemed that anybody who wasn't out for family brunch was strolling the streets of SoHo. Inside the loft, one found much to recall the days when small bands of listeners would climb five flights of stairs to listen to the early music of composers such as Reich and Philip Glass. Except now the floors were polyurethaned, there was an automatic elevator, the walls — painted the requisite loft white — were not peeling, and the temperature was comfortable.

I found a general openness, a willingness to pay close attention to divergent sounds and to examine each one for its own merits that has become increasingly rare in the polarized world of contemporary music. Not that an occasional judgment was not privately passed on — composers are composers, after all, and most of them have a personal esthetic, a "true faith" to defend. Still, the atmosphere was friendly and engaging; this was one new music festival that did not eschew the festive.

Indeed, the audience was invited to participate. The score for Oliveros' "Tuning Meditation" read, in full: "Using any vowel sound, sing a tone that you hear in your imagination. After contributing your tone, listen for someone else's tone and tune to its pitch as exactly as possible. . . . Sing warmly." And we did — high squeak and basso profundo, tentative at first, then confident, combining to create a restful hum. The sirens of lower Broadway seemed far away.

The producers were particularly proud that they were able to present artists who had not previously been heard in New York — not only a group called "Piano Duo" from the Netherlands (which presented the American premiere of Stravinsky's two-piano arrangement of his own "Agon") but a bassist, Robert Black, from Hartford, who played music by Jacob Druckman, James Sellers and Jon Deak, among others.

The festival cost about \$11,000 to produce; 600 paying visitors were needed to break even. At deadline it was not known if the goal was met. Whatever happens, however, the trio promises another "Bang-on-a-Can Festival" next year. "We have global aspirations," Lang said. /■

MUSIC REVIEW



Tim Page