

Naxos Blog

Sonically Sound and Pounding... A Discussion with David Lang

By Collin Rae

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Collin Rae, Naxos of America's Marketing and Special Projects Manager, recently started a series of email discussions with composers, which have been posted on PMS #286 Appreciation Society, the Naxos of America blog. This discussion with composer David Lang yielded some interesting answers— including one heck of a 15-track music compilation!

In February of this year I began an email exchange with composer (and Bang on a Can) member David Lang. A few months previous (November of '08) Naxos released a fantastic and intriguing CD of David's compositions titled Pierced. Then in January of '09 Medici Arts / EUROARTS released Bang on a Can's Music for Airports DVD (a brilliant aural and visual experience based upon the Eno composition of course) which also came through Naxos of America. It was in fact this email exchange with David and our discussion about his music that inspired me to do this series of artist interviews.

What I find so fascinating about David's music is its direct sonic link to what we now call "Indie Rock". His homage to the Velvet Underground is a fine illustration of this link. It is however pieces like Pierced and Cheating, Lying, Stealing with their organic and almost awkward loops, the spaces and hesitations that flow within that circular-like sound which really grab and propell the listener. There are moments where I feel like I'm listening to some form of post-modernly abstract electronica. Enough of this! Here's David.

CR: What are 5 recordings (different genres if possible) that shaped / shapes your personal musical landscape?

DAVID:-The Joseph Papp production of the Ralph Mannheim translation of Brecht / Weill Three Penny Opera

-The (1973?) Steve Reich recording of Violin Phase and It's Gonna Rain

-Leonard Bernstein's first recordings of Shostakovich's 1st and 9th Symphonies

-The first Velvet Underground record, with the Andy Warhol yellow banana cover

-Bob Dylan - World Gone Wrong

CR: Now speaking specifically about "Classical Music" what pieces / composers have totally blown your mind and helped shape who you are sonically today?

DAVID:

Glass - Einstein on the Beach

Reich - Drumming

Stockhausen - Stimmung

Berlioz - Harold in Italy

Machaut - Messe de Notre Dame

Andreissen - De Staat

Bach - Goldberg Variations

CR: Can you give us 5 visuals that helped shape that person that is you...these could be moments, a cereal box, a toy, a piece of art, a movie, a television show...whatever...

DAVID: I am not at all a visual person.

CR: We talk a lot about cultures and sub-cultures and how it pertains to music and art, what "culture" do you see you and your music being part of? What "Sub-culture / Subcultures" do you or have you identified with and why / how?

DAVID: My sub-culture is a kind of no-mans-land between experimental classical and experimental pop musics. One of the interesting things going on right now is that classical music's gravitational field is pretty weak, and creative young musicians who in past centuries would have been steered towards classical music now go straight to indie pop. there is now a growing part of the pop world that wants its music to be questioning, unusual, uncompromising, not always easy or pleasant to listen to. Those are all the traits we used to want from new classical music as well....

CR: Can you put into words your creative process?

DAVID: I like to think about why I like the things I like. What this means compositionally is that a lot of my music comes from examining myself, about why certain kinds of music make me feel good or bad. the piece that won the Pulitzer - 'the little match girl passion' - began with me thinking about how strange it is that Jewish classical music lovers spend so much time loving music from the past that worships Jesus. Christianity is central to much of the canon of western music - I know more about Christianity than many Christians I know, simply because I love Bach and Monteverdi and Perotin. After years of thinking about how weird this was I decided to write a piece about it. Likewise, my piece 'pierced' came out of years of thinking about the history of the concerto - how we take it for granted that a musical form is about a certain kind of argument between an individual and a group, a heroic depiction of the struggle of one noble person changing all society. What if we wanted to make a piece that was based on a different model of human interaction? What if a concerto was about two groups of people ignoring each other, but whose mutual ignorance added up to something that neither group could achieve by itself? I wrote 'pierced' after years of thinking such thoughts.

CR: When do you feel you do your best work?

DAVID: When my children get off to school in the morning I am so happy to be in alone my studio that I find it very easy to work!

CR: What are you working on this very moment?

DAVID: I am rewriting Beethoven's only opera FIDELIO - not the music, which of course is amazing and utterly untouchable, but the libretto, which has real problems, and which Beethoven himself knew needed some help. I am making my own version of the story, taking out most of the mushy love stuff and focusing on the politics.

CR: Can you create for me a 15 track compilation of music / sound (list the pieces you would put on this compilation)

DAVID: in no particular order:

- Kurt Weill - ballad in which macheath begs all men for forgiveness
- Pere ubu - the modern dance
- Michael Gordon - yo, shakespeare
- Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen - din tavshed
- Evan Ziporyn - tsmindao ghmerto
- Radiohead - everything in its right place

- julia wolfe - early that summer
- John Cage - six melodies
- Brian Eno - music for airports, 1:1
- Marc Blitzstein - the nickel under your foot
- X - the world's a mess it's in your kiss
- Frank Zappa - willie the pimp part 2, from fillmore east
- Xenakis - psappa
- Glenn Branca - lesson #1
- Meredith Monk - facing north