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'Bang on a Can' Showcases Inventive Classical Music

For the past several years, classical music composers have gathered to share their more eclectic scores at the "Bang on a Can" festival in North Adams, Mass. Jeffrey Brown explores the origins of the event.

JEFFREY BROWN: It has a funny name -- "Bang on a Can" -- but a serious purpose: to expand the idea of what music and the musical experience can be.

The Bang on a Can gang of composers and musicians is based in New York, but for seven summers now has been holding a three-week festival here at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams.

If Tanglewood -- classical music's far better known summer festival, just 30 miles down the road -- is the bastion of tradition, "Banglewood" -- as the folks here like to call this gathering -- is home to the experimental, with everything from a contemporary duet to a Balinese monkey chant.

The genre-bending Bang on a Can group has thrived on the fringes of the classical music world now for about 20 years, happily blending everything from Gregorian chant to the rock band Radiohead. But the group is suddenly in danger of becoming downright mainstream. This year, one of its co-founders has won the Pulitzer Prize for music.

The winning composition, called "The Little Match Girl Passion," was commissioned by Carnegie Hall. Its composer is 51-year-old David Lang, who started Bang on a Can with Yale music school friends Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon. All were classically trained, but also influenced by rock and roll, jazz, and much more, and as composers didn't fit into any traditional boxes.

Lang, who once worked in a record store, puts it this way.

DAVID LANG, Winner, 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Music: The thing about a record store is they have all the different sections of the store to make it easy for you to find the music you know you like. But you may not be the kind of composer who wants to fit in one of those categories.

Those composers don't have a venue, a kind of place that supports them, a kind of funder that supports them. They don't have musical institutions that support them or radio stations which just play that kind of music. You know, they don't have a good place to go. They're homeless. We wanted to be the place where the homeless composers could all go.

Band of all-stars tour the world

JEFFREY BROWN: The three brought in musicians to form a band to perform the new music, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, which now tours internationally 12 weeks a year.

Evan Ziporyn, himself a composer as well as professor at MIT, is one of the original all-stars.

EVAN ZIPORYN, Musician: When I was in college, you know, it was me and a few of my friends, and we were the weirdoes who liked the weird music. Well, here, everybody is that person, you know? And when you get here and suddenly you're surrounded by all these people who are just as passionate about this as you are, you know, it's really exhilarating.

JEFFREY BROWN: Every summer, 35 young musicians from around the world are selected to attend the festival. Andy Akiho is a 29-year-old steel drum player from South Carolina who'd composed music for his own instrument, but never tried writing for others until he got the chance at the festival.

His piece, "To Walk or Run in West Harlem," features a lively beat and giant rubber bands snapping on a vibraphone.

ANDY AKIHO, Musician: It has the classical influence, a little bit of hip-hop, a little rock in there.

JEFFREY BROWN: Are those all the kinds of music you listen to or grow up listening to or still listen to?

ANDY AKIHO: Yes. I listen to anything.

JEFFREY BROWN: And then you put it all together?

ANDY AKIHO: I try to.

JEFFREY BROWN: The student composers develop new pieces and, in workshops, discuss everything from rehearsal problems to where they got their musical inspiration.

MUSICIAN: I was watching the show "Big Love" on HBO. And it had -- and in the show, the guy has three wives. And I said, "This is exactly what I'm doing right now. I have to write for three mezzo sopranos."

JEFFREY BROWN: They also learn some fundamentals not taught in music school: big things like how to survive financially and the seemingly mundane details of how and why to take a bow.

MUSICIAN: It really is about sharing. And the bow is acknowledging that sharing, so I think that's one of the major reasons for doing it. But I also feel like it's good for people to know there's a composer.

You know, often people don't know what a composer -- they think all composers are dead. I didn't know people were still living that were called composers.

Finding an audience may take time

JEFFREY BROWN: There's still the question: How are we, the potential audience, supposed to approach all this? David Lang says he and his friends don't need us to love the music, nor do they even want that reverence that's shown the old masters.

DAVID LANG: Instead of placing the responsibility for the concert experience on reverence from the audience, we wanted to place it on respect for risk, respect for the challenge of it, respect for the freshness and the newness of it.

So that if you can say, "Here's a concert that has a whole spectrum of people doing things for the very first time, some of which may work and some of which may not work."

JEFFREY BROWN: And the Pulitzer? Is this self-described group of outsiders suddenly going mainstream?

DAVID LANG: I actually think what happened is not that anything has changed to make us more institutional or more mainstream, and certainly nothing's changed in my music, and I'm sure I am the weirdest composer ever to win a Pulitzer Prize.

I think what happened is that, actually, that world has opened up. You know, the world of classical music has realized, I think, in some places that, you know, we're looking for fresh ideas, we're looking for something that can come in. I mean, there's a way, I think, in which the world has come around to us.

JEFFREY BROWN: Of course, Lang also hopes the Pulitzer will help Bang on a Can continue its summer festival and provide a home for composers and musicians eager to explore new sounds.