



THE NEWNESS OF

David Lang

by Steven Schick

*In his percussion music,
the Bang on a Can
co-founder demonstrates
that true innovation
incorporates the past.*

In my student days at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg, I found myself seated behind an older woman at a concert of particularly dour new music by young German composers. She sat through most of the concert until, apparently exasperated, she stood suddenly and shouted, “You call this music?” My fellow students turned to stare and grumbled their objections. They were right to take offense. What she should have shouted was, “You call this *new*?”

Through an overly devout reading of the

“new” in new music, my Freiburg classmates had tripped on one of the principal, and dangerous, conceits of contemporary music: that, above all, it must be new. They fell into the ultimate trap of newness: excluding references to pre-existing music quickly leads to a narrowing path of possibilities and ultimately to a vocabulary of conformism in which, whatever else the music might be, it was not new. Two years earlier, in a 20th-century analysis class at the University of Iowa, my classmate David Lang sidestepped that pothole. He claimed in class that a passage in *Wozzeck* was not all that different from a section in a new Talking Heads song and that both passages had something in common with Wagner. Our fellow students grumbled their objections. But what David was asserting at that moment was a fresh idea—*really* new—that connections across the contentiously defined boundaries of history and genre were not to be avoided, but rather embraced. Borrowing was permitted.

That stance, in which David proclaimed that popular and art music, recent and older music, might share the same space, made him an ideal composer for percussion instruments. After all, the search for common ground, especially in cultural terms, had been central to early 20th-century percussion music. From the outset this music was a veritable Tower of Babel,



DAVID LANG (RIGHT)
OPPOSITE: SŌ PERCUSSION
PERFORMING LANG'S *so-called
laws of nature* AT THE 2008
BANG ON A CAN MARATHON



exploding on the scene in a starburst of multiple cultures. The composers of the great early pieces—from George Antheil to Edgard Varèse to John Cage—thought nothing of placing Asian gongs next to Latin bongos; glockenspiels next to oxen bells. Yet as the century wore on, the relationship between Western avant-garde percussion music and its polycultural roots had grown uneasy. Even Iannis Xenakis, a composer whose music I am devoted to, thought that his late percussion music, scored for congas, bongos and West African *djembes*, contained “no folkloric contamination.” Here he clearly missed the point.

A mid-century generation of American composers reinstated the cultural fluidity of the early percussion music. The most important of these was Steve Reich, whose masterpiece *Drumming* was composed after a study trip to West Africa in the early 1970s. But *Drumming* is much more than African-inspired music. It bears Reich’s imprint as a jazz drummer; it shows his love of Bach and of early vocal music; it shows his willingness to combine worlds. As the most important American heir to Reich’s

ideas about percussion music, David Lang likewise has always been ready to mix things up. By doing so, he has created a fascinating library of fresh percussion music.

David’s first percussion solo, *The Anvil Chorus*, developed in a way that had a lot to do with our friendship. After our time at the University of Iowa we went our separate ways. But when David founded Bang on a Can with his Yale classmates Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, we began working together again. I was a regular guest performer in the Bang on a Can Marathons and later the founding percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars. *The Anvil Chorus* was the first installment of a series of a dozen or so pieces of David’s that I have commissioned, premiered, or toured. This music has become a part of our friendship and allows us to take certain risks together. *The Anvil Chorus* is a work scored for 14 percussion instruments of the player’s choice. I was in San Diego and David lived in New York. Our daily rehearsals were held on the phone—I would discover a new sound and play it for him. When the little speaker in the

telephone couldn’t deliver sufficient fidelity, he trusted my judgment. The working draft of the piece was completed shortly before the first performance at La Mama in 1991, and subsequent refinements took place in regular debriefings after each concert. The freedom in the piece’s sound world is matched by its cultural fluidity. *The Anvil Chorus* seems like both a drum set (with five foot pedals) and a gamelan (wherein lower instruments play slower music and treble instruments ornament them). Periodicity, repetition, and recall in the piece come from both cultures. There is also a lot of late 20th-century concert music here: a performer comes on stage, bows, and plays from a score. *The Anvil Chorus* lives in a big world.

The great danger in music of this breadth is that its openness will lead to a lack of focus, to a kind of hyphenated identity in which no single aspect takes prominence. David’s remedy is his variation on what I think of as the Cage theorem: freedom in the area of sound production is directly

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proportional to the rigor of its formal construction. In early Cage percussion music, the more volatile the sound world, the more puritanical were the constraints of form. Following Cage here—and to some extent Steve Reich as well—David Lang allows himself great latitude in the choice of sound and aesthetic valence. Counterbalancing that latitude is a strict adherence to highly constructed rhythmic cycles and formal plans that contain and focus dispersed sonic energies. In each of David's subsequent percussion pieces, the options grew and, by extension, the formal containment became more rigorous. *Scraping Song* is a work for freely chosen noise instruments and four scrapers. Much of the sound is unscored, but the rhythmic cycling is extremely controlled: essentially a lesson in factorials, as the piece explores the number of possible combinations of five- and six-beat patterns within a four-part phrase. The most recent Lang solo work, *String of Pearls*, for marimba, is the exception that proves the theorem. In the smorgasbord of varied and enticing percussion timbres, the marimba is a straightforward single color—nourishing but not exciting, a little like that bowl of garbanzo beans at the end of the salad bar. With comparatively little sonic freedom to constrain, formally *String of Pearls* is a Fantasia.

As a farewell gift when I left the Bang on a Can All-Stars, David wrote *Unchained Melody*. It consists of a melody of just eight glockenspiel notes that are partnered with a noise instrument chosen by the performer. Note and noise are to be played in unison in a perfect Langian mapping of constraint onto the unpredictable landscape of noise. In recent versions of the piece, I have collaborated with computer musician William Brent, who devised sixteen robotic instruments to play a doubled noise part.

A fascinating recent piece is the “walking aria” from David's percussion opera *Hunger*. *Hunger*, based on the Knut Hamsun novel, has been the longest-running uncompleted project that

either of us has known. A string of failed attempts to commission the piece ended when the University of Iowa funded a single scene from the opera as a part of its centennial celebrations. (The remainder of the work remains un-commissioned at the time of this writing.) Hamsun's story is about a man who does not or will not work and as a result is gradually starving. To avoid his landlord, to whom he owes money, he spends his days walking through Christiania (now Oslo). In the aria, four percussionists walk in carefully constructed eighth-, quarter- and dotted-quarter note pulses on different materials—gravel, sand, wood and stone—while a soloist “walks” an obbligato solo part and recites the places in Christiania he visits. One might think that walking, even on varied surfaces, would produce a uniform enough sound

world to allow the composer some latitude in formal planning. But an individual's walk is very like a fingerprint—unique and irreproducible—and becomes the ultimately unpredictable sound source, requiring formal constraint.

Walking. Robots. A piece modeled on drum set playing. None of it is new. But by borrowing—unselfconsciously and unabashedly, inventively—David Lang has exchanged the narrowness of newness for the big open world of freshness. It is a trade worth making any day.

Percussionist Steven Schick has commissioned or premiered more than 100 new works. He is Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego, artistic director of the percussion group red fish blue fish, and music director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus.

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