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Breaking the Barriers of Music in a New York Marathon

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Michael Maccaferri and Nicholas Photinos of Eighth Blackbird

Woodstock, Lollapalooza, Bonnaroo — for decades, rock performers and fans have gathered in sweeping celebrations of music and tribal bonding. Excluding the Bayreuth Festival, the closest analog in the classical music world is probably the 12-hour marathon concerts staged regularly since 1987 by the collective Bang on a Can, founded that year by the composers Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe.

Bang on a Can turned 20 this year. Marking the occasion it mounted its most audacious offering to date: scheduling a 26-hour marathon from Saturday night at 8 to Sunday night at 10. The performance was staged at the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center, a co-production with the primarily pop-oriented River to River Festival and arts>World Financial Center.

When Bang on a Can was founded, the purpose was to provide a home for music by Mr. Gordon, Mr. Lang, Ms. Wolfe and their colleagues: an eclectic post-Minimalism that openly acknowledged an indebtedness to rock, jazz and a variety of world-music idioms. Two decades later these composers still haven't entirely entered the concert-music mainstream. Still, this year's marathon indicated that they may have achieved something even more meaningful.

It wasn't just that contemporary-classical adherents shared space with alt-rock fans here. Rather, what seemed clear was that Bang on a Can has played a central role in fostering a new kind of audience that doesn't concern itself with boundaries among new-music composition, the pianist Vijay Iyer's sophisticated modern jazz, the Uzbek folk ensemble Mashriq's eloquent meditations and innovative post-rock experimentation from groups like he Books, Clogs and Dàlek.

The prevailing tone was that if music is made with originality and integrity, these listeners will come. To

which one could add: Offer an event of sufficient novelty and music of consistent interest, and some of them will stay indefinitely. Only a hardy few braved the entire concert, but a performance of Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" by the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble around 5 a.m. on Sunday was attended by more than 400 people, by Mr. Lang's estimate. For listeners present from the evening's onset, that performance took on unanticipated dimensions: higher cognitive functions ceded to powerful impressions of physicality and emotion. The entry of the maracas in Section VI felt epic.

The work that opened the marathon, Julia Wolfe's "Lad," was the first of several gestures that recognized Bang on a Can's roots. The rumbling processional for nine bagpipers paid tribute to John Lad, a recently deceased violist who had regularly worked with the collective. The program included works by Lois V. Vierk and Jeffrey Brooks, two composers whose association with Bang on a Can extend back to its formative days. Steven Schick, the original percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, played solo pieces and led performances by his exceptional percussion ensemble, Red Fish Blue Fish.

Several ensembles provided evidence of careers shaped by Bang on a Can's innovations. Two of these, Eighth Blackbird and the International Contemporary Ensemble, found vigor in the high-minded severity of pieces by Franco Donatoni and Galina Ustvolskaya. A third, NOW Ensemble, offered highly attractive, unabashedly rock-influenced works by Mark Dancigers, Missy Mazzoli and Judd Greenstein.

The marathon concluded with Mr. Lang's "men," played by the International Contemporary Ensemble. The work, a funereal meditation, was inspired by the events of Sept. 11, 2001. An accompanying film by Matt Mullican offered images of New York in the 1920s, rendered bittersweet by the context.

It was a solemn (and perhaps overlong) way to end so festive an event. But the gesture reminded audience members that music does not exist solely in the isolation of glass-enclosed atriums, but instead reflects a composer's engagement with everyday life. Across the street from ground zero, the point could hardly have been missed.

