

BOAC's 3rd Virtual Marathon: 6 hours, 11 Premieres

By Clive Paget, *Musical America*
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Amid the current artistic doom and gloom, each of Bang on a Can's three marathons have stood as beacons of light, while also providing psychological insights into where artists, particularly composers and musicians, find themselves in these troubling times. The third, on August 16, was notable for a tension between the temptation to accept such virtual gigs as the new normal and an urgent need to get to get back to the give and take of performing to a live audience. "We're struggling to understand what our voices are in all this," reflected Louisville Orchestra Music Director Teddy Abrams, who, as one of the event's commentators, admitted that social media might not be where musicians are generally at their best.

Hosted by BOAC co-founders Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe, tickets were once again free with suggested donations. The two previous marathons had clearly drummed up sufficient funds to pay for six hours of new music while commissioning the impressive 11 world premieres on display here. An acknowledgement that three months in lockdown followed by two months of social distancing had given composers a chance to focus on the business of writing music was among the event's more positive revelations.

The concert was bookended by the only two pieces in all three marathons to have been written by dead composers. Pipa wizard Wu Man opened proceedings with *Ambushed from All Sides*, a joyous 19th-century piece that tells of warring armies in China c. 202 BC. Full of frenetic accelerandos and performed with her trademark virtuosity, it got matters off to a flying start. Jeremy Denk worked the same magic six hours later with Ligeti's *The Devil's Staircase*, a fiendishly capricious etude based on endlessly ascending figures on the piano. Denk's hands were a blur, even managing to turn his own pages, as he paid tribute to the eccentric Hungarian composer who Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe remembered turning up at an early 1994 BOAC event in the U.K.

A mix of live performances with interviews, the online format now feels a familiar one with just a couple of minor gremlins and a notable improvement in the general sound quality. Artists performed in living rooms and home studios from Berlin to Hong Kong, while audience comments came in from as far afield as Russia and Bangladesh. Among the composers, there was the typical cluster from New York's most musical borough. "There are composers everywhere—you can't get away from them," laughed Brooklyn resident Missy Mazzoli, admitting that although she couldn't see Vicky Chow out of her window, she sometimes bumps into the BOAC pianist walking the dog.

The world premieres covered an eclectic range of musical styles. British/Bulgarian composer Dobrinka Tabakova's *Simple Prayer for Complex Times* was an instantly likeable, tonal meditation for piano on a medieval Portuguese plainchant given a lyrical reading by Chow. Brad Lubman's *can you make a prayer?* was an equally rapturous affair. Over an electronic drone, cellist Lauren Radnofsky spun a drawn-out, faintly mournful solo line to powerful effect. Annika Socolofsky's *Bolder*, named in honor of her recent relocation to Boulder, Colorado, was more upbeat. Performed by Arlen Hlusko, the solo cello line ambled its way over layered electronics suggestive of a squeezebox before building to a stomping "fiddle tune" full of folkish high spirits.



If you like your new music gnarlier, Nick Dunston's *Fainting Is Down, Whooshing Is Up* gave bassist Robert Black plenty of leeway for interpretative license. Inspired by a *Twilight Zone* episode in which a woman describes being abducted by aliens, the music repeatedly erupted into wild thrashings. Black tore into his instrument in a series of ferocious musical assaults before the music was whisked away in an ethereal ending. Just as original was Hong Kong composer Samson Young's *Super Dark Energy* written for percussionist David Cossin. Live Spectral Gate processing was used to transform the sound of a solo glockenspiel into a quirky tapestry of cheeps and chirrups.

It was also an opportunity to enjoy some more established works that look set to enter the repertoire. Mazzoli's haunting *Vespers for Violin* (2014) worked its magic with Olivia de Prato's violin soaring and swooping over a rippling electronic soundscape. David Lang described Brooklyn-based Scott Wollschleger as writing music that "feels empty but is actually really full." *Tiny Oblivion*, impeccably performed by Karl Larson, is a perfect example, a scintillating pointillist work for solo piano that somehow manages to encapsulate the vastness of the night sky while emphasizing in comparison the insignificance of our own mortality.

Jacob Cooper's pop-inflected *Expiation*, performed by vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Jodie Landau, was another winner. Landau's expressive voice rose and fell as he accompanied himself on a harpejji—an electric stringed instrument that reflects the sound and technique of guitar, bass guitar, and piano—before beating out a final tattoo on an oil drum. In fact, as Cooper put it, Landau really did wind up "banging on a can."

Recognizing the increasing political dimension to America's coronavirus crisis, Phil Kline's *The Best Words* are settings of the 45th President's puffed up ramblings about his recent cognitive tests. Accompanied by Dan Tepfer on violin, in "An unbelievable thing," Theo Beckmann sang Trump's challenge to Biden as he bragged about "acing" the test. Todd Reynolds's piano then supported Beckmann in a multitracked choral build-up of Trump's much-mocked "person, woman, man, camera, TV." Not only was it a poignant representation of how such lists must rattle around in the heads of the cognitively impaired, it was very, very funny. And right now, we could all do with a laugh or two.



Todd Reynolds and Theo Beckmann perform Phil Kline's The Best Words, which quotes the 45th President's articulations

Top photos: Wu Man, Arlen Hlusko