

Bang on a Can Festival Seeks Political Relevance

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By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN



Rahav Segov for The New York Times

Dora Ohrenstein and Robert Black, two-thirds of the Bermuda Triangle, performing on Tuesday at the Kitchen.

As the seventh annual Bang on a Can Festival began at the Kitchen on Tuesday night, three figures were writhing and groaning onstage; like dangerous political prisoners, they were gagged, straitjacketed and bound with heavy rope. One figure snaked its way to the front of the stage area and grunted a plea for help. A member of the audience quickly got the idea and leaped up to untie the bodies. The victims finally wriggled out of their constraints and took their places: they were the musicians for the evening's concert, the Bermuda Triangle. They had just completed the first theater piece on the program, by Aaron Jay Kernis.

The prisoners, though, did not learn their lesson. After liberation, they became even more political: the entire concert was titled "A Political Songbook" and was devoted to the premieres of two dozen songs and performance pieces on political subjects.

Much of this concert was like the opening sketch: it was meant to be playful and compelling, alluding to issues of censorship and repression, but it also had the dated, self-conscious feel that characterizes attempts to keep an avant-garde spirit alive. The Bang on a Can Festival is apparently attempting to revive the political rituals of avant-garde music and stake a new claim of relevance, a claim continued on Wednesday in a concert devoted to a single work by Ben Neil attacking the "indifference of our political system" to AIDS.

But the remainder of the festival promises the eclecticism of past years. Before it concludes on Sunday with a nine-hour marathon of downtown, uptown and out-of-town music, its 10 concerts will have presented 68

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composers, ranging from Elliott Carter to Tan Dun, in 82 works, with styles ranging from Chinese opera to punkish declamation. The broad tastes of the directors — David Lang, Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe — have guaranteed the festival attention far beyond the few hundred attendees who regularly show up. For next year, in fact, the festival has been lured to Lincoln Center, where it will face the quixotic challenge of bringing its energetic esthetic polemics into large mainstream halls.

In the meantime, the Bermuda Triangle ended up seeming more substantive than many of the objects that came within its boundaries. The group commissioned the 24 political songs from a wide variety of composers. Unfortunately, the invitation to write political music tends today to be an invitation to point-making: music is turned into a tool or a weapon wielded in advocacy for a particular perspective. Music, though, has more general powers; its most profound political impact has been made not through the particular positions it takes, but through the transformations of thought and imagination wrought by the likes of Beethoven, Verdi, Wagner and Schoenberg.

So the players — Dora Ohrenstein (soprano), Kathleen Supové (pianist) and Robert Black (bassist) — were much more interesting than the mu-

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