

Baldwin Wallace FOCUS Festival to feature music by David Lang

By Mike Telin



When questions arise while learning a new piece of music, there's no greater resource for musicians than the composers themselves. Beginning on Wednesday, March 16, Baldwin Wallace University's Conservatory of Music will kick off its biennial FOCUS Festival, which will feature three concerts of music by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang. And yes, Lang will be on hand to answer any questions that students and faculty may have regarding his music and career.

"The festival has been going on since the '70s, and it all started because we don't get to ask composers like Bach any questions," BW composer-in-residence and assistant professor of music Clint Needham said during a telephone conversation. "Of course musicians make interpretive

decisions all the time, but having a living, breathing composer tell you what they were thinking when they were writing a piece is a fantastic opportunity."

Composers who have been previously featured at the festival include Chen Yi, William Bolcom, Loris Chobanian, John Corigliano, Lukas Foss, Karel Husa, Witold Lutoslawski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Gunther Schuller, Joseph Schwantner, and most recently Christopher Theofanidis. "My colleagues and I agree that working with composers like these helps with interpreting music when you don't have the option to talk to the composer," Needham said. "Those experiences help us approach all music with a fresh vision, and a sense of creativity that we otherwise wouldn't have."

This year FOCUS Festival has the added benefit of sharing its opening concert with the closing night of NEOSonicFest. Beginning at 7:00 pm on March 16 in Gamble Auditorium, Steven Smith will lead the Cleveland Chamber Symphony in Jeffrey Mumford's *a garden of flourishing paths* and Ruth Crawford Seeger's *Music for Small Orchestra*. The program will also include two works by David Lang: *Verb Ballets* will

join CCS during *pierced*, and the BW Motet choir will be featured during *statement to the court*, which Needham called a monumental piece with Cleveland roots. “The text is from the [statement](#) that Eugene Debs made to the Federal Court in Cleveland in 1918 after being convicted of violating the Sedition Act, so it’s especially relevant right now.”

The free Festival concerts will continue on Friday, March 18 at 7:00 pm, when the BW Motet Choir, Treble Choir, Symphonic Wind Ensemble, and Symphony Orchestra will perform Lang’s *o isis and osiris*, *mountain*, *evening morning day*, and *the little match girl passion*. The concert on Saturday, March 19 at 3:00 pm will highlight Lang’s chamber music, to be performed by BW Conservatory students and faculty. The program will include *the anvil chorus*, *sweet air*, *orpheus over and under*, *ark luggage*, selections from *memory pieces*, and *cheating*, *lying*, *stealing*.

On Thursday, March 17 at 3:10 pm, Needham will be joined by BW’s director of choruses Dirk Garner during a Convocation and Discussion with the composer.

Lang, who serves on the composition faculty at Yale, will have plenty of wisdom to share during his time on the BW campus. In addition to his prolific output as a composer, he has also played a vital role in shaping the face of contemporary music, and the rise of the composer-performer collectives — along with composers Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon, he co-founded [Bang on a Can](#) in 1987. In a February 2015 interview with *ClevelandClassical.com*, Lang recalled Bang on a Can’s first festival.

“We thought it would be a one-day event that would never happen again, because who would have the energy to do it again?” Lang said. “We didn’t have any money, so we did everything ourselves — we bought the beer and sold it, we cleaned the bathrooms, we did everything. Then it was two o’clock in the morning, the concert was over and we thought, that was so much fun. We have to do it again. We never planned on creating a giant international corporation. It has just grown organically from the needs of what our little world presented us. And no one was going to do it unless we did it. So we did.”

During that interview Lang said that he is proud of what Bang on a Can has accomplished. “We thought that there really needed to be an organization that would try to do as much for experimental music as it could think of. And wow, we have our festival, and our Marathon, the All-Stars, the summer school, the record label, and the commissioning program. But I don’t think we’re done. There still is a lot to do if we’re going to make sure that this little niche survives.”

Lang also feels that because of those accomplishments, today’s conservatory students are able to live in a different world. “People our age remember what life used to be like, but imagine what it’s like for the students who are at conservatory now. They don’t

remember what the world was like before Bang on a Can or the Kronos Quartet or before lots of other things that we saw struggle to grow and then thrive. They only see the size of the world as it is now, and I find that to be kind of exciting.”

Clint Needham looks forward to Lang’s arrival. “On Wednesday he’ll be in rehearsals with the Motet Choir and the Chamber Symphony. During the daytime on Thursday and Friday he’ll be talking with my composition students and presenting master classes as well as attending rehearsals with all of the chamber ensembles. He’s going to be very busy, but it will all be very interactive because he’s a composer who can touch all aspects of conservatory life.”

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