

**Baldwin Wallace FOCUS Festival: chamber works**  
**by guest composer David Lang (Mar. 19)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Over the years, Baldwin Wallace’s FOCUS Contemporary Music Festival has showcased a long list of composers of our time, ranging from Witold Lutoslawski and Krzysztof Penderecki to Christopher Theofanidis and Chen Yi. The latest guest, Bang on a Can co-founder David Lang, was fêted in three concerts and a convocation from March 16-19, performed by the Cleveland Chamber Symphony and BW’s own ensembles. I caught the final performance featuring six of Lang’s chamber works on Sunday afternoon, March 19 in Gamble Auditorium.

The opening work, *the anvil chorus*, provided a direct link to Bang on a Can, the New York contemporary group founded by David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe with a marathon concert on Mother’s Day of 1987. Writing about this 1991 solo percussion piece, Lang noted that he wanted to avoid “pretty instruments” that were invented “so that percussionists could play politely with other musicians.” Instead, he wanted to evoke the historical spirit of percussion: “that since the beginning of time people have always banged on things as a result of their professions.” Like blacksmithing, Lang wrote.

On Sunday, BW professor Josh Ryan struck a variety of conventional percussion instruments and found objects, producing a glorious din that changed textures from time to time following a couple of caesuras.

By way of contrast, *sweet air* (1999) — like e.e. cummings, the composer avoids using capital letters — recalls the experience Lang’s young son had with laughing gas on a trip to the dentist. Played gently by Jonah Vicente, flute, Meghan Colbert, clarinet, Andrew Cooper, piano, Philip Clippinger, violin, and Samantha Drees, cello, and conducted by Katherine Kilburn, *sweet air*’s minimalist cells conjured up the image of floating in space.

Pianists Lincoln Sandham and Kevin Thompson took on one of the endurance tests of the afternoon in *orpheus over and under* (1989), described by Lang as his visitation of the Greek legend, especially the moment when Orpheus both sees and loses Eurydice. “At that moment there is a strange equilibrium between hope and loss that I tried to capture in my piece.”

Ten minutes’ worth of almost unrelenting repetitive figures eventually changed registers and devolved into chords toward the end. Sandham and Thompson did a brave job with the material, an assignment that courted tendonitis.

The most amusing work on the program was *ark luggage* (2012), a whimsical setting of Noah’s packing list for the Flood conceived by English artist and filmmaker Peter Greenaway. It was sensitively sung by faculty soprano Nanette Canfield, supported by a string quartet (Julian Ross and Samuel Rotberg, violins, Jerri Lou Lugo, viola, and Dominic Aragon, cello). Greenaway’s manifest detailed the contents of the 92 suitcases Noah brought along, including “horse-shoes and twenty Gouda cheeses...coins and buttons, bread, and buns for the elephants...clocks & calendars, colanders, mousetraps & rat-traps, passports, lemons, bricks... and thank you letters to God and the angels.”

Pianist Lincoln Sandham returned for two of Lang’s 1992 *memory pieces*, “cage,” and “cello.” Each dedicated to one of Lang’s friends, these also spoke the language of repetitive music, the second exploring cross-hand textures. Though they became a bit tedious about half-way through their combined ten-minute duration, Sandham put them across with style and commitment.

The concert ended with Lang’s *cheating, lying, stealing*, composed in 1993 and revised in 1995. Marked “Ominous funk,” the piece is Lang’s attempt to depart from the positive messages classical composers usually embed in their works. “I wanted to make a piece that was about something disreputable,” he wrote. Rhythmic, syncopated, and accented by jazzy piano licks, the piece eventually makes a striking accelerando before recalling its opening material. Disreputable perhaps, but nonetheless likeable, the twelve-minute piece was vividly played by Justin Frankeny, bass clarinet, Emily Small, cello, Kevin Thompson, piano, and percussionists Jamie Kunselman, Tyler Hawes, and Donovan Aragon, under the precise baton of Katherine Kilburn.

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