



[Review: David Lang PIERCED](#)

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David Lang, alongside Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon, founded Bang on a Can in 1987 for the same reason most contemporary composers organize ensembles--to hear someone play their music. Twenty-two years later, "Bang on a Can" has become as much a movement as an organization, having gathered forces and expanded in all directions with a tenacity that would impress the Wu-Tang Clan. Despite their countless offshoots, side projects, collaborations, and a growing number of disciples, Lang, Wolfe, and Gordon remain the beating heart of BoAC, and their shared aesthetic has come to define a wide slice of the American contemporary classical scene.

The three tend to subsume their individual efforts into the collective, so it is enlightening and refreshing to hear when one of them breaks off on their own. Lang's music, released mostly on the BoAC's Cantaloupe label, does arguably the clearest job of defining the "Bang on a Can" sound of the three. If we're sticking with the Wu-Tang analogy, then Lang is the GZA figure, the one who most deftly negotiates all of the quirks and contradictions that make BoAC's world worthwhile and interesting. *Pierced* is a further refinement on that world, a place steeped in both the New York rock and the minimalism of the 70s without being overly indebted to either, an ingenious meld of film-score ambience, rock propulsion, and minimalist textures.

Lang's pieces come in two basic varieties: rippling, liquid, and quietly restless ("My Very Empty Mouth", "Sweet Air", both off of 2003's excellent *Child*) and chattering, agitated, and bustling. The works on *Pierced* fall mostly in the latter category, which can make it a tougher listen. The title track, for example, is a near-exhausting exercise in rhythmic rug-pulling, a hard downbeat switching accents every few bars while strings shudder and groan like a leaky barge and a piano endlessly hammers a low note. The piece lurches in place for almost

14 minutes, an equal parts maddening and absorbing shell game of "where's-the-beat?" "Cheating, Lying, Stealing", an older work, has a similarly spiky hide, bristling with nervously stuttering piano, low bass-clarinet blats, and feedback squalls, all scored by the bangs and clunks of scrapyard-metal percussion. It resembles the sort of bracing urban chaos that Industrial Age composers like George Antheil sought to capture in his 1924 *Ballet Mecanique*, except that here the machinery has rusted and grown creaky with age.

There is a long, mournful moment of repose, though, in Lang's startling reworking of the Velvet Underground's "Heroin". Art-rock legends and classical composers often make dicey bedfellows, but Lang wisely avoids trying to win cool contests against Lou Reed.

Maintaining the original's trancelike quality, he ditches everything else, recasting the song for the hauntingly pure-voiced singer/composer Theo Bleckmann and a single cellist. The result resembles a cross between an English Renaissance ballad and a Chet Baker-style torch song, stripping away the thin veil of bravado and leaving only piercing sadness. The only work that directly references rock music, it's also the most "traditional"-sounding piece of classical music on the album, a canny switch-up that demonstrates how comfortable Lang is in the cross-genre slipstream. The album isn't perfect-- there are a few dead patches towards the end-- but Lang, who won the Pulitzer in 2008 for his *the little match girl passion*, remains the rare Downtown composer who has managed to enter the Uptown world of big-name commissions and hefty grants with both his spirit and voice intact.