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MUSIC REVIEW

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A delightful meeting of man and machine

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | July 19, 2006

NORTH ADAMS -- Evan Ziporyn, a free spirit, has composed a trio for violin, clarinet, and a robot named Heliphon.

The work, "Belle Labs," was performed Friday during one of the daily afternoon concerts presented by the Bang on a Can Music Festival at Mass MoCA, "Banglewood." It was the kind of unexpected event one has learned to expect from the festival and from the MIT-based composer, a man who prefers not to repeat himself.

This is the fifth summer that Bang on a Can, the New York-based collective of composers and performers, has been in residence at the museum, performing, teaching, and shaking things up.

This month 11 Bang on a Can musicians are supervising a crowded schedule for 11 young composers and 25 instrumentalists from all over the world. The public events include daily concerts in the galleries, a concert by the Bang on a Can All-Stars (Ziporyn is one of them) Saturday night, and a concert at Windsor Lake July 26. The festival closes with one of the collective's signature marathon concerts, 4-10 p.m. on July 29; a special guest will be performance artist Meredith Monk.

On a typical afternoon, composers were introducing their works to one another while several ensembles simultaneously rehearsed in non-public spaces -- a laundry room, a coat check. In the projection booth, violinist Todd Reynolds presided over an improvisation workshop with a diverse group: Two players from Uzbekistan performed traditional instruments alongside two violins, a French horn, and a string bass and laid down a bossa nova groove underneath something that sounded like an Uzbek folk melody.

By 4:30 p.m. the rehearsals were over, and the can-bangers joined the public in a gallery beneath an installation called "Spacewalk" -- two astronauts attached by lifelines floating away from a capsule named "Martin Luther."

Ziporyn began with a world premiere, "Speak, At-man!," for alto flute (played by Patti Monson) and piano (Ziporyn, reaching inside the instrument for pitches and timbres that anchored and stabilized the flute's flights of fancy or formed a ghostly halo of harmonics around them). The unraveling flute part is rapid, mysterious, and vague, then becomes more jagged, insistent, and explosive. Monson's concentration and virtuosity were formidable.

Throughout, people were staring at the silent robot, developed by Leila Hasan at MIT and now a member of MIT's Ensemble Robot. Heliphon is a pole about 8 feet tall, set in what looks like a large washbucket. Stretching from the pole are metal arms, each supporting a small black box containing a glockenspiel bar activated electronically by a solenoid. Heliphon can race around two chromatic octaves at superhuman speed, and as each note sounds, there is a short flash of light.

Ziporyn's job was to write an interesting and exciting part for Heliphon and create parts for violin (Reynolds) and clarinet (himself) that provide a context for the robot. The beginning, before Heliphon enters, sounds a little like Copland in his back-porch Americana mood; once Heliphon is activated by the computer of its curator, Christine Southworth, the music shifts to rapid, ecstatic movement, and the fun and excitement come less from Heliphon's dazzling speed and sparkling spectacle -- the lights outlining the patterns and shapes of the music -- than from the live musicians' ability to keep up with the machine and somehow humanize it. By the end of this adventure, you feel that Heliphon is phoning home.

This delightful work may not represent the future of music -- music's future won't be just one thing -- but it's good to know that music is heading into the future with the same communicative concerns we value in music of the past. ■

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