

NewMusicBox, the Web Magazine from the American Music Center

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1. What is Bang On A Can?

FRANK J. OTERI: On behalf of NewMusicBox, the American Music Center's new web magazine, I'd like to welcome you all here at ASCAP today. I think it's very symbolic that we're meeting with you to launch this, because this year is the 60th Anniversary of the founding of the American Music Center which was an organization founded by 6 composer/advocates of new music back in 1939 just as the three of you are composers and advocates of new music now. I guess for all of us the most obvious question that a lot of us are still asking and people who are going to visit the site will ask is: What exactly is Bang On A Can? Is it a presenter, an ensemble, a style of music or a way of life?

MICHAEL GORDON: Everything but the last one. [laughs]

JULIA WOLFE: I thought it was only the last one. [laughs]

DAVID LANG: Am I supposed to say something witty now? [laughs]

RICHARD KESSLER: Not now. [laughs]

FRAN RICHARD: Profound. [laughs]

DAVID LANG: Basically, Bang On A Can started because we were three young composers. We got out of school. We came to New York. We looked around, and there were 5 million things that just off the top of our heads we thought we could change. Most of them are really obvious things.

MICHAEL GORDON: Wait a second. The first thing is,...

DAVID LANG: Oh yeah . . .

MICHAEL GORDON: ...before that...

DAVID LANG: I'm sorry.

MICHAEL GORDON: . . .is that we liked each other...

DAVID LANG: We were all friends.

MICHAEL GORDON: ...and we all wanted to get together.

DAVID LANG: Well, we were already getting together every day and we were just wasting our time. We would get together every day and we would talk all day about how, you know, the world wasn't set up to do a lot of the things that we wanted to do. Basically, a lot of what we were

doing was. . . we got out of school, we'd sit around, we'd meet every day for breakfast or coffee or whatever, we'd show each other our music and we'd complain about how the world sucked, basically. And then you go, well, it's easy to identify lots of things that need to get changed in order to make sure that, you know, interesting music always gets played, and the right audience knows about it, that music actually can mean something large in society, that young composers get treated well...

MICHAEL GORDON: The people who are interested in dance and theater and poetry, you would know who you are. . . I think fifteen or twenty years ago, it was not inconceivable -- it's not inconceivable now -- that an intellectually curious person would think that the contemporary equivalent of Bach was Stevie Wonder, or someone like that. Not to take anything away from Stevie Wonder, but. . .

JULIA WOLFE: I mean, the point about Stevie Wonder isn't that he isn't a great artist, but that in other areas of the arts people are pushing boundaries. . . I think more of the equivalent would be the Talking Heads; they're kind of experimental in a rock band. . . but that's as far as many people would go, and, you know, these are our good friends, college friends, who go to see very avant-garde art films, and really "out there" dance, and really strange exhibits of new sculpture, but there's no relationship to music. So that's something that really bugged us. And, actually, the first year, the very first year, Bang On A Can, to answer your question, initially, was only a one-day festival. It was a sort of like a marathon, and since, of course, it's expanded...

FRAN RICHARD: Mother's Day.

JULIA WOLFE: Mother's Day, right... [laughs] But that very first year one of the things we did was get mailing lists from the dance workshop, get some lists, get the dance list. I don't even think we took a music list.

DAVID LANG: No, we didn't do it on that year. And we did it in an art gallery in SoHo. The whole point, was basically, I mean... The people that we know, our friends in other disciplines, the people who are in the arts, it's just part of their life to go, "I want to know what's exciting, what's new, what's fresh," and all these different things. They want to read the most difficult book. They want to see, you know, the really strange foreign film, you know, they really want to be able to read the totally incomprehensible poetry. There are people who sort of have a circuit of knowledge that's important, and music wasn't even on that circuit.

MICHAEL GORDON: That's really the whole thing. [laughs]

2. Who are the Household Name Composers in America?

FRANK J. OTERI: So the one question is, why, before Bang On A Can (. . .and I guess we'll get into the issue of has it changed since Bang On A Can has been on the scene. . .), why aren't people going to new music concerts?

MICHAEL GORDON: Why weren't people?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah. Why weren't, or why aren't?

MICHAEL GORDON: You know, new music, I don't know, post-World War II, I think, the place of contemporary music in society retreated. Post-World War II modernist music was incomprehensible in America. But you find in Europe that that's not true. In Europe the equivalent of Carter and Babbitt, you know, the Ligeti and Stockhausens are like gods. And there is an audience - and they are revered. But here, I think, maybe, for whatever reason, that famous stance by Milton Babbitt -- "Who cares if you listen" -- I think, signaled retreat from the audience.

FRANK J. OTERI: Was there ever a time that an American composer was ever put up there and was revered like a god the way Stockhausen or Ligeti is?

MICHAEL GORDON: Copland. . .

JULIA WOLFE: Leonard Bernstein.

MICHAEL GORDON: . . .and Gershwin.

FRANK J. OTERI: Gershwin was certainly breaking boundaries but he was a success in popular music before he wrote for the concert hall.

MICHAEL GORDON: That's true.

RICHARD KESSLER: Bernstein's another story, though, had it not been for West Side Story and On the Town. In fact, he was constantly disappointed, it was one of the great disappointments of his life not to feel that he had succeeded as a classical contemporary composer.

FRAN RICHARD: Gershwin, too.

RICHARD KESSLER: And to some extent I think Copland is really now emerging more than ever before. I'm not sure what it was like in the 60's. I wonder.

DAVID LANG: Well, the 60's were a hard time for him. You know, certainly the 40's. That was a real heyday for him. The 60's were real difficult because he sort of lived long enough to see what he pioneered go out of fashion.

RICHARD KESSLER: But in terms of him being a household name, in terms of him being a major figure in the 40's, a major artist of the period?

DAVID LANG: I don't know. It seems to me that the political situation would make him much more prevalent than in the 40's, when there was a tremendous attempt to find national musical figures who had the same stature that European figures did. That meant something the way that Shostakovich meant something to World War II Russia, the way that Roy Harris's symphony took on political significance in this country, and Copland certainly was held up that way.

FRAN RICHARD: There were so many important figures who were heroes because they ran from fascists. And there was an engulfing and swamping of what was becoming an American tradition which started with a classical tradition coming from another place. But you'll also find that there's resistance in the traditional classical music community to what's new rather than what's American.

MICHAEL GORDON: That's historically true. Ives, you know, printed his own music and sent it to all these people who didn't want it, basically. They only really accepted him years later. He understood that. He didn't show when his Third Symphony was finally premiered.

3. The First Bang On A Can Festival

FRAN RICHARD: But you guys, when you started, in that day marathon, Mother's Day downtown, you also juxtaposed many styles, you did not allow yourselves to be "uptown" or "downtown." You put things together that were very unlikely in the program. I think you should talk a little bit about that because that defines what you believe in and what you like.

JULIA WOLFE: I think part of it when we were starting, the question was, to break down barriers within music, not just "uptown" and "downtown," but all kinds of stylistic differences, and what we were aiming for was what the three of us considered "innovation" and an "adventurous spirit." So regardless of what the language was, that was the criteria and that still is the criteria, although I've been having some really interesting evolutions over the years in terms of programming and where our thinking is at. But the initial spark was, first of all, we don't fit in anywhere. So it's somewhat self-serving in the sense that we're not in back of this real formal concept like uptown and we weren't improvisationally oriented which was the basic downtown scene at that time in '87. Aside from Glass and Reich who had already emerged out of downtown; they were all over town! So we built this festival. Part of it was to make a declaration about our idea about the lack of stylistic approaches, but also to make a new home for a whole new generation of composers. And there really were these composers out there like us, who were sort of around and, you know, started on their own to make things happen.

MICHAEL GORDON: When we started in 1987, one of the ways the world looked to us was that there was a war going on. The "uptown/downtown" thing which now, you know, appears less and less. Back then, it was really in the air. The problem with that for us, is first of all, you know, we were too young to be involved, you know, we were not Milton Babbitt, and we weren't Philip Glass, and, you know, it was like we like Milton Babbitt's music and we like Philip Glass's music so what, what was the battle? [laughs] Right. And the other problem for us was the ideological confinement of this music. We'd go to a concert at Carnegie Recital Hall and there'd be a piece by Elliott Carter, which would be amazing, and four pieces by his students that would be people attempting to do something like it but they weren't amazing. But they were classed ideologically instead of being classed by interest or by how good the music was. So when we put that first concert together, we put on music that we wanted to hear, music that we thought was revolutionary. And we also made some statements. We focused early on the Babbitt piece, Vision and Prayer from 1961 or something like that, you know, that is on the edge, pushing the boundaries. It's really funky; it uses these electronics that had gone out of style. Electronics became very sophisticated and now these sounds are actually back in style because of the low-tech sound, the really rock quality and you know, it's a very powerful piece. It's from when he was young, when he was our age...

DAVID LANG: Well, how revolutionary for him to say, okay, here's this new RCA synthesizer that's really crummy and only makes these really ugly square tones and I'm going to make a great piece of music out of this really exalted machine and put a singer in front of it ... I mean, it's this really revolutionary concept.

MICHAEL GORDON: You put that back to back with Four Organs by Steve Reich which is equally revolutionary. It was also for me personally a piece that I had never heard live. It had a huge impact on me. By the time we did it, which was '87, Steve hadn't played it for 10 years. He

came and we called him up and said, "Please come to the concert. We put these pieces back to back." We decided not to have any program notes, because our view was that program notes tell the audience member whether or not to like a piece, whether the person is a genius or unknown. So we decided, no program notes and we asked composers to talk about their music and we told them, "Look, don't talk about your music; tell a joke or something."

JULIA WOLFE: Because the audience wasn't trained in any sense. As we all know, you just can't underestimate the impact on an audience who hears something from the artist before they hear the piece. It's not like you have to tell them what to listen for but you just say well, I was thinking of this kind of image, or I was looking at a painting, whatever the spark was that keeps the piece up, it's like an open door. You know, look, my mom was there and she was totally into it. It just opens up the door, oh, okay, maybe they don't see everything or they like everything and get everything, but it was tremendous, really, the impact on the audience... I think all the composers were there.

MICHAEL GORDON: I think there were 23 pieces and 21 of the composers were there. They all spoke. But the real thing that was amazing was that there was an audience. It was packed. There were over 400 people there, which was unheard of in 1987 for this type of concert, and none out of them were composers or new music specialists. It was really an audience, people who were attracted by the 12-hour concert and were going to go check this out. So they did not know if they liked Milton Babbitt, they were not supposed to like Steve Reich. And they did not know that if they liked Steve Reich, they were not supposed to like Milton Babbitt. And you know, Milton Babbitt came in and he talked, and his piece was played and there was this huge ovation. And then he walked out the back because he didn't want to hear Steve Reich's piece. [laughs] Steve Reich, who did not want to hear Milton's piece and had been waiting outside the building until it was over came in, and then he talked, and there was a huge ovation and then Steve left. And they didn't ever meet. I mean, we didn't fix anything. We didn't try to create a ruckus but what we did was we proved this incredible thing for ourselves. The performances were great. These pieces were incredibly revolutionary, hard core, you know, from the complete opposite ends of the experimental music spectrum. But this audience went wild for them. And that was really a good lesson.

DAVID LANG: In a way the lesson was that people who already know something about music in a way are lost. The way that music is taught, and the way musical knowledge comes to you is, on one hand, knowledge, and on the other hand it's an inculcation of a certain kind of value. And that value tells you how to interpret the world and that interpretation is very narrow. . . . It was kind of shocking to us, actually. I think we really saw this battle as happening to people who were, you know, from some other world, who were really older than we were. And as younger composers, we had already had enough outside experiences. Most people our age grew up with pop music or playing in bands or other experiences that were sort of outside the traditional classical music value system. And it was very difficult for us and for the composers our age to actually believe those battles that were being fought by people above us because it just seemed obvious that a good idea is a good idea. And wouldn't people hope to have concerts that organized itself around plain good music?

JULIA WOLFE: I have to say, that part of it - that part of what David is representing is basic lessons of what we all emerged from. We say young composers, I think that was not completely widespread with all young composers, but we were all at Yale. I was a little later than Michael, maybe, but basically overlapping for a period of about 5 or 6 years, studying with Martin Bresnick and there was something very special about coming out of that atmosphere. It was a very open place. It still was - you know, classically oriented. It wasn't like we were listening to

rap or funk in class but still, there was no dogma. It wasn't like you had to write like Martin, and I think that was somewhat unique at the time. There were some other schools like that, but it was a very special place and in fact, the marathon idea itself came from an all-night marathon. Ours was an all-day marathon, but an all-night marathon took place at Yale that was started by Martin Bresnick called "Sheep's Clothing" that we'd all seen and David was actually really in it. It was a really wild extravaganza and everyone brought pillows and sleeping bags. So there was a kind of spirit that preceded this that set the tone for us.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wouldn't it be great to do a "Sheep's Clothing" here in New York -- an all-nighter?

JULIA WOLFE: You know, they actually just had a reunion.

DAVID LANG: We did a "Sheep's Clothing" in 1980 in New York... 1980-uh, oh when was it, actually? I don't remember, I think 1982. We did a concert here in an art gallery in Soho in 1983 and it was very successful, we had a really good audience, and it was really fun. We went back to New Haven all charged up; we had this great feeling. It was such a successful thing that the only thing that we could do would be disband the organization. [laughs]

FRAN RICHARD: I wish you'd do one New Year's Eve 2000.

4. What Are The Boundaries Of Bang On A Can?

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, what a great idea! Let's get to the issue of boundaries, because, of course, there always are boundaries. You mentioned Stevie Wonder before and we talked about - we've been name-dropping people like Milton Babbitt and Steve Reich on the programs. I know you incorporate a lot of jazz musicians. What doesn't get included? Is there anything that's outside of this domain?

JULIA WOLFE: It's been getting broader and broader over the years, I have to say, especially in terms of instrumentation. There have been some amazing ensembles that we wouldn't have imagined including in 1987 -- anything from large gamelan orchestras to huge bagpipe ensembles. I mean it's just amazing that people are writing new music for that. The general idea is anything that's innovative. It's broader than that, but I think it has to have a spark, something's being pushed. It can be alternative rock and it's not out of our realm. As long as it's not catering to history, it's not music where composers are saying: "I know what this is. I know how music goes, I'm going to be part of that. I'm going to make music too, because I know how music goes." It's when we listen to tapes, and we all go "What? Wow, what is that?"

FRANK J. OTERI: So have you presented alternative rock bands?

MICHAEL GORDON: We have.

JULIA WOLFE: We had one this year.

MICHAEL GORDON: Well, on our marathon concert this year we had this group called Ne Ne. They're three Japanese women from Brooklyn. They're vague in their promotion; they describe themselves saying: "Imagine if Steve Reich grew up on Mount Fuji listening to BBC Radio on a transistor radio that had melted" or something. [laughs] That's how they described their music. They've played a few rock concerts. I think what's happened over the years is, you know, what

doesn't get included. I think what happened really, is that when we started we were out of school, we looked at our world, and our world was Steve Reich and Milton Babbitt. That was the spectrum, and our aim was let's put these things together. Let's do a concert where it's not stylistically confined to one. And that just became broader. We started including people from the experimental jazz tradition, then we started including people writing new music for classical instruments from other traditions, or new music for Chinese instruments or so forth, and then we started including people doing alternative rock that was experimental. And now we're starting to include the kind of experimental fringe of the whole DJ scene, D.J. Spooky and stuff like that. On our benefit concert which we just had, Thurston Moore played, and Cecil Taylor played, and D.J. Spooky, and there were excerpts from John Duffy's opera, and Pamela Z, a young composer working with electronics. . .

FRAN RICHARD: Totalism? Is that your concept?

DAVID LANG: That was never our word.

FRAN RICHARD: You didn't coin that term?

DAVID LANG: We didn't make that word up.

FRAN RICHARD: Do you think it makes sense.

MICHAEL GORDON: We don't think of it in that way. The way we think of it is that. . .this is an analogy that we can use: you walk into a record store, and don't care what kind of music you want to listen to. Want to go to the jazz department, the world music department, the classical department with the double doors. . .

FRANK J. OTERI: . . .hermetically sealed. . .[laughs]

MICHAEL GORDON: ...or do you want to stay in the store which is basically the pop department? In each of those departments, there is experimental music. Most of the music in every one of those places is not experimental, but you can categorize music in different ways. You can go, well, I want to go to the store that only has that music that's, you know, that's not categorized like jazz or pop or classical or whatever, but it's categorized by experimental or unusual or strange or something I've never heard before.

FRANK J. OTERI: We do have stores like that here in New York City. You know, Downtown Music Gallery or Other Music. . . Amoeba in Berkeley...

DAVID LANG: Amoeba is fantastic. But Other Music is really great, 'cause that's the definition of what it is. Music that doesn't really belong comfortably in any of the bins that commercial industry tries to push it into. Other Music is the only store that you can go into and regularly find Stockhausen's own CD's; he bought back all the masters back from D.G., and he's released them himself, and it's the only place where you can find them. They have a complete set at Other Music. They have Xenakis at Other Music, but they have it there not because, oh, we have an earnest commitment to new music, but they have it there because people who like sort of the general category of "weirdos" like that kind of music. That's why they've got it there. The other thing, to continue Michael's analogy about, you know, music stores... We like the people who live in between rooms, the music that we want to be with are the people who are lodged in the wall between pop and classical music, or in the stairway between DJ's and jazz. There are people... it seems to me that if you want a composer who's really trying to do something interesting, you're

not trying to fit into a bin that has an easy location. You're trying to find something that actually hovers around. We just did Music for Airports by Brian Eno. Brian Eno has bins in three different places in Tower Records, because his output is too diverse to be categorized.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you listen to those albums themselves - an album like Another Green World -- is it a rock album, is it an ambient record, is it an experimental record?

DAVID LANG: Right. And that's what's interesting about him. You actually aren't able to locate himself in one place.

FRAN RICHARD: I'll make you a proposition - that you do something for "Between the Rooms," and you do some kind of showcase.

JULIA WOLFE: Great.

DAVID LANG: Sign us up.

FRAN RICHARD: Okay, you're on.

5. Audiences and Venues

FRANK J. OTERI: We mentioned Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth. I went to their show at the Hammerstein Ballroom; it was fantastic. A huge crowd was lined up around the block, getting frisked for tape recorders because everyone wants to bootleg the show. It was this amazing energy. Here they are playing this really complex music, really "out there" chords, screeching guitars, big extended microtonal harmonies, and everyone is listening to this. And it's young people. Why can't we get this audience for a new music concert?

JULIA WOLFE: You can.

FRANK J. OTERI: So twelve years into Bang On A Can, I guess the question really is: What is your audience? Who is attending your events? Are you getting the people who are going to the Sonic Youth concert? Are you getting the people who are going to the Gerhard Richter exhibition?

JULIA WOLFE: I think every project we do attaches us to a different audience. The move to Lincoln Center was our biggest jump in audience numbers. Every concert was sold out. That was probably due to the location of the facility. Some of the audience came from that area. When we did Brian Eno, there were a lot of Brian Eno fans there that we

FRANK J. OTERI: I would daresay probably you got people to Lincoln Center who haven't been to Lincoln Center before. Lincoln Center doesn't play Brian Eno's music generally!

JULIA WOLFE: I think that with all our different activities, we're actually trying consciously to tap into this audience.

FRANK J. OTERI: Let's take it out of New York City for a second, because all these terms are New York: "uptown," "downtown," Lincoln Center vs. the Kitchen, or Cooper Union, or the Knitting Factory. The Bang On A Can All Stars travel a lot. They were headliners in Atlanta and are appearing in Northfield Minnesota and Burlington Vermont. Talk a little bit more about you

three versus the All-Stars and what that represents. What are the receptions like in the rest of America? Then we'll talk internationally. It's interesting, there's this other audience for music that's out there, and then there's the mainstream classical music audience, and you get booked in a town outside of New York. Where are you getting booked outside of New York? Where are these concerts happening?

DAVID LANG: Colleges and clubs.

MICHAEL GORDON: Mostly colleges.

FRAN RICHARD: When you go to colleges, what part of the student population attends?

JULIA WOLFE: I think it's not only the student population, but a lot of the colleges have intellectual centers and art center. They get also get people from the town, the community of people who go to all the art events in that town, because that's where they happen - at the university. There are some places where they are particularly enthusiastic about music.

DAVID LANG: We played at a rock club in Los Angeles, and we played in a club in Vancouver. I think one difference between New York and the rest of America, is that in New York, there's so much happening that it's really possible to be jaded. You go: "Well, there are 10 things happening tonight that I want to go to so I'm not going to do anything, I'm going to watch TV." [laughs] And the rest of the country, you go someplace, you know, it's an event when somebody comes in, it's an event when somebody plays any kind of contemporary music, good or bad. So I think we have very good responses in these places, people are really hungry for different kinds of things. You go to San Francisco, people know us from our records. That concert was crazy, there were two very well attended concerts and people seem to know everything we have done. And they were hungry for it.

RICHARD KESSLER: Who else do you think they listen to?

MICHAEL GORDON: I think the audience is really really diverse. We were talking about Sonic Youth. That music is really amazing and it's really difficult to listen to, but if you took that music and put it in an album that said "new music" and had a bunch of people wearing jackets and ties holding a pair of bassoons no one would buy it.

RICHARD KESSLER: They'd never see it.

DAVID LANG: So our Symphonic Sonic Youth record isn't coming out? [laughs]

MICHAEL GORDON: Part of the reason these people are hits - they have cool haircuts and they hung out in New York in the East Village...

DAVID LANG: . . .And they get really hip artists to do their record jackets. They're totally connected to the alternative, kind of dangerous art scene - I mean, they've really insinuated themselves into a circuit which is the way it has to be. It's kind of, you know, the blood is flowing a different way in that world, which is really kind of cool. And that's the problem with what you're saying, Michael. The problem is that music got stuck over here someplace, and all the people who want it to be over there weren't people we want over there, and the rest of the people are over here, and how do you figure out how to tie into all these things which went together naturally. I don't think of it in terms of marketing. I think we can ask questions about who comes to these concerts. Maybe we should be thinking about...maybe we can break down the

demographic and find out which people buy which kind of toothpaste. I think what it really is that all people are hungry for interesting things. All people are hungry for something that makes them feel like their life is worthwhile. And people create these other vast mechanisms of things that allow information to pass through them that help them feel that they're grounded in the world and that their life has purpose and that their little corner of the world is not a little corner of the world but it's connected to all the other little corners of the world. So I think that's really what we're trying to do. I don't really care where the Kronos Quartet plays. I don't really care where any other music group plays.

RICHARD KESSLER: It's more an issue that there are certain forms, classical forms, that have become disconnected. . .

DAVID LANG: Right.

RICHARD KESSLER: ...and that are searching for ways to make connections, that are dealing with all sorts of issues having to do with labels, having to do with perception. It seems that so clearly in this issue that I have talked briefly to Steve Reich about. You can go to Philip Glass, you can go hear the Philip Glass Ensemble at Avery Fisher and you can go hear a Philip Glass piece with the ACO, and you will see two distinctly different audiences. What does that tell you about the people, and also the ACO and the Philharmonic? How do they reach out? How do they break down those barriers? Why do those barriers even exist? These are some of the questions - the larger institutional questions - they may have very little to do with individual artists, or composers and ensembles, but in the industry, they are big questions.

JULIA WOLFE: I think I can answer some of that. I guess that the audience that comes to Bang on a Can is a mix. It's not a Kronos audience. It's not like everybody who runs to Kronos comes here. What they're doing is they're reaching a string quartet audience and I think there's crossover, but I think that what Bang on a Can is speaking to is a kind of art crowd. It has to do with how we present ourselves. It's very informal. It has to do with what the flyer looks like. These things sound superficial but they are visuals that are conveying a philosophy. I mean, we are so picky, we are so tied to our copy and our art design, it's ridiculous...

RICHARD KESSLER: That says something. As ridiculous as it may seem, you pick up that flyer, for that second, it represents you. Nobody is listening to the music at that second - that picture is you.

JULIA WOLFE: And it all has to go together. I mean, there are some groups that are, let's say, more formal, and they have a cool flyer, but it all has to be organic. That's what I am saying. A symphony, if they are a symphony and they are wearing tuxes it's great if they still have a certain audience.

RICHARD KESSLER: The interesting part is to describe this music. I've had this discussion with Fran many times, but I can tell you that I have so many times bitten my tongue, bitten my tongue saying "contemporary classical," or "new music," "new American music," "American new music," none of these terms work very well, "classical music," "contemporary classical composer."

JULIA WOLFE: Whenever someone asks you, what kind of music do you write?

RICHARD KESSLER: Other music. [laughs]

DAVID LANG: I always used to say, "I write post-ugly music." [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Getting back to the Kronos, for a second. They are an interesting example. Everyone said; "You play new music and that's death in the concert music community." They said: "We're going to play nothing but music written since 1900." Then they dressed a certain way, they took music to certain venues, they did transcriptions of Hendrix, and they did a lot of really successful things, they did things that weren't as successful, but they had an audience. People attend those concerts and people buy those recordings, and they're very visible, and they look like a rock band, they look like an alternative rock band. We've all heard the clichés about them, but we're living in a post-Kronos world.

MICHAEL GORDON: They don't look like a rock band. They look like the closest, hippest thing in the classical music world.

DAVID LANG: I think so, too.

MICHAEL GORDON: I mean, just, they're taking their marketing cue from the way rock bands are marketed. They were maybe the first people ever to have a good picture on the cover of their album which was amazing and revolutionary. I think if you are someone who is interested in rock music, you don't look at that album and go, "Oh, this is a rock band." But if you walk into the classical department and you're looking for something hip or something new or something different, you can look at that CD and go, "Oh, this is cool."

RICHARD KESSLER: Why dress up a group like a rock band and then play Beethoven?

JULIA WOLFE: I think Richard is saying that it has to be organic. In other words, I think it is really fascinating to see a group playing Beethoven with some rock energy. Maybe if there are things about their performance of Beethoven that are really brash, really edgy, if it's miked really closely, whatever. All kinds of stuff like that but, it's got to be in the product (. . .I hate to say product. . .); it's got to be in the art, no matter what you look like. Everybody does that now. We've got sexy, nymphet, rock-star looking violinists, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: I think that, if anything, that stuff has hurt classical music because people listen to it, and it's just a lackluster performances of standard repertoire. You might have gotten a larger audience to buy this stuff and then they hear it and they say "Gee, this is really boring. Yeah, classical music is boring. Goodbye." And you've lost them.

MICHAEL GORDON: The thing is, when you say "hurt classical music," when you talk about the recording industry and you talk about music, you know, you're really talking about basically two different things. Everybody knows that classical music no longer sells. Every single thing on the classical Billboard chart is a packaged, marketed thing. It's either Bach with your cereal or it's the latest tenor...

FRANK J. OTERI: Even those don't sell anywhere near compared to a pop recording. They're not real numbers. You can sell like 300 copies of a recording a week and get on the Billboard chart so it doesn't really mean anything...

MICHAEL GORDON: The Three Tenors, though, was a major...

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, that actually sold...

MICHAEL GORDON: But that's also generic.

FRANK J. OTERI: Gorecki's Symphony No. 3 was a piece of repertoire that sold...

FRAN RICHARD: The third time it was recorded! People want to know what made it successful, and they can't help trying to make it a formula. And you're right, it has to be organic, but they can't help trying to figure out why and if they want to be different, how can they make it?

6. The Success of Bang On A Can

FRAN RICHARD: Do you think you're a success?

JULIA WOLFE: I think we've been thrilled about the growth of our organization. I guess that's success in a certain sense. I mean, there are things we still want to do, there are things that haven't worked. If you take an average day what happens in that office - it's really unbelievable -- we're getting faxes and phone calls, the group is traveling worldwide, and...

FRAN RICHARD: What is really exciting about going there and playing another season or going in there another day and not finishing a piece you have a deadline for? What is it that keeps you so charged up?

JULIA WOLFE: That's a really good question...

MICHAEL GORDON: We're just getting our publicity for our festival coming up, and we were just working on it and we were looking at the marathon concert. There are still 10 or 12 composers that we've never done music by before. A couple who just got their tapes in the mail...

DAVID LANG: The reason why Bang On A Can is successful is that we are incredibly romantic about it, you know. We are really good friends, and we are all very different people but we have some things that we share in common and we are best friends and we see each other every day, and we have also very high standards. So, every day we meet and every day we talk to each other and we figure out how to get each other excited about different things. And we have very high standards about it and we only do things that are interesting to us and are exciting and charge us up and that make us feel very excited and feel good. And that's, I think, how everything's made honest. When we get together and we have a conversation, if we can't get excited we have to stop. Today a composer called me out of the blue, who is somebody who sent us in a score blind, and we listened to it and we programmed it. The guy called me up on the phone and he was almost in tears on the phone that we were playing his piece. It's just so amazing. Essentially, we didn't know who he was, we put on his music, we liked it, we programmed it. You know, it seems so obvious that the world should work like that.

FRAN RICHARD: So the politics that usually predestine what will be played here or there or in that venue, you don't think that you have that. . .

DAVID LANG: The pressures are there.

FRAN RICHARD: Oh, I'm sure there's pressure.

JULIA WOLFE: We do consciously want to reach a very broad spectrum of the community. So I think there are things that push us to look in different areas. There are issues pushing us around, but the basic thing is you just have to like it. It's definitely there. When we listen to these several hundred tapes that come in, we'll listen quietly, and afterwards we'll know who it is, and for at

least half of them, I go "Oh," if they're a really nice person, and I love them personally. But it's totally about whether it was something that was written with integrity and creativity and if we're interested in the piece; that's the bottom line.

MICHAEL GORDON: I don't think that we're saying anything about this music except that there's something of interest about it. In other words, I don't really feel like we're saying that this is the great music of our time or these are the great composers. But what we're really interested in is: "Is this a fresh idea, or is this a new sound I haven't heard before, or does this have something that makes it worth listening to, because there's something I've never heard before in this?" But that doesn't mean that it's good. I always get charged because I go to a marathon and I listen to all this music - I designed it for myself to go and get charged!

FRANK J. OTERI: So do all three of you have to be into it for it to get on? Can one of you hate it?

DAVID LANG: It's something we have done from the very beginning which I think is also one of the reasons why I think we've been successful, is that if that one person does not want something to happen, it's not happening.

FRANK J. OTERI: And that's happened with you?

JULIA WOLFE: Yes. It's not really that...

DAVID LANG: It's not like it's a war...

JULIA WOLFE: It's not a fight, but it has to be unanimous. But somebody will always like some stuff more or less than the others. Maybe someone loves one piece, and one likes it okay, and the other really likes it... Usually we listen to all 200 or 300 tapes and it's cut down to maybe 40. In that initial listening, I would say that most of those 40 affected all of us in some way, whether or not it then makes it to the next round. I don't know why, maybe we hang around each other too much, I think there is a common art that jumps out at you.

RICHARD KESSLER: Throughout the new music community, there's a question about audiences. In the orchestra community, there are apologists who say: "Where are we going to put that new piece - the second to last piece in the first half right before the intermission?" You know, in their heart they support the music but they're afraid. They know they have some people in the institution who don't like it. They can't sell it and they worry about what's going to happen to the seats. I'm concerned about that morale, that sort of psychological impairment. I have this sense that none of that exists for you. My question would be, has it always been that way? When you guys first started out, did you just sort of blindly go into it and say: "We're just going to do what we want and we're going to have some fun and we have something to accomplish"?

DAVID LANG: Okay, I'm going to answer that first. My answer - I don't know if my answer is the same as yours...

MICHAEL GORDON: If it is, I'll think of a different one. [laughs]

DAVID LANG: I personally don't feel that there's anything wrong with having a concert for a smaller audience. And I personally feel like I never imagined doing something with Bang On A Can that I didn't believe in strictly because I felt like it was important for us to have x number of people at a concert. The only thing that's tragic is if you don't have the audience you want. I think

what's beautiful about Milton Babbitt's article "Who Cares If You Listen?" is that he says, you know, we are like scientists and we've discovered this incredibly beautiful thing and there are only 10 people in the world who are smart enough to know it. And what are we supposed to do, I mean, this is an incredibly beautiful gift for those 10 people. And I think that's great; I think that's fine. The tragedy is that if you think you would rather have 1000 people and you only have 10 people. I guess the reason I got a little touchy when we were talking earlier about demographics is I don't care if 100 people come. I mean, I'm really happy if lots of people come, and I think it's great. But I really care mostly about making the concert that I want to go to. And if there are a lot of people who are like me, then there will be a lot of people there. And if there aren't a lot of people who are like me, I'll still be happy!

MICHAEL GORDON: I feel like we're not burdened by having to perform classical music. We're classically trained musicians and we work mostly with classically trained musicians. We're basically coming out of the classical tradition. But we're not burdened with having to perform classical music; we're only performing contemporary music. And the big problem with putting that piece of contemporary music on a classical music program is the audience doesn't want to hear that piece of contemporary music. So the question is, are you really doing something for the world by having that piece of contemporary music there or not? The traditional idea is we are doing our duty and a service to contemporary music by commissioning this piece for this group that doesn't want to play it and by performing it for this group that doesn't want to listen to it. But I propose, and this is my personal view, that we're not doing any service of any kind by doing that. Who else in the world would go: "Oh, you're going to a country music concert? Well, I'm going to put aside 15 minutes of this country music concert so you can hear music you don't want to hear!" Or, you know: "I'm going to put aside 15 minutes of this rock concert aside so you can hear..."

RICHARD KESSLER: The Monkees did it, though. Jimi Hendrix opened up for them. . .

MICHAEL GORDON: When you're talking about the rock world that's a whole different thing because those opening spots are sold. Those are spots that record companies buy to promote their acts. There's a story that Frank Zappa, when he first played in Vienna, got this really known quartet to come out, and he put them all in robes and hoods, and they went out and played a Beethoven string quartet. The audience, you know, sat there for a while and then they started booing, by the time the string quartet was over, the entire audience was throwing things and booing. The quartet bowed and walked off the stage, and then Frank Zappa's band put on these hoods and took the violins and went back out to take a bow, as if they were the quartet, and the whole audience was sitting there booing and throwing things, and Zappa just pulls off the hood, his whole band pulls off the hoods. . . I think the success of the Kronos Quartet, the success of the Philip Glass Ensemble, Steve Reich and Musicians, and you know, what we're doing, is basically when someone comes to hear a Bang On A Can concert, they know that they're going to get weird music. They know they're not going to get country music. They know they're not going to get classical music. We don't have to deal with people who don't want to be there. It's really simple. We don't have anyone at our concerts who doesn't want to be there. I mean, it happens that people don't know what it is, but they're not there thinking, you know, well, it's a classical music concert and I came here to hear beautiful music. I personally, I'm against it, you know, I think that the orchestra. . . classical music. . . is a beautiful thing. But if I'm going to an exhibit of Rembrandts, I don't want to see, you know...

JULIA WOLFE: I don't think it's that simple. I think that, what really matters is the intentionality. What are they trying to do, what's the ensemble or the orchestra presenter trying to do. I think it's great if a classical music has some new music; I think it's totally fine. I think that what matters is

that the orchestra, or the administration of the orchestra, knows what they're about. You know the Kronos, and that's great. All these people who have listened to Kronos records all this time and all the records they've made suddenly hear this very strange music and they're really open to it and that's fantastic. The Brooklyn Philharmonic plays new music. They played Stravinsky, and Bach, and Reich. What got the huge ovation? The Reich. And I think that that's because the Brooklyn Philharmonic gives that concert - that was their intention, and they're committed to it, and they're behind it, and that's what they're about. I think the problem is when you have something, like the Philadelphia Orchestra, who are a fantastic orchestra, and they're kind of trying to do this duty or they're trying to add something to their programming, but their audience is very staid. They're all going out to a very fancy dinner and a social phenomenon, which is really the case with most orchestras that it's a whole class or milieu that goes to it for a very particular reason. It's like a hammer, a slam in their faces. I don't think that's going to work but I think it could work, if that's what they're about. I think the problem is when it's not coming from the community of music makers or listeners.

7. Is the Orchestra Dead?

FRANK J. OTERI: Then here comes the loaded question. . . What happens when you want to write for a big ensemble or an orchestra? Is that form something that we shouldn't think about anymore? Is the orchestra dead?

MICHAEL GORDON: No, it's not dead. It's a museum.

RICHARD KESSLER: What may happen is that all of a sudden the repertoire has ended. And that as an industry, that's where they're going nuts. It's about, has it in fact ended? Is it going to grow to add another piece?

DAVID LANG: I want to jump in here, because I really disagree. I mean, I agree with everything that both of you said, about the audience - I feel that it goes back to what I said earlier. It's really important to have the audience you want. To create the environment so you get the audience that you need in order to create the opportunity for people to listen to everything openly and to listen to everything constructively. But I don't think that the orchestra is, by definition, dead, or, by definition, a museum. I think it is a museum now, but I do not believe that that's the way it has to be.

MICHAEL GORDON: Well, no, it doesn't have to be and I want to tell you this story. Julia and I are walking down the street and we see posters plastered on the street. There's this like cool looking guy, about 20 years old, green hair and blue goatee and he's sitting on the sidewalk, he's wearing jeans, he's got this little sign saying "I'm going to the opera." And I looked at it and said, "Wow, look at that -- could that be like an ad for City Opera? That would be so cool." And Julia goes, "Yeah, that would be so cool. They're not cool enough to do that ad." We get closer and closer, and finally we get right up to it and there's this little tag that says "Levis." [laughs] And that's what this ad is for.

FRANK J. OTERI: I was walking to the American Music Center a couple of weeks ago and I was just livid. There was a sign at a bank for retirement plans, and it said, "Do you have a classical IRA? Well, maybe it's time to rock and roll." So the implication was that a "classical" was boring and staid and not where it's at now. And that's the perception -- it's this word, "classical." I was really excited when the Ensemble Modern came here a few years ago. Here's this chamber orchestra playing all new music, big audience, an orchestra version of the Kronos, let's say. Or,

even what Esa Pekka Salonen's doing in Los Angeles. I heard the new John Adams piece ["Naïve and Sentimental Music"] -- the audience loved it. They flipped out. They gave it such a huge ovation. They changed the order of the program, even. The original order of the program was Adams first and Prokofiev after intermission. Usually they're afraid to put new music on the second half, they're afraid people will leave at intermission. But even pairing Adams and Prokofiev was atypical; it was an all-20th century program. It wasn't sold out, but there were lots of people there and the audience was ecstatic. They brought Adams out twice. It can happen. And I would dare say you program this new music with an orchestra, chances are, you're going to get more of the type of crowd that is interested in otherness in other arenas coming to the orchestra than you would if you were playing a whole program of Mozart symphonies. That is the way to save the orchestra.

MICHAEL GORDON: The type of programming that you're talking about goes back to what I was trying to say about record companies. Record companies realized five years ago that classical music is dead. They were never going to sell another copy of a Beethoven Symphony; they're never going to sell another copy of the Brandenburg Concertos. They can't survive anymore selling classical music. So all of these records now are gimmicks. I am going to sell classical music with, you know, a beautiful tenor that we market, a gimmick, or this or that. There is a label, or there is someone at one label, maybe, or there are certain people who can go, "I know that if I have great performances and I package this right, I can put out a quality product that is even challenging and sellable." Let's take the Kronos Quartet for example. But most people at most labels don't have that kind of vision, or they won't try new ideas. And my feeling is that the orchestra is going downhill. The audience is going down; they're running out of money. And ten years from now, the orchestras that survive. . . There will be a San Francisco Symphony, let's say, that will do daring programs and will have an audience. But more and more, classical music concerts are going to be marketed exactly like these, you know, it'll be classical music and breakfast, or classical music with the forty tenors, so, like, giveaways at a baseball game, come to this concert and...

RICHARD KESSLER: Lincoln Center has these rush hour concerts...

MICHAEL GORDON: But what they're not doing is they're not going: "Look, how can I do innovative programming, do something that's of quality, and market it in a way that I can get an audience?" And that is possible, you see. But the ingenuity is not there.

RICHARD KESSLER: It's a cultural issue and it's an institutional issue. What you were not burdened with, what led you directly to it is in your hearts and your minds - the work. Let's say you had hired someone to run the operation who knew nothing about music and nothing about what you did. The fact of the matter is in orchestras, the music director is given the music responsibilities, the executive director is given the administrative responsibilities. In the museum field, the executive directors were once curators. In the music business, the executive director had nothing to do with the music. In addition, they have marketing people who may not even know anything about music. So you didn't have this other side, this other half, this other side of the coin that you would have had to commit, that you would have had to move, to convince to whatever. You were simply able to take a look at, as I said, what was in your hearts and minds and just go in that direction. And you said as much earlier, essentially. With some of these institutions, it's really complex.

JULIA WOLFE: It's harder.

DAVID LANG: I'd just like to add one thing. It's not just contemporary music which has the problem in the orchestra world. You shouldn't expect to hear an orchestra play a subscription series with a Beethoven symphony either. That's not the right environment to bring to any of those pieces. It's not just contemporary music that has the problem. I feel like those orchestras are doomed for many more reasons.

8. Radio and the Sound of Classical Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Part of the thing is the flip side of the coin of what you were saying before, Michael. You go to a Bang On A Can concert and you're expecting to hear other music; you go to a country music concert you're expecting to hear country music. Part of the problem with this term "classical music" is we pigeon hole what we can and accept into the canon and we say, "What sounds like classical music?" This is a real problem with classical radio. They'll say: "Well, I can't tell you what it is but I know what it sounds like." I've been going to the public radio conference now for five years in a row, and they're starting to open to new music. But when I first started going, there'd be people who bragged about censoring orchestra broadcasts whenever there was a contemporary piece. They'd say: "My audiences won't listen to that stuff. They'll turn the dial!" And it's that mentality out there. How are you going to keep listeners? And they're all afraid they're losing their listeners, so they'll only play the standard stuff. Which leads me 180 degrees around. . .feel free to jump in here. . .to talking about the All-Stars and the formation of the lineup of the All-Stars. You have an orchestra; an orchestra has a certain kind of sound, a symphony orchestra. You have a string quartet that has a certain kind of sound. The All-Stars is a very decidedly not classical-sounding ensemble. There's a percussionist, there's an electric guitarist, and it's amplified, it's not the sound that you expect from this music. So that was clearly the decision. What led to the decision of choosing that sound, that combination?

JULIA WOLFE: First of all, the formation of the group came in kind of a mutual way because they were hand-picked by three of us, and not because of their instruments. Every one of those performers had been on the festival as soloists. Most of them in repeated performances. And we thought they were amazing. So part of it was people jumping out at us, and that was part of the inspiration. And another thing that inspired us to start the group was that we kept getting calls from all over, from California, or from Europe, asking: "Can you bring Bang On A Can to Amsterdam?" Well, 24 pieces and 10 groups and, I mean, it was an unwieldy thing to relocate. And just little by little it dawned on us that if we had an ensemble, we could take the aesthetic on the road. And even though obviously the marathon is much more diverse than this ensemble, it really is the voice of Bang on a Can on the road. But as far as the instrumentation goes... There was some thought to the fact that, well, some lows, some highs; we definitely wanted that electric sound and the electric guitar. But it really was the top, phenomenal players that got us excited, that's why they're a group, and it's really odd to put 6 soloists together; it's like fire in the room!

MICHAEL GORDON: It's also, you know, there's a cello and a bass, and an electric guitar, which are basically the same, you know, the cello and the electric guitar are basically the same range, and there's percussion...

JULIA WOLFE: It happens that Maya Beiser plays way up in the violin register on the cello...

DAVID LANG: ...because of the oddness of the instrumentation. They were chosen because, we, year after year, started depending on some of these people who were really the equivalents in the music performance world. Composers that we were interested in were people who were incredibly great, incredibly passionate and giving their lives to this, you know, totally weird

world, and we started depending on these soloists. Some of them played on the first marathon. They've played on every marathon since. And we thought, okay, well, these are the people that we know, that we work with, the soloists. What would it be like to take these, you know, incredibly dynamic, egomaniacal, monster players and put them all in an ensemble together and say: "you've got to work together"? [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: To bring it back to that 'radio' thing: "Well, it doesn't sound like classical music so we're not going to play it on our classical radio station because people are going to turn the dial." I remember the first radio conference I attended 5 years back in Nashville, the All-Stars came out there, and, you know, I loved it, but I was at a table with a bunch of people who were ducking for cover. They were afraid of it. How do you reach people via radio?

JULIA WOLFE: We used to get a lot of radio -- we're not experts about radio. I don't know who the major stations are that are playing our records. It would be a great thing to know. Sometimes we get feedback from records that are played. We get calls from friends: "Yeah, I just heard your last record on radio." So somebody's playing it somewhere; probably the bulk are alternative college stations...

FRANK J. OTERI: We're at a real impasse now. There are commercial classical radio stations that have a mandate to play "classical music," and when you're entering the marketplace, there are certain expectations. It's like, you go to a country music concert and you're not going to listen to 15 minutes of a rap concert thrown in the middle, and say, well, this is also country. But at the public radio stations, there was always, in the past, a different mandate. The public radio station is something that serves the public; it's something that is beyond the realm of the marketplace and should open people's minds and educate people and bring them to something new.

RICHARD KESSLER: And public debate.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, that's a corollary of that. And that has fundamentally changed.

FRAN RICHARD: Their mandate. Their mission...

FRANK J. OTERI: Their mission...I don't think they know what their mission is.

MICHAEL GORDON: As money gets tight, and everybody has to support themselves, you're going to see a shift, I mean, you can see it in New York, WNYC, is incredibly progressive, but that's in New York City, and here there is an audience.

JULIA WOLFE: Well, they've improved a lot ...

MICHAEL GORDON: But the second the money becomes tight ...

JULIA WOLFE: ... It goes in waves. Like no new music on certain times. They've had cutbacks and stuff...sometimes you sort of have to relax about it. But there are waves that come and go and suddenly everyone wants to hear new music.

FRAN RICHARD: Well, it definitely is interesting, because, we're looking at orchestras, and how they're handling the huge fiscal problems they have. Is it smart to do the same old thing? Or is it smarter to do something in addition, or more or different? The same thing happened in public radio with the huge cutback in the Corporation in Public Broadcasting and also an attack. So they have less fire. You have a financial shift and that is fundraising, continuously on the air. How do

we respond to that? That's why I asked you before if you are concerned about the selling of tickets. Now, you have to fund-raise. I remember when the NEA pulled away the grant, and we came and helped you that year, remember? Well, the point is, money is needed to fuel your vision. And sometimes maybe your vision isn't fueled only by what will sell tickets. But it's a reality, you go back to the radio thing, and the orchestras. They've forgotten what their mission is or why they're not-for-profit or why they're not a commercial rock band, why they're doing something, radio particularly. It's our only medium so it's very key for us, because we don't have a lot of play on the major networks. So now what do we do - and they have a lot of discussion about whether to play classical music at all or be all talk. The Bang On A Can All-Stars, particularly Maya and what she did there, was a little disconcerting for a lot of them. But we also heard this year some very bad playing of standard repertory. [laughs] They had this guy, and we don't want to mention any names, playing lousy Chopin, the performances were abominable and the thing that I noticed, these guys will give standing ovations to everybody, whether they're good or bad...

FRANK J. OTERI: As long as it's safe repertoire, then, you know, if they hear something that's unfamiliar they run away ...

MICHAEL GORDON: I just want to say that this is the same thing as the orchestras. We get radio play on college stations and we're, you know, like we're doing a concert Saturday night at Alice Tully Hall, we're doing ticket giveaways on WFMU, not on WQXR, not on the classical stations.

FRAN RICHARD: Any broadcasts of the concerts?

JULIA WOLFE: No.

MICHAEL GORDON: Nothing at Lincoln Center.

FRANK J. OTERI: But what we've been saying before is that there is an audience. So these public stations - forget the commercial, forget QXR. These public stations should be looking. They certainly are there in terms of their news program, for the "other" listener, the person who goes to the new art gallery, who reads the complex book, who wants to be out there in the vanguard for stuff, yet it isn't there for music. Why not?

DAVID LANG: Well, these stations were really good for our music. It's not necessarily in what they play during the day as part of their normal rotation, but, as far as special features go, I think that radio has been very kind to us. And, again, I see that it's a special interest to all of us that this music gets on the radio. But I don't want to really obsess about it, because I feel there's this giant shift going on about where people get their information and how people get their information. And I think that what's really happening is that people who are interested in the new and fresh, have begun, for many different reasons, to write radio out of the equation of how they get their information.

RICHARD KESSLER: The use of radio and what people listen to on it is a psychological historical issue. But, we're thinking, after we get the magazine up and running, about creating an internet radio station for new music. We've been thinking about a place where people can go. It's natural that it would be on the internet...

FRAN RICHARD: On the radio -- at the conference, they talked about having different streams. You have the local NPR station but it has set up the streams on their web sites to do the music I

don't think is in the modules of the Arbitron, which is also fascinating. . . Radio has been good to you, want to tell WNYC you'll do something to help them.

DAVID LANG: Give them \$60.

FRAN RICHARD: The other thing is with NPR, I mean, we used to have these kid DJ's at 2 and 4 in the morning that could play anything. But what Richard Kessler is saying. . .and this is the dilemma that they know they have with All Things Considered. . . they have people who want to hear more in-depth news and not just a thirty-second sound bite. These are intelligent listeners of a certain ilk for every age and they're trying to hold them on that station, that they not switch them off the air, and that's what's so interesting. Why would somebody be so interested in all the things you're saying, and you come back again to why they're not interested in some really innovative music.

JULIA WOLFE: Well, I think they could be. I think that maybe the bridge hasn't been made completely. It's still evolving, we did a spot for the Eno disc on All Things Considered at the airport, and what that means, and the whole philosophy behind it.

FRAN RICHARD: That's right. Make news.

JULIA WOLFE: ...they're open to it. They're not closed to it. They may not be purely musical or purely anything, but I think if there's a story, there are roads in there.

FRAN RICHARD: Absolutely.

9. How To Promote American Composers

FRANK J. OTERI: To connect all the dots: the discussion of orchestras, the discussion of radio. . . To take it back to what we were saying at the very beginning of this discussion about Stockhausen and Ligeti being heroes in Europe. . . Do we have any composers we can look to here that same way? We mentioned Copland, whom I would argue is largely out there because he was such an advocate for music and the field in general. He was an excellent politician. He founded the American Music Center. He saw the need for this outreach. We don't, as a country, unlike other countries in the world who have public radio, who have non-profit orchestras, give percentages of funding based on bolstering national artists. We don't say a percentage of the music you're playing in America has to be by American composers in the orchestra, a percentage of what you broadcast on an American public radio station if you want NEA dollars should be American music. Now that sounds terribly xenophobic. . .

DAVID LANG: It does.

FRANK J. OTERI: ...but in Canada they do that, in Finland they do that.

DAVID LANG: How many great composers does Canada really have? I'm against this 100%, I have to say. I feel like good music is good music. It could very well be that one year, every American composer is terrible, and to play their music on the radio you're not doing anybody any favors. You know, I think it's really good if you can create the environment where people want what is new, they'll want what you have. And I absolutely, 100%, with every fiber in my body, reject something that says that an American should get paid for work because he is an American. Music which is good should be supported by whoever, by the most despicable human being in the worst country in the world. If it's good enough, I want to know about it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Who determines what's good?

DAVID LANG: I have no idea. But I know that a committee going and measuring my blood is not going to be able to make that determination.

MICHAEL GORDON: When we lived in Amsterdam, it was interesting because just about every year, European countries, they have a huge amount of money, you know, I think that it's, I mean, right now, it's about 5 or 6 times the amount of the NEA budget in this country. And I think it's fine. They can do whatever they want. So we were there, and it's great. You register, and after a year and a half you are considered Dutch, and then you can get funding. So what happens is a wonderful retirement place for every bad young composer in the world. If you can't have a career anywhere else, you can move to Amsterdam and after 2 years you get an orchestra commission and an opera commission and so forth and you live the rest of your life. There's never a question of quality; there's never a question of, well, what are you doing? Is it good or bad? Because they have this feeling in Holland that everyone should get supported and no one is better than anyone else.

RICHARD KESSLER: As executive director of the American Music Center, I might be expected to say certain things about the issue of mandating American. But for me the more important issue is the lack of federal and state funding for individual artists. The NEA, for a number of well-known reasons, ended its funding of individual artists. Rather than spend my time on the quota issue, I think it's more important to figure out how to increase the funding that goes directly to artists. This is particularly important when you compare the US to countries overseas. When you recognize the level of support available for European artists.

{I'm afraid I have to say goodnight, because I have tickets tonight to hear Lizzie Borden! Again, I would like to thank you all for taking part in something that is extremely important to us at the AMC. It is incredibly important to me personally as well, so thank you! I also want to say, if there's anything we can do to help at the Center, please call. As I ask everyone to remember, it's your American Music Center. We're there for you, so call if we can do anything. }

FRAN RICHARD: The state arts council by law is politically unable to support individual artists. We don't consider that artist in the same way because in order to get around those things they have created more arms-length projects which are not government controlled. There was funding for individual artists through the Endowment, but it was taken away because of terrible political pressure from one particular part of the spectrum that holds us all as perverts and whatever. I'm concerned that the American music dominates the world. The pop music has engulfed the world, all over. In some cases, in film as well. And in France if you own a cinema house you have to play three French films before you play one American film because of that domination. We are usually fighting in our field alone. Some work hard in our music field where Americans are not valued, here, as much as they may be valued elsewhere, which is an interesting twist in the state of affairs.

FRANK J. OTERI: To counter what David was saying, I don't think there'd be a year when there wasn't any good American music. I'm hearing tons of great American music all of the time. And the fact that we have funding for non-profit orchestras and radio stations to play classical music, and we define classical music in such a way that we define America away from it. Classical music does not include American music, it does not include music of our time. We're doing our own musical culture a great disservice.

DAVID LANG: You said two different things. One thing is that it's terrible these people get public funding and they don't play American music or deal with the music of our time. Well, you know, those are two separate issues. I feel like, if there were a climate to support a listenership for music of our time, American composers would profit greatly. I don't think that one could create a climate for that by mandating they play music of our time. And I don't think that they would profit by mandating that they play American music. I feel like the general question is not how to make people do those things but how to change the culture so that those things become viable. And I believe that it is possible - I don't exactly know how, but I believe that it is possible.

FRANK J. OTERI: Let's take it one step further. I'm going to really, totally play devil's advocate here, because, you know, we're funding orchestras. Why even fund classical music? Why are we funding classical music in this country?

DAVID LANG: That's a really good question. I don't know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Maybe we shouldn't be.

DAVID LANG: I don't want to say anything that takes money away from anyone, that takes a dollar away from anyone. I don't want to do anything that impinges on anyone's abilities. I know that in years when fund-raising was very bad for Bang On A Can, we still had a festival. When the NEA pulled money away from us, we still had a festival. We did a smaller festival, but we still did it.

FRAN RICHARD: So part of it is you have a commitment and a mission and necessary values. But it's more important to put the show on, not so much where and not so much all these things. We sit here near Carnegie Hall and we see when the Finnish orchestra comes to play, they play Sibelius. We respect when the Czech orchestra comes and plays Dvorak or Janacek. What is so hurtful for so many Americans who devote their lives to this field is that we don't have any equivalent pride and self-confidence in the culture that is created indigenously here, and that's what Frank is talking about. And there isn't an argument, it's just an issue of what we do to encourage it and he is saying force the issue. It doesn't necessarily mean a quota, but if something doesn't become indigenous in the pride, it cannot take hold.

JULIA WOLFE: I also think that it's not so black and white, necessarily. You can do interesting and strange things and find a way to get them to people. I guess that's what we're trying to do. I guess I agree with David that you don't want to force someone to do things, but you can find those pockets where people are out there pioneering through, when you find a radio station that does that, when you find that record company that does that...

FRANK J. OTERI: And there certainly are plenty of new music ensembles that do that. Other groups around the country like the California EAR Unit in L.A., Common Sense in San Francisco, Present Music in Milwaukee, or Relâche in Philadelphia. . . And there are a lot of people doing a lot of really worthwhile things out there. I'm disturbed about the "museum pieces" part of our culture where people are playing music that they don't want to play, and people are not wanting to hear it and there's this divide. Maybe the orchestra is a museum piece, maybe there's no future for the repertoire for the orchestra, but there certainly is new repertoire for the orchestra in other parts of the world. And there are plenty of good orchestral pieces by Americans. Why haven't these entered the repertoire?

MICHAEL GORDON: Well, I'm not saying there aren't any good pieces.

FRAN RICHARD: Well, when we started with the residencies and the orchestras, the composers didn't want to write because it was so difficult to get the work played. These are very practical people, you know, they don't see a purpose. I'm thinking about all the record companies, see, without recording and multiple performances nothing can come into the repertory. So we come now to a place where all these recording companies go to this radio conference with their product, and ask them: "How come you're not playing this?" And those guys are saying: "We can't pronounce the name -- there's not one vowel in this conductor's name. We'll be embarrassed if we say it." What if we couldn't say Beethoven?

DAVID LANG: An embarrassing thing happened today, it's an unrelated topic.

FRAN RICHARD: Okay, good.

DAVID LANG: This conductor from a tiny, tiny orchestra, in a tiny, tiny town calls me up about a piece of mine, and he found it kind of by mistake.

FRAN RICHARD: In America?

DAVID LANG: In America. And he's asking me all these questions, as if he's discovered me. And this is a piece that's been played by the Boston Symphony and the New York Philharmonic and the St. Louis Symphony and the San Francisco Symphony. And, this guy's asking me these questions like, you know, like I dropped from the moon. And I think that that was really interesting to me. There's not really a way that information gets passed from here without recordings.

FRAN RICHARD: The orchestra league is working on a millennium project. Without going into all the details about this fiasco so far, they finally agreed that they want to do something to promote American music as the purpose of this project. And they're saying that all these people nominated pieces by American composers and blah, blah, blah. There's lists for however long it is or whatever goes on it or not on it. We're saying what we'll do is promote it. Every record store will have bins with this music. And I said these pieces have not been recorded, don't you understand? Out of this whole list you realize how few? And the marketing director of the league is stunned! And there comes the forces that you can control with the All-Stars or whatever, that you write, you can record, you can tour with them.

MICHAEL GORDON: Basically, we are a mom and pop store. We have found that we carry the products we like and we don't carry the products we don't like. We don't owe anybody. We are not being controlled by a corporate entity, and we have figured out how to survive. You can survive, and you can do better than survive. I think it's very hard within the classical music world to create that energy, very hard for orchestras and record companies and radio stations. You've got an established way. You have a way of doing things. You know, 6 years at Lincoln Center, as successful as our concerts were, in terms of our relationship with the structure, which means the marketing director, the P.R. person, we were always on the fringe. The last time we talked to the Marketing Director he looked at me and said, "I've got 3 concerts of Elgar in Avery Fisher Hall to sell. I can't worry about you."

JULIA WOLFE: And he's talking to us because we feel we made a contribution there, you know, to move into that space and sell out those concerts...

FRAN RICHARD: You brought them something they didn't have.

JULIA WOLFE: Yeah.

DAVID LANG: But how can you argue with him? I mean, he's got 3 concerts of Elgar to sell - I feel sorry for him! [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: A loaded statement... but maybe it's a mistake for him to be promoting these 3 concerts of Elgar if they're not selling.

DAVID LANG: Well, I believe an orchestra playing classical music can survive. And I really believe that a radio station playing classical music, can survive, too. I think there are lots of reasons, which have to do with, you know, lack of courage, about why these things don't happen. But I don't believe that they're fundamentally impossible.

10. The Identity of BOAC vs. The Identity of its 3 Directors

FRANK J. OTERI: One of the things that's so amazing about the Bang On A Can Festival, is, in a way, it's like a radio show.

DAVID LANG: Well, yeah. It's a variety act.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah -- it's sitting and listening, or it's sitting with a bunch of friends together and listening to a bunch of really interesting records. "These are the records that I bought this week." And, you know, that's the energy that should be on the radio and there are people who do this stuff on college radio stations. But that's not what's happening straight across the board. I want to turn to a whole other area completely 180 from where we've been so far, because each of you are composers of significance in your own rights and you each have separate careers and are doing separate things. It's this amazing juggling act having Bang On A Can and then having your own individual projects, a lot of which are really starting to blossom. How do you separate the two? How do you work on your own individual projects and shepherd this entity, Bang On A Can?

JULIA WOLFE: The question is, how do we survive every day? [laughs] It's pretty tricky. I think that we're all very giving, and that helps a lot. Whenever someone's really busy, they don't go to every meeting. When someone's got a workshop, or a deadline, or a record, or whatever's going on, two of us meet.

FRANK J. OTERI: So the everyday meetings aren't all three of you.

JULIA WOLFE: No. Pretty much most days we see each other, just mostly out of friendship. But it's definitely a juggling act. The nice thing about it is the organization has evolved to where we're not running the logistical things - we're very close to it, we're talking to the two guys in the office every day. We do have a two-person office for that, it has been a three-person office and it will become a three-person office again. In the past, we've just had some great, great people who are totally just music nuts, like they have more records than any of us, more CDs than any of us. So we've been at least weaned off that part of it, you know, we still do a lot of stuff, we're always doing copy, you know, all the words for everything, and all the press releases and the grants. We're sort of overseeing stuff and a lot of fund-raising stuff, not necessarily grant-writing now, which is great...

DAVID LANG: We oversee it.

JULIA WOLFE: We oversee it. We've moved closer and closer to being true artistic directors, which means of chunk of your energy here, and not 2/3rds of your day, I mean, I know David can talk on the phone, but I won't. Both Michael and I turn the ringers off, and that's it, you know, check the machine a certain time of the day and that's it. Otherwise you're not getting anything done. You have to certainly be vigilant about guarding that space out for yourself. But all of us plan and project in all kinds of worlds.

FRANK J. OTERI: How do you feel when you have a work presented, a major piece, and it'll say "David Lang, one of the co-directors of Bang On A Can," and Bang On A Can is always there with your name?

DAVID LANG: I love it. Because it's a really beautiful thing that we made.

MICHAEL GORDON: If I can jump in, we have a very fortunate situation. It's not so much the time or work we put into it. It's all here. I have Julia, David and Evan who's also a composer, my three closest friends, and the rest of the Bang On A Can All-Stars. We talk about music all the time. Every single day one of them will call me, or I will call them or see them and say, "Oh, what do you think about this, that I'm working on." And I'll play them something I'm working on. So we have a really active musical exchange and it's something that's really rare, because as artists get older, you get more and more isolated. They have developed their style and they are surrounded by a group of people who are fans and supporters, and they're never challenged. It was funny, when I first met Ligeti back when I was in school, I said to him really naively, "So, what's your relationship with Stockhausen?" "Oh, I've never met Stockhausen." [laughs] "So, how do you know, since when do you know Boulez?" "Oh yes, Boulez, he has conducted a couple of my pieces." And you realize, these people don't talk to each other. And Philip Glass and Steve Reich don't talk to each other, and they don't talk to Elliott Carter or Milton Babbitt, and they don't talk to each other. So people are very isolated and you go through this world by yourself, and I feel like we have this very warm life where we're constantly exchanging musical ideas. And then we have this incredible group of musicians. It's amazing to be writing for some group, to be writing for Ensemble Modern and you have a problem and you call up an advisor and say: "Oh, is this possible." You call Steve Schick and you say "Can you do this?"

FRANK J. OTERI: It really is about having a new music community. And this is really striking a chord -- back 60 years, to what Copland was doing when he founded the Center with Otto Luening, Howard Hanson, Marion Bauer, Harrison Kerr and Quincy Porter.

FRAN RICHARD: It's one of the problems when you go to any isolated place and hear a piece of music whether it's for orchestra or whatever. . .

FRANK J. OTERI: Right, because each one's trying to push their own agenda.

FRAN RICHARD: The issue of professionalism makes very bad propaganda. You need leadership. You need people to make choices. They have made a choice [Fran points at all three composers], which is a fascinating one, and it's not just gratuitous, it's well deserved because it was against the grain of what anybody expected. Now I'm sure it's difficult trying to figure out how to juggle teaching and writing music... You know, then you stand for each other and you put on events which feature other people. Which is why this thing is so credible. But you don't go around saying: "Oh, let's just do each other" because you need to be able to be free to express yourself. And that's the leadership: if we had some more of that, people could make up their own minds if they like it or not.

FRANK J. OTERI: None of you teach. Each of you makes a living from writing music.

DAVID LANG: That's correct.

FRANK J. OTERI: Talking about balancing your career as a composer with this whole Bang On A Can thing, David, you have an opera that's premiering this weekend...

DAVID LANG: I've got this opera called Falling and Waving. The workshop premiere is tonight, it's designed to be a high-tech situation where there are monitors and video projection and the music is actually a soundtrack which accompanies the action on stage. There are all sorts of incredible things, the technology for the workshop is a bit rudimentary but the eventual program for it is really ambitious. And next week I have a workshop of an opera I just finished with the Kronos Quartet.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now to turn back on an audience question. . . In terms of the audience for these non-Bang On A Can events, when you're doing an opera, what sort of audiences are you finding there?

DAVID LANG: I wrote a traditional opera for Santa Fe, Modern Painters, which was for a very normal audience and was really fun, I'm really proud of it. These are specifically designed for theater audiences. They're done with theater singers, not opera singers, and the presenters are theater presenters, not opera presenters. . . not that I have anything against opera presenters. . . I'm composer-in-residence at ACT, so a large part of what I do is for the theater. That friction is really interesting for me. I think it's more interesting than to go into the traditional opera world and try to blow it up.

FRANK J. OTERI: Just like you have the All-Stars; you have this ensemble that's amplified and doesn't sound like a classical music ensemble. You're not writing something that sounds like opera.

DAVID LANG: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: You're inventing a new thing that is opera in the sense that it's this tradition, but you're not playing into the stereotypes.

DAVID LANG: Well, it's an interesting negotiation you always make with the singers in this situation because most of them are theater singers. You're writing something and you actually sort of go through this weird process of trying to figure out how close you can get. How can you change things to take advantage of what it is they can put across? Their theater skills put things across that their music skills don't necessarily put across. I think that's one of the things that makes it fun for me; it's calling on something I don't necessarily know how to do.

JULIA WOLFE: I'm working on figuring out a second record, I have a record contract with Point. The first record came out a couple of years ago, and just today I had a discussion to try to figure out what to do. It's really an exciting way of working because in a certain sense I'm writing for the record. It's a very different head to get into, I just think of who the players are going to be...

FRANK J. OTERI: It's not going to be a collection of other music...

JULIA WOLFE: It's going to be one piece. It may be sectional, but really, it's, I don't know. I don't really want to go into all details about it because I just talked to them. The thing I'm excited about is it's very political and it uses voices. For me it's a new thing, samples, it's a concerto of car skids and glass breaking, so this piece is basically going to be made up of political material taken from interviews with political figures, music for ensemble.

FRAN RICHARD: What time, our era, this century?

JULIA WOLFE: It's right now. It's people alive today. It's very current. I'm excited about it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Looking forward to hearing it. Maybe we can get a sneak audio preview that we can put up on the website before the album gets released.

JULIA WOLFE: Yeah. I'd love that.

FRANK J. OTERI: That'd be great. Michael, I know you have a recording of a major piece on Nonesuch.

MICHAEL GORDON: It's a string orchestra piece. it's a collaboration with this artist, Elliott Kaplan. He got the idea that the orchestra should be vertical, because that was the best thing for video. I told him it wasn't possible, because you can't stack the orchestra on top of each other. But he said: "Oh, you've gotta do it, and so they did." I just wrote the music and then when we went to rehearse. In every rehearsal they turned around and faced the wall so they couldn't see each other. So they got used to it over a period of 6 months. They got used to playing without seeing each other, then we finally did it, and it's great. We did 16 performances in Germany. We recorded it after the tour for the British division of Warner, and that record company actually folded, and Nonesuch decided to release it. The record, I think, was 63 minutes, the piece was actually 75 minutes.

FRAN RICHARD: Did they cut it?

MICHAEL GORDON: You know, I worked with a pop producer. I worked with this guy, Gregg Jackman, who produced the Sex Pistols, and all these rock records. He actually was also classically trained. He comes from a whole family of trained musicians, and he makes his living producing pop records.

FRAN RICHARD: Do you have a video of it?

MICHAEL GORDON: I have pictures.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah. That's another way. That's how alternative rock music really got off the ground is video. Well, the question I wanted to ask everybody but I may as well ask you, this whole question of the canon and forebearers -- doing Music for Airports was such an interesting project. I know, for me as a listener it was amazing to hear the music live and I've gotten to hear the All-Stars do it twice and it's extremely exciting. I was at a concert that you did which was combining Music for Airports with Terry Riley's In C. And In C sounded more like rock than Brian Eno, and it was more aggressive and more confrontational and certainly part of it was the instrumentation you chose.

MICHAEL GORDON: It was a great performance. It was really fantastic.

FRANK J. OTERI: But a very different reconceiving of that piece than any performance that I'd ever heard, whereas the Brian Eno was really almost pure. Certainly things had to be changed, but it sounded like a Brian Eno record that I've known and loved for 20 years. I guess the question is, down the line do you see yourselves doing more projects like this? Are there other transcriptions of unnotated music that you'd like to do?

MICHAEL GORDON: I think the reason for transcribing the Eno exactly is because the point basically was, the point was really questioning what is rock music, what is classical music? So for us to play with it and be free with it, in a sense, would not be making the same point. The point was to do it exactly the way he did it, to treat it like a composition.

FRANK J. OTERI: And also, what's so interesting is, it's not just the classical and rock divide, but he was creating a piece that was talking about the issue of passive listening versus active listening. You took a piece that he designed for passive listening and made it active listening, by making it a live experience, by having people focus on it in a concert format in real time, not as background. . . it was no longer background. . . but as foreground.

MICHAEL GORDON: In C's really related to a lot of pieces from the 60's. It's part of a whole school of music where you can choose what the instruments are or choose the length of time; all these factors are open. We tried to take a more aggressive stance on that than what is traditionally done. Our performance of Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet on Saturday night isn't going to be aggressive, but I think it's something that Gavin Bryars would not necessarily have originally conceived. I don't know if Terry Riley would feel like In C was too aggressive or if Gavin Bryars would feel that our version of Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet is too ambient. We're trying to reinterpret the spirit of that music.

JULIA WOLFE: I think we're making it up.

MICHAEL GORDON: We're making it up.

JULIA WOLFE: That's what we're doing with all this stuff. That was the really fun thing about working with Meredith Monk. It's the first time she worked with an outside ensemble. She's doesn't get near anybody except for her own players so it was really a radical introduction. And a couple of the All Stars are really great singers. It really sounds like Bang On A Can meets Meredith Monk. And she has this incredibly beautiful solo music, generally soft, the performers are soft, and suddenly we have Evan and Mark doing these contrapuntal singing lines, it has this kind of maniacal feel to it. I think it is a matter of taking this music because it had a huge impact on all of us and making it our own.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you ever see doing this with older music? Where is the line?

MICHAEL GORDON: We've thought about it. We thought about it for a long time... A Beethoven symphony or something like that. Who knows?

FRANK J. OTERI: There are lots of other people out there playing Beethoven. No one's out there playing Music for Airports.

11. Free Time

FRANK J. OTERI: You say you design this program for people like you. What kinds of events do you all go to? What do you go see? What turns you on? What records do you buy? What records have you bought recently, what concerts have you gone to?

DAVID LANG: Records?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, let's start with records.

JULIA WOLFE: So much has been the stuff for the festival, like for festival planning...

DAVID LANG: I've been listening to Bob Dylan. But he's never been on the festival.

FRANK J. OTERI: Would he ever be on the festival?

DAVID LANG: I think that's more for him to decide. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Okay, but if he said, "Okay, I want to be on the Bang On A Can festival."

DAVID LANG: I could imagine something he could do that would fit

FRANK J. OTERI: He's definitely redefined genres. . .

JULIA WOLFE: I've had very little else in my head, because I'm putting together this concert Saturday night. I'm re-orchestrating this piece, and I'm performing in it.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you're singing a piece by Meredith Monk.

JULIA WOLFE: Well, yeah. I'm clapping and dancing. I've been really immersed in it...

FRANK J. OTERI: That sounds so exciting to me...

MICHAEL GORDON: He [points at David] just had his third kid, we have two kids...

FRAN RICHARD: Do these kids all like each other?

DAVID LANG: Our daughters are best friends.

JULIA WOLFE: They play together every day. We share a babysitter.

FRANK J. OTERI: How old are they?

DAVID LANG: Mine are 4, 3 and 3 months.

JULIA WOLFE: 3 and 1.

DAVID LANG: Five kids are being babysat together at this very moment.

FRAN RICHARD: Where would you go, if you had a night out?

DAVID LANG: The New Jersey Nets!

MICHAEL GORDON: We go to a lot of concerts.

JULIA WOLFE: We do go to a lot of concerts.

FRANK J. OTERI: Would you go to a concert of Brahms symphonies?

MICHAEL GORDON: No. [laughs]

DAVID LANG: I would. Michael says NO. I say yeah.

JULIA WOLFE: Brahms, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: Without naming names, Orchestra X concert that plays overture, concerto with a soloist, and a standard rep symphony - that program. Would you go to that concert?

JULIA WOLFE: Probably not.

DAVID LANG: You didn't make it sound very good.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm sorry.

DAVID LANG: You didn't sell it.