

Los Angeles Times

[Twigs break, cans bang and L.A. Philharmonic soars with Mahler](#)

[excerpt]

by Mark Swed

Los Angeles Times

October 3, 2014

For Thursday's program, Dudamel paired the Mahler Fifth with the U.S. premiere of David Lang's "man made," a percussion concerto the L.A. Phil co-commissioned with the BBC Symphony in London. An exceptional Dudamel tradition has been to begin every season with a newly commissioned piece.



The program, which runs through Sunday, is profound. Neither Mahler's symphony nor Lang's new concerto break the mold. Rather, in ways deep and meaningful, they question progress while embracing it.

The innovation in Lang's concerto, written for the ensemble So Percussion, is evasive. The four percussionists (Eric Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski and Jason Treuting) begin by sitting in the front of the orchestra snapping twigs. Light amplification is used so that you can also hear a twig drop, but barely.

Making music from amplified plants is not new. Lang is a native Angeleno who has gone on to glory as a popular and Pulitzer Prize-winning New York composer and co-founder of Bang on a Can. For his L.A. Phil debut he has turned for inspiration to the first composer to bang on a can, John Cage, another Angeleno who migrated to New York and happens to be the first to snap an amplified twig and call it music.

Along with the twigs, the soloists strike tuned wine bottles, a steel drum, a trap set, xylophones and other conventional and found instruments. Of course they bang on a can – trash cans, in this case. The orchestral percussionists first respond as what Lang calls "translators," catching the soloists' sounds and then conveying them to the rest of the orchestra with them.

Strings and winds find their own asymmetrical rhythms, with thick and tonally colorful percussive-like attacks. The brass have lines that flow like lava. There are four cycles, and in each the orchestra slowly builds in sound and complexity, transforming and overwhelming the soloists.

Lang has likened this process to our relationship with nature. In loving our environment, we built around it and soon hide it. But "man made" need not be apocalyptic. Nature is not so much lost as transformed and even enhanced.