

Bang on a Can: Music Among Friends

MOMA

May 23rd and 24th, 7pm
The Roy and Niuta Titus 1 Theater

Program Notes by David Lang

These two concerts are offered in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*. It is a fitting name for an exhibition that highlights an artist who was so connected to all the creative arts and artists around him. But it is especially fitting for us to highlight Rauschenberg among his musical friends. The time that Rauschenberg spent among musicians and composers had a powerful, discipline-changing effect on our musical landscape, in New York and around the world.

Rauschenberg collaborated closely with the composers who came to be known as the New York School: John Cage, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, David Tudor. Many of these collaborations were mediated through dance, in particular with choreographer Merce Cunningham, whose company became a kind of laboratory for collaborative experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s. Rauschenberg's contributions to this world, in concept, set, costume, lighting, and staging, are well documented. What is less known is the influence he had on the lives, output, and careers of the composers themselves. These two concerts are designed to focus on music that in some way depended on Rauschenberg's generosity and influence.

Rauschenberg's connection to Morton Feldman is a great example. Feldman was a young, unknown composer when he met Rauschenberg. He was experimenting with how to use graphs as musical scores, leaving lots of room for interpretation by his performers, of which there had only been a few. At that point Feldman had had almost no music performed in public. Rauschenberg invited Feldman to give a solo concert, as part of his 1955 exhibition at the Egan Gallery in New York. It was the first concert anywhere that focused exclusively on Feldman and his music.

Feldman is represented in our concerts with his piece *Ixion*, originally written in 1958 for Cunningham's piece *Summerspace* and revised a few years later. Rauschenberg designed the set and costumes for *Summerspace*. Feldman's score was a giant graph that indicated the number of notes in each musical event; the effect it created was a pointillistic soundscape, which he said was a tribute to the dots Rauschenberg had placed all over his costumes for the dancers.

Our concerts also celebrate Rauschenberg's invention of the Combine, his revolutionary blurring of the boundaries between painting and sculpture, between art and everyday found objects. In the spirit of the Combine, for the past several years Bang on a Can has been commissioning

composers to make “Field Recordings,” new pieces of music that incorporate scraps of music or sound that already exist in the world around us. We perform field recordings by Christian Marclay, Anna Clyne, and Bryce Dessner, the latter of which features a recording of Rauschenberg’s colleague from Black Mountain College, the poet Charles Olson.

We are honored to be joined by composer Christian Wolff, another composer who was introduced to the world through his early collaborations with Rauschenberg and Cunningham. Not only will we hear Wolff’s *Suite (1)* for prepared piano, from 1954, which accompanied Cunningham’s piece *Changeling*, and which also included set and costume by Rauschenberg, but we will also hear a recent composition, *Exercises 29 and 30*, from 2011.

One of Rauschenberg’s most lasting influences was on the composer John Cage. Cage was a frequent collaborator, and not only on projects with Merce Cunningham. After all, Rauschenberg’s 1953 piece *Automobile Tire Print* was a tire print of Cage’s own Model A Ford, with Cage himself driving. Rauschenberg played a huge conceptual role in the creation of Cage’s most iconic piece, *4’33”*. Cage always claimed that Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, from 1951, gave him the courage to make his completely silent *4’33”*, from the following year. “When I saw those, [the *White Paintings*] I said, ‘Oh yes, I must; otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging.’”

Cage is also represented by his monumental orchestral work *Atlas Eclipticalis*, from 1961, which translates star charts into musical instructions, and was choreographed by Cunningham, in his piece *Aeon*, with set and costumes by Rauschenberg.

Perhaps Rauschenberg’s most generous contribution to the music world involved David Tudor. Tudor was an essential part of the New York new music scene, the young, hotshot piano virtuoso of choice for avant-garde music from both sides of the Atlantic. He was the pianist who premiered Wolff’s *Suite (1)*, and who premiered Cage’s *4’33”*. Eventually he became an important composer in his own right, the creator of the iconic Cunningham piece *Rainforest*, but it was Rauschenberg who invited him to compose for the first time. In 1964 Rauschenberg created a kind of happening, called *Elgin Tie*, for a museum in Stockholm. He asked Tudor to create a score to accompany Rauschenberg’s performance—it was Tudor’s first composition. Tudor’s idea was to put contact microphones on all the fluorescent light bulbs in the space, about 270 of them, catching the sharp ping as they turned on and off, amplifying their hums. He called it *Fluorescent Sound*.

There are several giant problems in trying to realize Tudor’s piece today. Tudor left no written score, there are a few photographs of the event but there is no audio or video documentation of the performance, and, perhaps most significantly, fluorescent lights no longer make those same pings or hums. My collaborator Jody Elff and I have done the best we can to imagine the sound and the light of Tudor’s piece, and our performance is more of an homage than a recreation.

Program

Part I

Tuesday, May 23

Morton Feldman. *Ixion*. 1958, rev. 1962

David Bloom, conductor; Domenica Fossati, Kelli Kathmann, and Roberta Michel, flutes; Nathan Koci, horn; Andy Kozar, trumpet; Jen Baker, trombone; Ken Thomson, clarinet; Ashley Bathgate, cello; Robert Black, bass; Karl Larson, piano

Bryce Dessner. *Letter 27 with film featuring Charles Olsen*. 2013

Christian Marclay. *Fade to Slide with film by Christian Marclay*. 2012

Anna Clyne. *A Wonderful Day*. 2013

Bang on a Can All-Stars: Ashley Bathgate, cello; Robert Black, bass; David Cossin, percussion; Karl Larson, piano; Taylor Levine, electric guitar; Ken Thomson, clarinets

Pause

Interview with Christian Wolff and David Lang

Christian Wolff. *Suite (I) for prepared piano*. 1954

Karl Larson, piano

Christian Wolff. *Exercises 29 and 30*. 2011

Jen Baker, trombone; Ashley Bathgate, cello; Robert Black, bass; David Cossin, percussion; Nathan Koci, horn; Andy Kozar, trumpet

Part II

Wednesday, May 24

John Cage. *4'33"*. 1952

Jody Elff/David Lang. *After David Tudor (Homage to Fluorescent Sound)*. 2017

John Cage. *Atlas Eclipticalis*. 1961

The New School's Ensemble 4'33": Todd Reynolds, director; Jacqueline Traish, flute; Amy Wang, clarinet; Chanmi Kim, oboe; Tylor Thomas, bassoon; Linda Briceno and Alexandria Smith, trumpet; Kalun Leung, trombone; Ferran Martinez-Miguel, tuba; Sergio Tabanico and Sunhyun Yoo, saxophone; Adam Holmes and Alexandros Louloudis, percussion; Skyla Budd, harp; Monica Meng-Chieh Lu and Andrew Yang, piano; Malorie Casimir, Alexa Jarvis, Aine Eva Nakamura, and Cemre Necefbas, voice; Nathalie Barret-Mas and Yukiko Kuhara, violin; Aya Terki, cello; Hwansu Kang, bass; Adam Nguyen, guitar