

Special Thanks

*This concert is sponsored in part by generous support from the
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*Tonight's performance of the so-called laws of nature is sponsored in part by
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Performers

Emma Moon, flute/piccolo
Sarah Rathke, oboe
William Wohlmacher, clarinet
Rufus Olivier, bassoon
Lawrence Ragent, French horn
John Pearson, trumpet
Hall Goff, trombone
Roy Malan, violin
Nancy Ellis, viola
Stephen Harrison, cello
Steven D'Amico, contrabass
Paul Binkley, electric guitar
Karen Rosenak, piano/synthesizer
Daniel Kennedy, percussion

Gregory Kuhn, Sound Engineer

SAN FRANCISCO CONTEMPORARY MUSIC PLAYERS

David Milnes, Music Director
Monday, January 26, 2004 at 8 pm
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Theater

DAVID LANG: A QUICK BLOW TO THE SIDE OF YOUR HEAD

the so-called laws of nature (2002)

Part I
Part II
Part III

Christopher Froh
Daniel Kennedy
William Winant
James Lee Wyatt, III

~ INTERMISSION ~

Sweet Air (1999)
Short Fall (2000)
(performed consecutively)

Are You Experienced? (1987/89)

1. On Being Hit on the Head
2. Dance
3. On Being Hit on the Head (reprise)
4. On Hearing the Voice of God
5. Drop
6. On Hearing the Siren's Song

Peter Wahrhaftig, electric tuba
David Lang, narrator

DAVID LANG (B. 1957)

“There is no name yet for this kind of music,” Los Angeles Times critic Mark Swed has observed of David Lang’s compositions. Indeed, neat labels remain elusive, but multiple descriptions proliferate when writers encounter his works: “relentlessly inventive,” remarks Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times*; “insolent, puckish,” “a vivid melange of minimalism, rock, Romanticism, and performance art,” according to Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Remarkably, Lang’s oeuvre yields more than a quirky sum of these eclectic parts. Force of personality, intellect, and wit have made him one of the most consistently provocative voices in contemporary music.

Born in Los Angeles, Lang studied at Stanford and the University of Iowa before making his way to the East Coast and earning a doctorate from the Yale School of Music. His teachers have included Jacob Druckman, Hans Werner Henze, Martin Bresnick, Roger Reynolds, and Henri Lazarof. Two years prior to his graduation in 1989, Lang had already made a name for himself as a co-founder of New York City’s first Bang on a Can festival. A brainchild of Lang and composers Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, the first festival brimmed with youthful optimism—and a 12-hour marathon concert. Lang recalls their desire to insure that “interesting music always gets played,” “that young composers get treated well,” and “that music can actually mean something large in society.” Lang and company “caught the city sleeping,” in the words of critic Kyle Gann: “the festival rebuilt a bridge between classical audiences and the downtown Manhattan scene.” In subsequent years, the festival has settled in without settling down, growing into a year-round organization renowned for the international scope and innovative programming of its permanent and touring ensembles.

The festival’s colorful moniker bears witness to Lang’s love of whimsical or irreverent titles. He is known for such creations as *Eating Living Monkeys* (1985) and *My Evil Twin* (1992), and his forthcoming

works include two concertos called *Loud Love Songs* (for percussionist Evelyn Glennie) and *Fur* (for pianist Andrew Zolinsky). “Bang on a Can” also suggests Lang’s penchant for percussion—and it is not just cans that come into play. Junk metal, tuned flowerpots, and all manner of percussion instruments have found their way into his scores as he attempts to rouse ears that may have become complacent. Some of the instruments in tonight’s concert, for example, were constructed especially for this performance by members of the ensemble who worked according to Lang’s specifications.

Critics have been quick to link Lang’s percussive scores to the intensity and mechanical restlessness of modern urban life. Pieces like *International Business Machine* (written for the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1990 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Tanglewood Music Center) or *While Nailing at Random* (1983, for solo piano) would seem to support this claim. But Lang’s music also reminds us how wide a world of cultural references percussion music can encompass—not just the noise of the contemporary city, but also the sounds of the natural world, and even the annals of history. In *The Anvil Chorus* (1990), written for “home-grown” percussion instruments and performed by William Winant for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in March 1993, Lang took his inspiration from the carefully coordinated hammering patterns of “the glory days of blacksmithing.”

If we consider Lang’s works for piano—that most versatile of percussion instruments—the references stretch even further back into music history and beyond into mythical and spiritual realms. When he received a commission from the six pianists of Piano Circus, he responded with *Face So Pale* (1992), which adopts and adapts a famous fifteenth-century love song by Guillaume Dufay and “subjects it to numerous pulling and stretching procedures” to create “a bizarre equilibrium between the spaciousness of the actual music and the stuttering mechanism by which it is made.” Lang compares the work to his piano duo *Orpheus Over and Under* (1989, written for Double Edge), which “used single-note tremolos to create a kind of nervous singing quality” evoking the mythic music of Orpheus, who lost his beloved Euridice twice: first, above ground, and then below. More recently, Lang has devoted his attention to an evening-length piano

solo setting of the entire Biblical book of psalms titled *Psalms without Words* and written for San Francisco keyboardist David Arden.

Writing for the stage has always been an important part of Lang's creative work, beginning in 1989 with a chamber opera for puppets, *Judith and Holofernes* (using his own libretto). In 1994, he composed *Modern Painters* for the Santa Fe Opera, based on the life of art critic John Ruskin, and more recently he has completed or contemplated several unusual operatic projects: *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* (1999), written on a libretto by Mac Wellman for the Kronos Quartet, soloists, and small choir; a "comic book opera" titled *The Carbon Copy Building* (1999) in collaboration with cartoonist Ben Katchor and his Bang on a Can colleagues Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe; and the new opera *Anatomy Theater*, composed in collaboration with visual artist Mark Dion. Lang continues to contribute music for the stage as Composer in Residence at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, where he has contributed scores for productions of *Mary Stuart*, *Hecuba*, *Antigone*, and *The Tempest*, involving such prominent Bay Area ensembles as Kitka, Chanticleer, Rova, and the Kronos Quartet. His staged oratorio *Lost Objects* (for baroque orchestra, chorus, soloists, and DJ) on the subject of "spirituality, progress, and loss," will have its American premiere at this year's Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

In Lang's hands, even works that eschew the operatic stage can have dramatic, almost visceral impact (and occasionally a few stage directions). His unaccompanied choral work *By Fire* (1984) creates a political counterpoint by juxtaposing two texts: the words of an anonymous CIA agent documenting the impact of a nuclear test on the birds in the area and an excerpt from Sun Tzu's treatise "Attacking with Fire" from *The Art of War*. In the 1982 duo *Illumination Rounds*, violin and piano mirror the violent gestures and unearthly aura created by the phosphorescence-laced bullets used during the Vietnam War. Although much of Lang's music carries a social message, inviting us to question what we tend to take for granted, the explicitly political overtones of *By Fire* and *Illumination Rounds* are rare. Instead, he prefers a less heavy-handed approach, as he revealed in a 1995 interview with Joshua Kosman: "I want people to hear a number of things and be free to listen to different things at different moments,

without my telling them, as in the theater, 'Now you will laugh, now you will feel great sorrow?'"

The freedom that Lang offers listeners goes hand in hand with some unconventional choices about compositional structure. For example, *Spud*, composed for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in 1986, is famously "potato-shaped": its form is modeled on the life cycle of the potato. Several of his pieces emerge as gradually unfolding processes rather than architectural forms. In *While Nailing at Random*, for example, a cluster chord generates its own pianissimo echoes, which Lang manipulates by changing one note at a time. In the trio *Frag* (1985), short for "fragmentation bomb," the shift is textural: from a single line, to simple counterpoint, to more complicated interactions. Lang's celebration of audible process reached a culmination of sorts in the nearly static ensemble work *The Passing Measures* (1998), in which a consonant chord, stretched to contemplative lengths, slowly sinks away from its starting point.

Though influenced both by minimalism and by such modernist figures as Stockhausen, Lang always suggests that there is more magic than mathematics behind his art. This same imaginative and inclusive philosophy has long been part of Bang on a Can. Comparing the festival to shopping at an alternative record store, Lang notes: "We like the people who live in between rooms. . . who are lodged in the wall between pop and classical music, or in the stairway between DJ's and jazz . . . you want a composer who's really trying to do something interesting . . . not trying to fit into a bin that has an easy location." Perhaps this is why Lang's own music has proved so difficult to categorize—and so easy to enjoy.

Despite a predictable ruffling of feathers in conservative circles, Lang has garnered numerous honors, including fellowships to Tanglewood, Aspen, and the MacDowell Colony, the Rome Prize, Munich's BMW Music Theatre Prize, BMI and Kennedy Center/Friedheim Awards, and a Revson Fellowship from the New York Philharmonic. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim and ASCAP Foundations, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center have recently collaborated to commis-

sion Lang's *World to Come*, for cellist Maya Beiser and multiple pre-recorded cellos. In addition, his music has been commissioned by such organizations as the San Francisco Symphony, the BBC Singers, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the American Composers Orchestra; it has been programmed at the Munich Biennale, the BBC Proms, the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival, and around the world. In 1999, his music for choreographer Susan Marshall's *The Most Dangerous Room in the Hours* earned a Bessie Award and was performed live by the Bang on a Can All-Stars at the Next Wave Festival of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In 2000, his *Carbon Copy Building* won the Village Voice OBIE Award for Best New American Work, and a recording of *The Passing Measures* was named one of the best CDs of 2001 by the *New Yorker* magazine.

the so-called laws of nature (2002)

for four percussionists

"*the so-called laws of nature* is at the same time a piece of music and a piece of theater," according to Lang, "It is meant to be seen as well as heard."

The composer writes, "I went to college to study science. I was expected to become a doctor, or at the very least a medical researcher, and I spent much of my undergraduate years studying math and chemistry and physics, hanging out with future scientists, going to their parties, sharing their apartments, eavesdropping on their conversations. I remember a particularly heated discussion about a quote from Wittgenstein: 'at the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanation of natural phenomena.' This quote rankled all us future scientists, as it implied that science can't explain the universe but can only offer mere descriptions of things observed.

"Over the years it occurred to me that this could be rephrased as a musical problem. Because music is made of proportions and numbers and formulas and patterns I always wonder what these numbers actually mean. Do the numbers themselves generate a certain structure, creating the context and the meaning and the form, or are they

just the incidental byproducts of other, deeper, more mysterious processes?

"My piece *the so-called laws of nature* tries to explore the 'meaning' of various processes and formulas. The individual parts are virtually identical—the percussionists play identical patterns throughout, playing unison rhythms on subtly different instruments. Most of these instruments the performers are required to build themselves. Some of the patterns between the players are displaced in time, some are on instruments which have a kind of incoherence built into their sound. Does the music come out of the patterns or in spite of them? I am not sure which, but I know that this piece is as close to becoming a scientist as I will ever get."

the so-called laws of nature was commissioned by Tim Feeney and So Percussion Group, to whom it is dedicated.

Sweet Air (1999)

for flute, clarinet, piano, violin, and cello

Sweet Air is a music of minimal changes—elusive, entrancing, and cool. At times, its hypnotic patterns can draw you in to ponder their veiled harmonic implications and interlocking rhythmic activity. At times, those same patterns can free your mind to wander, making the music into an imaginary soundtrack. Is the "air" of Lang's title the breath that flows through flute and clarinet, or is it some unheard melody for which the ensemble provides a gentle accompaniment? "Heard melodies are sweet," Keats tells us, "but those unheard are sweeter."

Before its gradual fade to black, occasional breaks in the otherwise continuous texture divide the work into potentially discrete sections. Yet the move to a new section does not seem to suggest a new stage in some epic journey, and still less an organic development. Rather, it is as if, with a deep breath, you gain a slight shift in perspective—a miniature revelation, like turning the corner in an ethereal cityscape or watching the casual mingling and re-mingling of a slightly surreal cocktail party.

The feeling that reality is moving in and out of focus may reflect the original inspiration for the Lang's title—a visit to the dentist's office during which Lang's son was given laughing gas (or “sweet air”) to soothe the pain and anxiety of having a cavity filled. Together with *Short Fall*, *Sweet Air* forms part of Lang's five-movement work *Child* (2000), a “meditation on childhood and memory.” *Sweet Air* was written for Sentiere Selvaggi of Milan and is dedicated to Louis Andriessen.

Short Fall (2000)

for piccolo, piano, violin, and cello

“I wanted to write a piece in which a large amount of effort was expended to go a very small distance,” Lang says of *Short Fall*. “Underneath all the activity...the actual notes fall only very slightly. It is as if the surface is so active that the subtle effects of gravity pass (almost) unnoticed.” With the possible exception of the piccolo, *Short Fall* employs instruments often assigned to carry the melody in conventional chamber music. Here, however, as Lang's words suggest, they form a unified fabric—a single, layered texture that pulses with energy. It calls to mind an Indonesian gamelan (percussion orchestra) more than any piano quartet. One has the sense that there are many, overlapping cycles at play.

The work is intensely (even deceptively) virtuosic. Superimposed duple and triple divisions of the beat yield a giddy spinning surface. Focus on a single pitch—the recurring high octaves in the piano part, for example—and a rhythmic pattern emerges from the surrounding mosaic. The pattern may persist or change; it may take on a melodic character, or not, before receding back into the carefully controlled chaos. Try to take in the entire complex of interlocking parts, and you can appreciate Lang's own description of the movement: “deranged carnival music,” “aggressive and hard edged.”

Like minimalist pieces modeled on African drumming or created by playing two tape loops and letting them move in and out of sync, *Short Fall* is remarkable for the tension it maintains between motion and stasis. But unlike Steve Reich's so-called “process music,” Lang's

quartet includes moments that defy any single process of unfolding. Maybe there are multiple processes at work, or maybe the composer simply has a few surprises up his sleeve.

Short Fall was written for Stockholm's Pearls Before Swine Experience and is dedicated to Lynn Garon.

Are You Experienced? (1987, rev. 1989)

for narrator, electric tuba, and thirteen players

It has been nearly four decades since Jimi Hendrix's landmark tribute to the counterculture of the sixties, and fifteen years since David Lang reprised his famous question: “Are You Experienced?” Much has changed in the worlds of popular and classical music in the time that has elapsed between Hendrix's question and Lang's, and, as a result, we can hear Lang's piece as a partial embrace of Hendrix's attitude, with a decidedly postmodern twist. According to critic Mark Swed, “Hendrix's song is the experience of losing your mind to pleasure; Lang's is about simply losing your mind.”

The “experience” that Lang's piece invites us to share has something to do with “being hit in the head,” and something to do with a conceptual free-fall that ensues when what might have been an embarrassing moment turns into what might be a near-death experience. Or not. Perhaps the initial blow leaves a ringing in your ears. Perhaps you become intensely aware of your own heartbeat. Or perhaps those pulsing notes are distant echoes of the rambunctious dance—or danse macabre—that comes into focus as movement two and leads to the work's most unusual gesture: a cadenza for electric tuba.

Commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts for David Stock and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, *Are You Experienced?* features an electric tuba part that Lang composed for Jay Rozen. In the score, he points out that “the tuba is an altered personification of Jimi Hendrix—although in some instances the high tech solutions might give better results Jay and I chose the options that most reminded us of a late 1960s solo electric guitarist. . .the soloist is a low tech romantic hero.” Enveloped in Hendrix-style feedback, the

tuba stumbles like a brash electric guitar moving in unexpectedly slow motion.

Following on the heels of the tuba cadenza are “disturbing mystical delusions,” in Swed’s words, “scary returns to childhood (here ‘drop’ is the command school children in the 1950s practiced in case of nuclear attack),” and “utter confusion.” Do you see stars? Does your life flash before your eyes? Or are you merely aware of the distant sounds of traffic? Do you hear the “voice of God”? Is it the “Siren’s Song”? Or, in this case, does Lang speak for himself?

—*Program notes by Beth Levy*

Featured Performers

Christopher Froh is the newest member of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. A San Francisco-based freelance percussionist specializing in new music written for solo and chamber settings, he is a founding director of the Ann Arbor-based new music group and series, Brave New Works as well as a member of the Balinese gamelan, Sekar Jaya and marimbist Keiko Abe’s percussion group, Galaxy. Froh has performed with the Empyrean Ensemble, EARPLAY, Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players, Santa Cruz New Music Works, and at the Other Minds and Pacific Rim music festivals. He also won praise for his musical contribution to the Berkeley Repertory Theater’s 2001 production of the *Oresteia*.

Daniel Kennedy, percussionist, has played with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players since 1993. He holds degrees from the California Institute of the Arts and the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and his teachers have included Raymond DesRoches, John Bergamo, and tabla maestro Swapan Chaudhuri. He was a founding member of the contemporary music ensembles California E.A.R. Unit, Tabla Rasa, and the Talujon Percussion Quartet. He has performed with the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society, the Group for Contemporary Music, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players, EARPLAY, the Empyrean Ensemble, Music Now and at the Bang on a Can Festival. Kennedy’s numerous recordings include collaborations with Tod Machover, David Starobin, Fred Sherry, Harvey Sollberger, Charles Wuorinen, Paul Hillier and Dennis Russell Davies. He is currently on the faculty at California State University, Sacramento, where he also serves as Artistic Director of the Festival of New American Music.

William Winant, percussionist, has collaborated with some of the most innovative musicians of our time, including John Cage, Iannis Xenakis, Keith Jarrett, Anthony Braxton, James Tenney, Steve Reich, the Kronos String Quartet, and the John Zorn Chamber Ensemble. Since 1995 he has toured the world with the avant-rock band Mr. Bungle, and in 1997 he participated in the world premiere of Lou Harrison’s *Rhymes with Silver* with cellist Yo-Yo

Ma and the Mark Morris Dance Group. Winant has performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, as well as at festivals and recitals worldwide. He teaches at U.C. Berkeley and Santa Cruz, and is Artist-in-Residence at Mills College with the internationally recognized Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio, which has commissioned over twenty-five new works for violin, piano, and percussion. He has been a member of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players since 1988.

Percussionist **James Lee (Trey) Wyatt III** made his first appearance with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players last November after joining the San Francisco Symphony in 2001. In May 2003, he was soloist in the Stanford Symphony's performance of Joseph Schwanter's Concerto for Percussion, a work he also played with the Honolulu Symphony, where he was Principal Percussionist from 1997-2001. He has performed with the Santa Fe Opera, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Repertory Orchestra, and National Orchestral Institute, as well as at the Ojai, Britt, Tanglewood, Pacific Music, and the US and Italian Spoleto Festivals. He recently performed at the 2001 Percussive Arts Society International convention with Japanese marimba virtuoso Keiko Abe. Wyatt is Co-owner of California Percussion, LLC Rental/Sales/Service with his San Francisco Symphony colleague David Herbert. He received degrees from Temple University under Alan Abel and the University of Michigan under Michael W. Udow and Salvatore Rabbio.

Peter Wahrhaftig, tuba, is Principal Tubist of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra and the Sun Valley Summer Symphony, and is a member of the Bay Brass. In addition to performing with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players since 1989, he appears frequently with the San Francisco Symphony, the San Francisco Opera, the Oakland-East Bay Symphony and numerous other local organizations, both in concert and in recordings. He has performed with many other groups including the Israel Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, the St. Louis Symphony, the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus, and Metallica. He teaches at U.C. Berkeley, the Young Musicians Program, and privately.

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For more information, please contact
Adam Frey at afrey@sfcmp.org or
415.278.9566.

The **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** (SFCMP), now in its 33rd year, is a leader among America's most distinguished and successful chamber music organizations, performing, commissioning, and recording the music of today's composers. The group presents works written for both large and small chamber ensembles. SFCMP is an eight-time winner of the prestigious national ASCAP/Chamber Music America Award for Adventurous Programming of Contemporary Music, having commissioned 62 pieces and performed over 1,000 new works, including 46 U.S. and 122 world premieres.

Each season the ensemble performs a subscription series at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. It has also toured widely throughout California, with performances on such concert series as San Francisco Performances, Cal Performances, the Stern Grove Festival, the Other Minds Festival, Los Angeles' Monday Evening Concerts, the Ojai Festival, and the Festival of New American Music in Sacramento. SFCMP made its European debut at the Cheltenham Festival of Music in 1986 and its East Coast debut at the Library of Congress in 2001. The ensemble has recorded eight albums of its own and contributed to eight others. Its musical outreach programs have involved masterclasses, performance demonstrations, and an evening course for adults.

Executive Director **Adam Frey** obtained his B.A. in Music from Harvard University, and his M.B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, with emphasis on marketing and planning. He joined the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in 1991 after six years with Sherman, Clay Co., then the nation's largest keyboard instrument retailer, where he was Vice President in charge of Merchandising. He serves on the Board of Governors of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. Mr. Frey is also a writer; his work has been published in *The Mississippi Review*.

Artistic Administrator **Elaine Ng** received her B.A. in Music from the University of California, Davis and her M.B.A. and M.A. in Arts Administration from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. Along the way, she has worked with the Empyrean Ensemble, the Dallas Opera, the Dallas Symphony, and, most recently, the Studio Arts Centers International in Florence, Italy.

SAN FRANCISCO CONTEMPORARY MUSIC PLAYERS

55 New Montgomery Street, Suite 708, San Francisco CA 94105

Phone: 415.278.9566 Email: info@sfcmp.org Website: www.sfcmp.org

THE PLAYERS

Roy Malan (1976), violin I
Susan Freier (1993), violin II
Nancy Ellis (1975), viola
Stephen Harrison (1982), cello
Steven D'Amico (1979), contrabass
Tod Brody (2001), flute
William Wohlmacher (1995), clarinet
Rufus Olivier (1991), bassoon
Lawrence Ragent (1981), French horn

**Dates indicate year of joining*

Charles Metzger (1976), trumpet
Hall Goff (1979), trombone
Peter Wahrhaftig (1989), tuba
Karen Gottlieb (1990), harp
Paul Binkley (1981), guitar
Julie Steinberg (1989), piano
Karen Rosenak (2002), piano
William Winant (1988), percussion
Daniel Kennedy (1993), percussion
Christopher Froh (2003), percussion

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Debussy *Sonata for Piano and Violin* (1917)
Stravinsky *Divertimento* (1934)
Shostakovich *Viola Sonata* (1975)

David Abel, violin and viola
Julie Steinberg, piano

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