

NEW YORK

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Tiny Blockbusters

Who says a composer has to be dead to sell records?

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

WONDERFUL THINGS have befallen composers in recent years. Orchestras and festivals sign them up young. Entrepreneur-musicians build careers on a constant supply of fresh scores. New clubs encourage string quartets and D.J.'s to mingle in stylistic promiscuity. And the cost and profits associated with recording have fallen to somewhere not far north of zero. Since you can't make a living flicking more Chopin discs onto the heap, you might as well stay broke recording, oh, say, David Lang.

Lang, who is 52, spent decades beating a career path until the world finally chose to widen it. After collecting a Pulitzer and a Yale professorship, he has finally earned a lustrous recording of *The Little Match Girl Passion* on Harmonia Mundi, one of the few old labels with a pulse. Lang writes music of hard-earned simplicity—restless, vaguely neurotic minimalism that always threatens to go spinning off into giddy complexities but never actually does. The choral piece conflates Hans Christian Andersen's heroine with the suffering Jesus, and though the conceit may sound twee, it animated Lang to produce half an hour of burnished naïveté. Voices intertwine, forming piquant medieval dissonances that ring against fields of luminous choral harmony. The atmosphere is at once knowing and pure, like a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Medieval counterpoint and Renaissance harmony hang in air, but so does the tang of today.

Phil Kline, another composer of Lang's lower-Manhattan cohort, long ago declared independence from any musical Establishment, by inventing the orchestra of boom boxes—hundreds of them, scattered and only loosely synchronized. In *Around the World in a Daze* (on Starkland), he's produced an hour-long suite meant to be heard in Surround Sound but beguiling in old-fashioned stereo, too. Kline has a cinematic ear. He hung microphones outside his Henry Street window, picking up the rumble of a summer's eve; he recorded a couple making quiet love in an apartment while a rainstorm climaxed outside. What might merely have furnished the soundtrack to screen clichés becomes, in his hands, the raw material for a set of sensational études.



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GIRL PASSION
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DAVID LANG.
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