

Behind the Music: The Bang on a Can People's Commissioning Fund

J.G. Thirlwell

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J. G. Thirlwell is a prolific composer, producer, and performer originally from Australia and now based in Brooklyn. He has been releasing acclaimed and influential recordings for over twenty years under many guises including *Foetus*, *Steroid Maximus*, *Manorexia*, *Wiseblood*, *BabyZizanie*, *Clint Ruin*, and many more. Over the course of many albums and live performances Thirlwell has proved himself to be a genre-defying and boundary-leaping artist. An accomplished remixer and producer, he's also worked his magic on the likes of Nine Inch Nails, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Coil. He is also an acclaimed graphic artist. More recently J. G. has also been involved with audio installations (the *freq_out* project curated by CM von Hausswolff, with whom he also conducted an audio workshop at the *Staedelschule* in Frankfurt). In 2005 he will be writing his first commission for the Kronos Quartet. Thirlwell's new album as *Foetus*, *LOVE*, was released on April 24, 2005.

Molly Sheridan: One of the interesting things about the People's Commissioning Fund to me is that they take composers who you wouldn't necessarily expect to write for such an ensemble, even one as adventurous as the Bang on a Can All-Stars. But what about for you? Is this an opportunity you had ever looked for?

J.G. Thirlwell: It's not something I've pursued, but it's something that's kind of opened up to me as a result of the course that I've taken musically over the last ten or fifteen years in terms of creating instrumental music and music of a cinematic nature. It's a little-publicized fact that when I started making music, the basis of my compositional process was coming out of a lot of theories mixed with more mainstream influences. I was reading Cage and listening to Stockhausen and serial music and that got me into it. The first *Foetus* single was called *Foetus Under Glass* which actually was intended as a double entendre. On the back cover it actually has a list of forthcoming *Foetus* releases, one of which is *Foetus on the Beach*. And on the B-side of that single, the first three minutes are serial music.

I do what I do and then things sort of come to me as the result. Particularly some of the commissions that I'm getting now are the result of a project I started a couple of years ago under the name *Manorexia*, which I just distribute through my website and at concerts. That project came out as a result of many frustrations, and musically it's got a lot more space than my other stuff. I was in talks about doing a version of *Manorexia*, which was going to be strings and percussion, and another one which was going to be based on the remix project I had called *Flow*. I ended up folding those two projects in with another project of mine, *Steroid Maximus*, which is also instrumental, and I worked

out what it would take to realize it, which is an 18-piece ensemble. So I set about working with this orchestrator, Steven Bernstein, dissecting what I had written, rearranging and re-voicing it for those instruments, and I think that process opened up some avenues as well.

MS: With references like Stockhausen and serial music, what sort of musical education did you come out of?

JGT: I've always had very broad musical tastes. I'd gone to see Steve Reich, Phil Glass. I saw John Cage, too, in London in those years. And I was working in a record store and investigated all that stuff and still have a huge collection from those days.

Very young I had learned a couple of instruments that never really stuck. I'd learned the cello and percussion but I never really was adept at reading music—it wasn't an instinctive thing. So I had sort of put those down and then later on I started picking up bass guitar and then I started borrowing synthesizers and experimenting with tapes and things like that. I moved to London in the late '70s in the post-punk era and that was a really fertile time for experimentation. There'd been a sort of democratization process, you know, about not needing technique to create, skills coming maybe a bit before ideas and implementation of them. I was working with this kind of avant-garde group called Nurse With Wound. What I was doing came about as a result of directly using the recording process as a compositional tool which meant I used the studio as my instrument. I would have as much technique as it required to make any one overdub, and then I would process that or put down another instrument over that.

In those days that was pre-MIDI, pre-sampling technology. I developed on those early records several different numerical systems of how to execute my stuff. I was working in an 8-track studio and the stuff that I was doing was pretty dense, so since I was playing all the instruments, I'd have to work out what order I'd make the overdubs in to create the density of what I wanted to do. So I'd have to fill up the tracks and bounce them to another track and so on, and I'd have to have this order worked out and also plotting things in different ways. And then I sort of moved away from that after a year or two. My processes change all the time.

MS: But obviously not a notation process you could use for Bang on a Can, so I'm curious, with that background and that experience, how you approached writing the piece that you've created for Bang on a Can.

JGT: Well, I thought about it a lot, and I was aware of what the instrumentation was, but I didn't want to start writing for the sound of those instruments. I recorded a piece first and then went back and re-voiced it for the instruments, which was difficult because I was using a lot of orchestral sounds and much more dense stuff. It starts off based on some instructions and then it moves on to the score. The starting point on this was making a little fake twelve-tone thing that wasn't strictly twelve-tone, but it was a piano motif that I wanted to experiment with which wasn't bound by any one time signature. I tend to know where I want to take the piece next. I think it's sort of bound by a weird cinematic process. I imagine a scenario which isn't necessarily married to a story but, having listened to a lot of soundtracks disembodied from the film, which I do, I like the way you get unexpected twists and turns. They are obviously created to mirror the action on the screen, but when you hear it without that you get a lot of interesting dynamics. You make up a more abstract pattern of why they're happening. I find that has crept into my own music, where I'll put in things in weird places in the bar where it could be that someone's head is being held under water or the killer emerges or something similar.

MS: Do you ever tell your audience what those stories are?

JGT: No, my audiences usually come up to me and tell me what they imagine, which I like much better, because it is evocative and I like to leave those pictures to the listener.

