

## 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 Städelshule 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.



**MS:** You said there are instructions at the beginning of your piece for Bang on a Can?

**JGT:** There's a free section where there are plucked piano strings and bowed instruments. Mark Stewart, the guitarist in Bang on a Can, plays various invented instruments. In fact, one of the things I did before I started composing the piece is meet with Mark and David Cossin, the percussionist, to get an idea what sort of different voices I could introduce apart from traditional instrumentation and to see if that would spark off some ideas, which it did. Mark's got a lot of strange percussive, not necessarily pitched instruments at his disposal. So I wanted to use those to create more eerie atmospheres and to build up dense tonal clusters.

**MS:** Is this an extension of other work that you do or do you see it as something completely separate? In other words, would you have written this music anyway in some other format?

**JGT:** Yeah, it's all an extension of what I do, which is quite a few things. [laughs] It's hard to say if it would sound out of place because there's no formula at work, but yes, it's a facet of what I do, definitely.

**MS:** So you've been to two rehearsals. Is it what you thought it was going to be?

**JGT:** It was real interesting to hear them do it the first time, to hear those pieces come alive, and now it's a matter of hearing it sort of fleshed out on the concert stage, because it is a piece that has a certain intensity to it and it really needs the dynamic that would be brought into it by the live performance and the energy from an audience. Also, I'm more inclined to hear it when they're sound checking it and we're hearing it through a PA. Then I can hear the frequency spread much better.

**MS:** We talk a lot about the "literate tradition" in music and how, because of the rise of a lot of technology and electronic instruments and samplers, people no longer have to learn to notate music in a traditional Western classical sense in order to create music that's as complex as anything else. You're obviously sort of straddling both sides right now. How does it look to you? Do you see a value in writing things down in the traditional way?

**JGT:** Yeah, I do see a value in that, in creating scores that will go on to be played by other ensembles, that can stand alone as a score and the ensemble can bring their own flavor to that as well. I'm respectful of that tradition. At the same time I think that there are contemporary ensembles that are borrowing back, as you said, from people who aren't working strictly from that place, an example being Alarm Will Sound doing works of Richard James, which I'm sure he never sat down and notated in the first place. So I think that that process has opened up a lot. You could take it further and talk about the nature of audio vs. music as well—where do you draw the line between that, really. Is it music? Is it organized sound? What is it exactly? I think it's all valid.

**MS:** What about in your case, especially with the Bang on a Can piece, you were talking about the sounds you were working with. So you created the track and then notated it after the fact?

**JGT:** Yeah, I worked with Steven Bernstein. I got commissioned by the Donaufestival in Austria to do the same thing with the next Foetus album, which I'll be performing in April. I create the piece and then reverse-engineer it, if you like—worked out how it can be voiced by these instruments. There are several choices at any one time. It's a matter of knowing the range of the instrument, knowing what's physically possible and what would best serve the purpose and then taking a look at it. For example, when we were working on these Foetus charts, I noticed it's the end of the song but the strings aren't doing anything, so I'm adding a new string arrangement. It's a different sort of procedure.

**MS:** Do you work very closely with Steve during that process or do you let him make decisions at that stage too?



**JGT:** We sit down and dissect it, usually in my studio where I can isolate tracks. Sometimes I can print out a score from the program I use, which is Logic, and we'll come up with the best way to notate it. He'll bring things to the table which I wouldn't have thought of. Especially on one or two of the Steroid Maximus pieces which have a little bit more of music concrete organized sounds, and he'll propose ways of recreating that with instruments, like breathing through a trombone. Or he'll hear a piece of feedback and say we can give that to the flute, where I just hear it as a sort of transient sound that I wouldn't have notated. So he's bringing a whole different discipline to it, which is great.

**MS:** Does it feel like the same piece by the time you're done shifting it then?

**JGT:** Oh, yeah, it's totally uncanny. It's all there. The stuff is pretty meticulously arranged to start with and then it's really nice to hear with these different feels.

**MS:** Obviously this is already something you've been working on then with Steve in your own projects, but is there anything from working on this Bang on a Can commission that you've picked up that will influence you compositionally going forward?

**JGT:** I'm kind of in the middle of it now so it's hard to say. I'm sure in a couple weeks I'll be able to look back and say, "Yeah, I could have tried this or I could have done that." But each thing is a new prospect and sometime I won't know until I sit down and I do it again and I remember what I ran into last time. I'm supposed to do one for the Kronos Quartet, and I'm doing this thing in Austria: we'll do the Steroid Maximus set which is already charted and I'll conduct, and then the Foetus set which I'll be singing. That'll be a sort private revelation for me because then we'll have these two sets of charts that I can take and do as a big piece in other places.

You mentioned not being part of the ensemble. There's another project I've been doing for a couple of years, *freq\_out*, which is curated by Carmichael von Hausswolff. We've done it in Copenhagen and Oslo, myself and eleven other audio artists. It was Carmichael's idea to sort of split up the frequency spectrum into twelve slices and give each of us a part to work within. We go and create the piece, within that space, which is then burnt onto a CD and looped and then becomes an installation and reacts to the space. We're not there at all and that's an interesting thing as well. That blurs the line between audio and music and performance and art and architecture. It brings in a lot of different elements across the board.

I don't think it's necessary to act as a performer in a traditional sense. I've done laptop shows and there's a lot of people who have a resistance to that because you look like you're checking your email, but a lot of the best shows that I've seen in the past couple of years, most interesting musically, have been laptop shows. You have to give yourself over to the fact that it's being created on the spot or, if it's not, it's being generated for this specific performance. The way that I chose to do it was by incorporating visuals at the same time, so you're not really supposed to be watching me studiously moving a mouse, but you're supposed to watch the visuals behind. A lot of those people working in that milieu are also crossing over into the world of composition.

**MS:** It makes me think about Merkin Concert Hall. The venue is very straight ahead, everyone sits more or less quietly in their chairs. Do you have any reaction to working in that kind of space?

**JGT:** With the large ensemble, I prefer it to be in that kind of environment because I like there to be silence. A lot of what I'm doing is really quiet and so I don't want to be in a place that has a bar, like a normal rock club where people are milling around and talking. I think you really have to concentrate. So no, that's fine with me to be in that sort of environment, I prefer it.

**MS:** I realize we never spoke concretely about the piece. It's a question that always makes me uncomfortable to ask and usually makes composers uncomfortable when they

try to answer. Should we or just wait to hear it?

**JGT:** I think it sounds like a mixture of a lot of things I touch on musically in that it's intense, it's dramatic, but it's also suspenseful and at times atonal and quite violent, and then moves out into open space. So it's all over the place, but it takes you on a journey.

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