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Post-Minimalism and Folk Ballads Fuel a Composer

By **ALLAN KOZINN**

Like most composers, [Julia Wolfe](#) is often in two places at once psychically: working on new pieces (with working defined as anything from cogitating and experimenting to actually putting the notes on paper) but also seeing that the backlist is getting attention. In recent weeks she has been putting the finishing touches on “Iron Maiden,” a new solo work for the percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and working on “Combat de Boxe,” for the Asko Ensemble of the Netherlands. And she has been gathering thoughts for a work for the Ethel string quartet and a vocalist.

But her schedule has also included dropping in on recording sessions for “Big, Beautiful, Dark and Scary” (2002), with the Bang on a Can All-Stars, and listening to test pressings of “Cruel Sister,” a new album of her work due out in March on [Cantaloupe](#), Bang on a Can’s house label. In fact, Ms. Wolfe’s professional juggling act involves keeping a third ball in the air: along with Michael Gordon, who is her husband, and David Lang, she is a founder of Bang on a Can, the composers group that presents an annual new-music marathon, fields a touring band (the All-Stars) and runs a summer institute in North Adams, Mass., known informally as Banglewood.

Ms. Wolfe’s early “Believing” (1997) will be on the program at Bang on a Can’s annual [People’s Commissioning Fund Concert](#), at Merkin Concert Hall on Feb. 10. But at the moment she is focused mostly on a [Composer Portraits program](#) on Thursday night at the Miller Theater, in which Brad Lubman will conduct Signal in the first New York performances of the two string orchestra works on Ms. Wolfe’s new recording: “Cruel Sister” (2004) and “Fuel” (2007).

“I’ve been waiting to have these pieces done here for so long,” Ms. Wolfe, 52, said. The scores were commissioned by two German groups, the Munich Chamber Orchestra and Ensemble Resonanz.

“Fuel,” a collaboration with the filmmaker Bill Morrison, is “less about the poli Ms. Wolfe said, “than about the fact that everything is dependent on it.” And “C an almost programmatic piece — something unusual in Ms. Wolfe’s catalog — b. British ballad about two sisters, one of whom murders the other to win the love



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Though it quotes the ballad in neither melody nor text, it follows the story's contours with a painterly precision.

"I often think of extramusical things," Ms. Wolfe said of her approach to composing, "but I rarely think so much about narrative. Part of the reason I got interested in music is because it was beyond words. When I got this commission from the Munich Chamber Orchestra, I thought, 'Great — it's the next step after the string quartets.' And a few weeks later, they called and said, 'Could you make this go with a folk tale or a fairy tale?' It was a foreign concept for me, so I said, 'Let me think about it.'

"I was going to be open-minded, but I didn't want to be boxed in. And while I was thinking about it, I remembered this song that I heard in college, a [track from a Pentangle album](#). And I wound up, to my surprise, not just using the gestalt of the song, but really following the emotions and the arc of the story."

Both "Cruel Sister" and "Fuel" are couched in the rhythmically propulsive post-Minimalist style that drives most of Ms. Wolfe's music, though both also have haunting dramatic touches. It is easy to hear the influence of Steve Reich in her work, as she happily admits. Mr. Reich suggests that these days the influence goes both ways.

"I get a general feeling that what she and Michael and David have done was certainly influenced by what I did earlier on," Mr. Reich said of Ms. Wolfe and her Bang on a Can colleagues, Mr. Gordon and Mr. Lang. "But what's interesting is that they've come up with techniques I haven't thought of, and which I sometime may steal from them. I was listening to 'Cruel Sister' and admiring her use of the open strings of the fiddle, which give the piece a kind of folk feeling. And when that open-fifths sound is replaced by extreme clusters, it's very effective. I wouldn't do that. I mean, I haven't done it. But you know what? I'll put it away for a rainy day."

Since "Cruel Sister," Ms. Wolfe has looked to other folk songs for inspiration. In "Steel Hammer" (2009), composed for the Bang on a Can players and the Trio Mediaeval, the (mostly) early-music vocal group, she drew on dozens of variants of "John Henry" and included some of the instruments she played during her years as a college folk singer in the scoring: a mountain dulcimer, for example. This time she quoted from the melody's refrain but only obliquely. "With a Blue Dress On" (2010), for a singing violinist and eight recorded fiddle tracks, is also based on a folk tune, and she said that the piece she is writing for Ethel will have folk roots too.

Synthesizing popular and classical influences has always been part of Ms. Wolfe's style. She came to it naturally and almost by accident. Though she played the piano growing up in a small

town in Pennsylvania, Ms. Wolfe had gravitated toward rock and folk music by the time she enrolled at the University of Michigan. She had no intention of studying music formally. But a friend talked her into taking Creative Musicianship, a class taught by Jane Heirich, who changed her life.

“She was an amazing teacher, who played us all kinds of things: Dave Brubeck, Terry Riley, you name it,” Ms. Wolfe said. “She was very open and didn’t categorize things. It was all music. And that was a wonderful way to start looking at all kinds of new ideas. That was freshman year. And after that I took almost nothing but music courses.”

After completing her bachelor’s degree in Michigan, Ms. Wolfe continued her studies at Yale, where she studied with Martin Bresnick, and at Princeton. She met Mr. Gordon during a visit to New York in 1982, and they married in 1984. By then Mr. Gordon had introduced her to Mr. Lang, and in 1987 the three composers formed Bang on a Can and presented the first of their marathons, which for a time grew into a short new-music festival.

The Bang on a Can All-Stars began after the organization started getting invitations to present concerts outside New York. The composers oversee the ensemble’s programming and occasionally write for it. And now and then the three collaborate on a score, usually a full-evening staged work. So far, the joint projects include “The Carbon Copy Building” (1999), “Lost Objects” (2001), “Shelter” (2005) and “Water” (2008).

“I remember telling friends, in the late ’80s or early ’90s,” the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen said in a recent telephone interview, “that of the founders of Bang on a Can, Julie looked the most quiet and polite, but her music was actually the sharpest and most aggressive of the three composers.”

Her relationship with her colleagues, she said, is noncompetitive: a good thing, since she is married to one of them, and they have two children.

“When Michael and I were younger,” she said, “we would attend performances of each other’s works, and it was weird, because when we’d meet people, one of us would be the composer, and the other would be the spouse. It would happen both ways, and neither of us is hugely egotistical, so it didn’t bother us. But that doesn’t happen often now. I love being married to another composer. We’re always playing each other music and giving each other feedback. In that sense, it’s a real friendship, a friendship about music.”

