

Symphony for a Broken Orchestra: What, exactly, did it sound like?

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With a viola missing its strings, bridge, neck, and scroll, Esther Moon, 20, a junior public health major at Drexel University, stands with her fellow musicians at the end of the premier of the Symphony for Broken Orchestra by Pulitzer-Prize winning composer David Lang.



by **David Patrick Stearns**, Music Critic dstearns@phillynews.com

Has a symphony ever been so noble, yet so whacked?

Even before its premiere on Sunday at the 23rd Street Armory, the *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra* had fulfilled its larger function in the musical ecosystem: By simply writing a major work for 400 broken school instruments, the much-awarded composer David Lang had called attention to the need for more functional musical instruments for the betterment of the educational system and the community at large. But musically? If you didn't know Lang's previous work, you might expect something like Professor Harold Hill's suspicious "think method" in the Broadway show *The Music Man*.

Instead, this post-minimalist composer and key member of New York's Bang on a Can composer collective wrote a genuine piece that's likely to have a continued life in special occasions such as Sunday's, but is an interesting addition to his larger musical output that often makes you significantly reevaluate what you think you know. The 40-minute work is written in 10 sections with subtitles such as "Unstable Chorale" and for 400 players divided into 10 sections, seated around the edges of the cavernous armory with the



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Jayce Ogren of Orchestra 2001 conducts the *Symphony for Broken Orchestra*.

audience inside of that circle. In the center on a raised platform was Jayce Ogren of Orchestra 2001, conducting with his bare hands.

5:15 p.m. The 400 players of all stripe marched in — from Philadelphia Orchestra players to Mimmers — all carrying instruments from the city's public schools. One cello — all polished up for the occasion — had a few dangling strings and was good only for being an ad hoc percussion instrument. A trumpet was bandaged with blue duct tape. A bass had a distant memory of a fingerboard. One French horn was literally rusty. They had a hero's welcome from the audience, simply for being there.

5:20 p.m. The beginning was purely percussive with players tapping their knuckles and fingers on the their instruments, creating a soft multitextured rumble whether tapping on wood or metal flutes. Waves of sound traveled spatially from one section of players to another, then came together with an aggression that suggested the instruments were trying to escape from a cage. Or maybe from their own infirmary?

5:25 p.m. A tone emerged. Then another, like an orchestra tuning up. Chords sounded dire, like a dying god from a Wagner opera. Plucked string instruments added to the texture creating a volatile cloud of music that could mean many things to many ears. Did a few seconds in there sound intentionally Latin?

5:30 p.m. The brass entered. What a shift! Minimalists such as Lang make music from a radical economy of means. Your expectations change so much that any shift feels seismic. But this still-abstract, unmelodic texture had a meditative quality. Some listeners closed their eyes (though sleep was not possible).

5:37 p.m. Soloists popped out of the groups, facing their colleagues and giving them a simple, punchy melody to imitate — which they did as much as their instruments would let them. The prevalence of saxophones recalled the extraterrestrial jazz of the Sun Ra Arkestra.

5:45 p.m. A five-note upward scale emerged, repeated again and again. Exhilarating!

5:47 p.m. OMG! A counter melody!

5:50 p.m. The emphatic rhythm suggested a determined processional. They will not be stopped.

5:52 p.m. Everything got mellow in harmonic textures that kind of sounded like Debussy with the underbrush of a summer night. Ogren stopped conducting completely and just stood with his hands folded before him. I felt giddy, and as though I'd been some place I hadn't previously visited.

The music was commissioned by the Temple Contemporary of the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, but also involved a number of other institutions and donors. I think it's fair to say they all got more than they bargained for.



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Percussionist Su Spina beats on a broken violin using its bow and neck and scroll as drumsticks.