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## Staying in the Vanguard for 25 Seasons, and Counting

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By Steve Smith



Brian Harkin for The New York Times

**The Bang on a Can All-Stars** From left, the guitarist Derek Johnson, the bassist Robert Black, the cellist Ashley Bathgate and the clarinetist Evan Ziporyn on Saturday at Zankel Hall.

Carnegie Hall is celebrating its 120th anniversary this year and many artists appearing there are heralding the 200th birthday of Franz Liszt. For the classical-music world, almost any coming or going prompts a party; in this, the New York composers' collective Bang on a Can is no exception. Still, when David Lang, a founder of Bang on a Can along with Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, introduced the first event of the organization's 25th season from the Zankel Hall stage on Saturday night, his announcement was hardly boilerplate.

A concert upstairs in Stern Auditorium was running late, Mr. Lang explained, and he had been asked to stall. "They're nervous, because we are such barbarians and the music we make is so titanic, they're worried that the sound and energy of this room will completely overwhelm everything for like three square blocks," he said, eliciting whoops of approval from the audience.

“When I went to music school I was never told that this was going to be one of my jobs,” Mr. Lang added.

The same could be said for virtually everything Bang on a Can has achieved during its first quarter-century. From its unorthodox initial splash, a 12-hour new-music marathon on May 10, 1987, at the gallery Exit Art (then in SoHo), Bang on a Can went on to establish an appropriately quirky house band, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, which is part chamber ensemble, part rock group; a record label, Cantaloupe; and a prescient model for subsidizing compositions by amassing small donations, called the People’s Commissioning Fund.

Most important, Bang on a Can offered an omnivorous, anti-dogmatic outlook. Mr. Lang put it succinctly: “The only criterion we used was, Is the composer trying to change something about the world with this music?”

Whether that was true of the recent pieces at hand was debatable, but then the composers represented on the first half of the program — Mr. Lang, Mr. Gordon and Louis Andriessen, who is Bang on a Can’s spiritual godfather — waged and won their style battles years ago. Mr. Lang’s “sunray” circled gently and wistfully, like a scratchy sepia film loop of an antique carousel. “For Madeline,” composed by Mr. Gordon in memory of his mother, was a miracle of juxtaposed moods, aptly hazy, anxious and poignant at once.

Mr. Andriessen’s “Life,” originally meant to have its American premiere during the composer’s Carnegie Hall residency last year but delayed by travel restrictions resulting from the volcano in Iceland, was uncharacteristically gentle and wistful even in its most driven passages. Often the music ceded primacy to films by Marijke van Warmerdam projected overhead, in which the fantastic repeatedly emerged from the mundane: dead leaves and detritus danced in wind-current swirls; an old couple on a bench looking out on a pond were depicted in swooping Ferris-wheel camera motions.

The second half of the program reprised some of the more successful pieces garnered from the People’s Commissioning Fund: David Longstreth’s perky trilogy “Instructional Video,” “Matt Damon” and “Breakfast at J&M”; Kate Moore’s gracefully cloudy “Ridgeway”; and Lukas Ligeti’s “Glamour Girl,” filled with buoyant Afro-pop rhythms. Disparate as these pieces were, each used the All-Stars’ strengths with confidence; all reveled in the liberties made possible by Bang on a Can 25 years ago.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/arts/music/bang-on-a-can-features-louis-andriessen-at-zankel-review.html?\\_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/arts/music/bang-on-a-can-features-louis-andriessen-at-zankel-review.html?_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss)