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A Concert's Final Note Is Provided by Nature

Bang on a Can All-Stars at Rite of Summer Festival



Bang on a Can All-Stars and guests, from left, David Cossin, Mark Stewart, Gregg August, Ashley Bathgate, Michael Lowenstern and Vicky Chow at the Rite of Summer Music Festival.

By STEVE SMITH
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What is it about summertime that makes us flock to outdoor concerts, despite their precarious nature? Some deep connection to a primordial past of fireside storytelling and open-air drum circles? A school-conditioned reflex linking grassy settings with freedom from rigidity and responsibility? Just wishful thinking?

Whatever it is, events are in high demand and presenters respond, catering to all tastes against all odds. For example, the Rite of Summer Music Festival opened its third season on Saturday afternoon with a concert reasonably well attended despite ominous clouds looming.

Directed by two fine pianists, Pam Goldberg and Blair McMillen, the festival specializes in contemporary classical music, a niche increasingly well served by bigger institutions like the River to River Festival and Lincoln Center Out of Doors. Still, Rite of Summer has an undeniable grass-roots appeal and a novel setting on the arty Governors Island. Welcoming the audience at the 1 p.m. set, Mr. McMillen said that the festival planned to expand beyond its customary three-concert series and diversify its musical offerings in future seasons.

Saturday's concert featured the Bang on a Can All-Stars, whose lineup included two excellent substitutes, the woodwind player Michael Lowenstern and the bassist Gregg August. That the group maintained its signature sound and verve says a lot about its integrity, as well as the depth of New York's freelance pool.

Starting with Michael Gordon's "Industry," a 1993 work for solo cello, was a gently flung gauntlet; from a placid, repeated three-note motto, the piece swells to roiling, distorted noise. As Ashley Bathgate played and passers-by gawked, the rumble of air traffic overhead complemented her instrument's groans.

Likewise, the bucolic portions of David Lang's "Sunray" were augmented with the jingling bells of passing bicyclists. Julia Wolfe's "Lick," a buzzy cloud of fragmentary funk riffs, gave the guitarist Mark Stewart a chance to show off his mastery of Jimmy Nolen's trademark chicken-scratch style, familiar from countless James Brown hits. The set ended with the animated hammering and stamping of Louis Andriessen's "Workers Union." Despite sheet music flapping in the breeze and a brief power failure during "Sunray," the All-Stars lived up to their well-earned stature.

The 3 p.m. set started promisingly with Mr. Stewart's airy account of Steve Reich's "Electric Counterpoint." But a sudden shower caused a mass exodus, and, after a pause for assessment, the concert was cut short: a first for this appealing festival.

The Rite of Summer Music Festival continues with a performance by Fireworks Ensemble and Ljova and Friends on Aug. 10, Colonels' Row, Governors Island; riteofsummer.com.

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