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Music review: Steve Reich's 75th birthday concert at Disney Hall

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By Mark Swed



Tuesday night, for its Green Umbrella Concert, the Los Angeles Philharmonic invited the Bang on a Can All Stars to pay tribute to Steve Reich. The line for last-minute tickets at Walt Disney Concert Hall was already long two hours before the concert.

The enthusiastic, engrossed audience included all types — rockers, new music fans and the traditional symphony crowd. One of those in jeans and a polo shirt was Gustavo Dudamel, who dashed out of a Mahler choral rehearsal just in time to hear Reich's classic "Music for 18 Musicians," after intermission. A retrospective of Reich, performed by musicians who live and breath his music, made attendance at this kind of event one of music's memorable experiences.

Twenty-five years ago Reich was an important composer but still viewed as a pioneering Minimalist, distinct from the musical mainstream. And 25 years ago, Bang on a Can was a new collective of composers fresh out of Yale. So impudently anti-institutional was the first Bang on a Can marathon in New York that the guest of a critic (this critic) was told he had to buy his own ticket because he worked for a music publisher.

Now both Reich and Bang on a Can are major forces in the musical world. Reich, who turned 75 in October, is admired by classical musicians for the near Bachian structural integrity and singularity of his work. He is also as close to a rock star as a composer can get these days. Progressive pop musicians remix him. Advertising rips him off. The establishment awards him: He possesses both a Pulitzer Prize and an honorary doctorate from Juilliard.

Meanwhile, Bang on a Can has become an institution itself — boasting an ensemble (the All Stars), record label (Cantaloupe Music), publishing arm, teaching institute and summer music festival (at MASS MoCA in the Berkshires), annual New York marathons, staged productions and a commissioning program. No composer is as much of a father figure to Bang on a Can as Reich. Thus the coincidence of the collective's 25th anniversary and the composer's big birthday made a tribute all but inevitable.

What was not, perhaps, so predictable Tuesday was the degree to which Reich retains his edge and Bang on a Can its feistiness. Performances were less polished than infectious. The authenticity was in a spirit that can't be canned, except, of course, it was very much *Canned*.

The concert began with examples of the early Reich as rhythmic phase-shifter. The composer and Can percussionist David Cossin clapped, one in a fixed pattern, the other moving out of phase. "Clapping Music" plays tricks with a listener's mind, not only because of the rhythmic confusion, but also through the human character of rigid sound made directly on the body.

Cossin then provided his own startlingly original version of Reich's 1967 "Piano Phase," retitled "Video Phase." Instead of having two pianos moving in and out of phase to create insanely complex patterns, Cossin performed the score with MIDI percussion pods on poles. He stood behind a pre-recorded video of him playing one part as he played the other live, looking like a four-armed Shiva.

The one recent work of the evening was the West Coast premiere of "2X5," written for the All Stars to open a 2009 Kraftwerk concert. The All Stars is a six-member ensemble (cello, piano, clarinet, guitar, bass and percussion), and Reich removed the cello and clarinet (putting Can clarinetist Evan Ziporyn on piano), added another guitar and made them a rock band with electric instruments.

As Reich often does, he intended this for the ensemble to play against a recording of itself, unless, that is, another rock band can be found that can read music and play difficult rhythmic structures. One could be here, and among the additional guitarists was Gyan Riley (the son of Terry Riley, whose seminal Minimalist "In C" helped set Reich on his own path).

The three-movement piece contains typically Reichian pulsing and phasing and snappy short melodies, but the sound is new and exhilarating. The thick squeal of electric guitars, the raucousness of funky piano, the earthiness of electric bass, the drive of a drum kit all bespoke a rebellious freedom. The thickly blended guitar chord created a fuzzy, sensual harmony. There was also a battle-of-the-bands attitude that could never be equaled with a pre-recorded version.

"Music for 18 Musicians," Reich's hour-long 1976 score, is the work that made his reputation as a serious composer. It is now a classic -- widely performed, studied, analyzed. For Tuesday's performance, the All Stars were fortified by members of Red Fish Blue Fish, a UC San Diego ensemble founded by former All Star percussionist Steven Schick.

The All Stars added a rollicking quality to the score's 11 sections, each a wondrously pulsating (and pulsing) study on a chord. Some of the younger USCD players were on the timid side, and Reich, who amplifies everything, was not flawless in his operation the of the soundboard. But this is music clearly for keeps, its essential vitality movingly passed on to a new generation.

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Photo: David Cossin and Steve Reich performing "Clapping Music" at Walt Disney Concert Hall Tuesday. Credit: Francine Orr/Los Angeles Times.