

Music

Long Play festival hits high with sensational performance of Steve Reich masterpiece – review

The minimalist composer's work, including Music for 18 Musicians, was celebrated at various venues in Brooklyn, New York



Composer Steve Reich © Yannick Coupanec/Bridgeman Images

George Grella MAY 7 2024

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Composers David Lang, Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon and their All-Stars ensemble launched the first Bang on a Can 24-hour concert of new music (of all kinds) in 1987. The marathon started getting shorter earlier this century and, after delays arising from the Covid pandemic, it has now essentially been replaced by the Long Play festival, which last weekend brought dozens of concerts to multiple venues in and around the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

This third edition featured a focus on minimalist composer Steve Reich, who together with peers such as Philip Glass inspired the generation of post-minimalist composers that counts Lang, Wolfe and Gordon among its leading figures. There was music by the Bang on a Can founders and Glass, but Reich's dominated, with four sets that included the masterpieces *Drumming*, *Music for 18 Musicians* and *Different Trains*.

Approaching 88, Reich is still making new music and was in attendance for the world premiere performance by bassoonist Rebekah Heller of *Grand Street Counterpoint*, a reworking of his 2003 *Cello Counterpoint* for soloist and multichannel tape. An overflow crowd at Bric arts centre heard how easily the music transferred to the mellow, throaty massed bassoons. Heller's verve and phrasing gave it a modern pop feel, but multichannel tape means amplification and mixing, the weak point here.

That was also the problem with the Mivos Quartet's set of Reich's complete string quartet music, which suffered from a seriously bad mix. Mivos was precise, but much of the taped audio was buried in the dense sound, and the viola frequently swamped the other instruments. *WTC 9/11* was a jumble, *Triple Quartet* exciting but blunt.



Bang on a Can All-Stars perform Steve Reich's 'Music for 18 Musicians' © Stephanie Berger

In *Different Trains*, Mivos's playing channelled deep emotional intensity. Though much of the speaking was unclear to those not familiar with the work, the simple statement in the last movement, "But today, they're all gone" — referring both to the trains and much of European Jewry — still had the punch of loss and desolation.

On Sunday afternoon, percussionist Kuniko played the quartet piece *Drumming* with solo tape, one she produced. This was a virtuosic performance, full of focus, energy and stunning moments, such as her intricate cross-stick marimba playing. It was engrossing to see her playing alongside her taped self, though in "Part IV" she overdid it, switching so quickly between marimba, bongos and xylophone that it was like spinning plates. However, she got back in the groove and her finale brought the crowd to its feet.

The augmented All-Stars closed the festival in the BAM Opera House with a sensational performance of *Music for 18 Musicians*. This piece is always fantastic live, the greatness of the composition further enhanced by the pleasure of seeing how musicians work together to build it. Except for some mushy rhythms from the voices, ensemble playing was superb and the moderate tempo allowed a sensuous beauty to unfold. This time the mix was excellent, the violin and clarinet phrasing clear, the emphasis on the bass providing expressive weight.

★★★★☆

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