



Bang On A Can Cap Long Play Fest With Steve Reich's '18 Musicians'

Legendary 87-year-old composer was on hand for the performance, and took bows with the musicians at its conclusion

Written by [Jonathan Cohen](#) | May 5, 2024 - 10:01 pm



Bang on a Can Allstars performing Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" as part of the Long Play festival on May 5, 2024 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (photo: Stephanie Berger).

For the past 30 years, few groups have been as synonymous with the experimental music spirit of New York than Bang on a Can, and few pieces embody that spirit more than Steve Reich's landmark 1976 work *Music for 18 Musicians*. Those elements came together in mesmerizing fashion last night (May 5) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where an expanded edition of Bang on a Can Allstars performed *18 Musicians* to cap the group's second annual Long Play, an immersive arts festival set in and around the neighborhood.

In 1985, SPIN's John Schaefer wrote that the piece "is like unraveling a tapestry — it may appear simple on the surface, but a complex weave of different musical strands pulses underneath: mallet percussion here joins voices there, while pianos sneak in with the strings somewhere in the middle." An hour-long cycle of 11 chords performed with marimba, xylophone, violin, cello, clarinet, shakers and human voice, *18 Musicians* has also been hailed by Bang on a Can co-founder David

Lang as the best new classical composition of the past 50 years and has influenced everyone from '80s synth outfit Tangerine Dream, '90s U.K. techno duo the Orb, instrumental hip-hop collagist DJ Shadow, David Bowie, Radiohead and Sufjan Stevens in one way or another.

And while Schaefer's is a valid descriptor, words alone are not sufficient to prepare the listener for what they'll actually hear on a recording of *18 Musicians* or at a concert. Thankfully, longtime fans weren't disappointed last night, since with 20 instrumentalists wedged onto the Gilman Opera House stage, Bang on a Can Allstars expertly translated the singular harmonic complexity and pulsating dynamics of *18 Musicians*. The work is often cited as "the most present-tense music ever," and it's a fitting description of an experience during which the raw power of sound rose, fell, morphed and phased as if it was an elemental part of nature itself.

Best of all, the 87-year-old Reich was in the room for the performance, and as soon as it was complete, he came onstage to personally thank each musician and then take bows with them. It was a fitting finale to Long Play, which also featured performances throughout the weekend of such Reich works as *Cello Counterpoint*, *Drumming* and his three string quartets.

Other artists who helped enliven Long Play included The Sea and Cake's Sam Prekop and John McEntire, who conjured improvised analog synth epics during a rainy Sunday afternoon set at Public Records, Detroit techno godfather Jeff Mills, Chicago Underground Duo, William Parker, Jazz Passengers and Deerhoof.