

Bang on a Can All-Stars With Philip Glass

Known for their endeavors in American experimental music, the Bang on a Can All-Stars' performance with renowned composer/pianist Philip Glass at the Davies Symphony Hall on November 5 was at times beautifully stirring, and disturbingly discordant at others. While not all the pieces were pleasant, they were successful in exhibiting their musical range, innovation, and technical prowess.

Armed with upright bass, cello, clarinet, piano, keyboard, various unique percussive instruments, and an electric guitar, the All-Stars performed a wide range of pieces, including "Big, Beautiful, Dark, and Scary," a taut piece which could not be described any better than by its title. Beginning with just a whimper, the piece is quickly swept up in a frenzy of urgency and anxiety. The sound created was beautiful in the awe and unease that it inspired: it was the aural equivalent of watching a pride of lions closing in on their prey on the Discovery Channel. It climaxed frenetically in a cacophonous, shrill orgy of noise, leaving the audience spent and resigned to the impending apocalypse. When intermission came, I noticed more people than usual getting up for a smoke.

"Dalum and Sangut," was a four-part suite composed for the Balinese shadow-puppet opera ShadowBang. The varied suite began with playfully vibrant 'traveling music' led by a lighthearted clarinet. Two contemplative, lyrical pieces of 'background music' followed, with a pensive piano setting the tone. Most impressive was the fourth movement, a rhythmic and lively overture particularly memorable for its powerful cello solo. The suite demonstrated the diversity of Balinese music, which, in turn, was a testament to the All-Stars' depth as musicians.

Philip Glass' performance of three solo piano etudes was his opportunity to showcase his immense talent. The three pieces were played together as three movements of a suite. It was a marked contrast from the ensemble pieces, a classical performance highlighting his artistry and proficiency as a pianist.

The All-Stars also performed two pieces by Philip Glass. The first was "Music in Similar Motion," composed in 1969. Considered a modern classic, this piece is still as progressive now as it was over 30 years ago. Starting with the clarinet playing a simple melody, the remaining five are added, playing the same melody in parallel at one-quarter octave above or below the clarinet. The result was quite interesting, for the first few minutes, but it became overly repetitious.

"Music in Fifths," the second piece, had the musicians again playing in parallel but this time in fifths, rather than the traditional quarters in which most music is played (4 notes = 1 whole note). The result was rushed and seemingly offbeat, which helped hold my attention better as I tried to follow the rhythm. To do so, I tried to follow each instrument individually. It was then that I was able to pick up the subtle layers that each instrument added. They were unique, even though they were all tied together through playing the same melody. Equally impressive was the precision with which it was performed and the stamina to continue it perfectly. In some respects, it was like trance music — subtle underlying individual textures in a repetitive, hypnotic rhythm- but performed with live instruments.

The All-Stars and Philip Glass indulged the audience with an encore, performing the fittingly titled "Closing." It was a hauntingly melodic piece with the cello, bass, and percussion giving it a full bodied sound, which contrasted nicely with the upper registers of the clarinet and Glass' soft yet powerful piano playing.