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U.S. Group Bangs on a Can in Zaryadye

Bang on a Can All-Stars performs a collaborative work by its founders

By Alexander Feinberg

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Courtesy of Zaryadye Concert Hall

Moscow's Zaryadye concert hall opened in September with a mind to bringing new audiences to the realm of classical music. There is perhaps no better act on their fall line-up to do this than the Bang on a Can All-Stars, who are set to play at the hall tonight.

The All-Stars are the touring sextet of the New York-based Bang on a Can, a contemporary music organization which is unique in the world of classical music. They regularly commission new works, run their own summer institute, and even have their own record label. Bang on a Can was founded by composers David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe. In 1987, they decided to hold a 12-hour long concert of contemporary music, where, thankfully, the audience was encouraged to come and go as it pleased.

To define the group in terms of the traditional framework of the classical music world is quite difficult. Organizationally, they lie somewhere between an itinerant ensemble and an major institution, and, as the double bassist Robert Black described, are "part classical contemporary ensemble and part rock band."

While they have collaborated with leading figures in the classical world like Steve Reich and Philip Glass, they also have branched out to other genres, working with the jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman and the Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore. The ensemble's clarinetist, Ken Thomson, told The Moscow Times in an interview upon arrival in the Russian capital that "we're looking for people who are experimenting in their genre, in the avant-garde of whatever they're doing. We're not working with [American Idol winner] Kelly Clarkson."

Related to their willingness to cross boundaries, the ensemble emphasizes making their programs accessible to audiences. They avoid the more academic and esoteric elements of contemporary classical music, and as a result, Black finds, "when people come to a Bang on a Can concert, they're not put off or outraged." Thomson explained that when performing "we try to be a little bit less formal than the traditional classical concert in that we talk to the audience. We're not all getting up there in tuxedos, playing some strange music and then leaving again. We're trying to have some conversation."

At Zaryadye, the All-Stars will be performing a collaborative piece by the Bang on a Can founders Lang, Gordon, and Wolfe called "Road Trip." It premiered in 2017 and is now being performed outside the United States for the first time. Black called the piece "energetic," and Thomson elaborated that it is "the stadium rock show that they never got to have because they're classical composers." Both were thrilled to be playing it under the fine tuned acoustics at the new hall.

Tickets are still available for this unique musical event.

Concert on Thursday (October 25) at 7 p.m. Zaryadye Concert Hall. 6 Ulitsa Varvarka, Bldg. 4. Metro Kitay-Gorod. +7 (499) 222 00 00. zaryadyehall.com.

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