

**Oberlin Artist Recital Series presents
Bang on a Can All-Stars:
a conversation with composer David Lang**

by Mike Telin



Since playing their first marathon concert on Mother's Day of 1987 in a SoHo art gallery, [Bang on a Can](#) founders Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe have gone on to create a multi-faceted performing arts organization with a broad range of year-round international activities. One of those activities is the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Formed in 1992, the All-Stars present dynamic performances of

music that inventively crosses the boundaries between classical, jazz, rock, world and experimental music.

On Saturday, February 28 at 8:00 pm in Finney Chapel, the Oberlin Artist Recital series presents Bang on a Can All-Stars Ashley Bathgate, cello, Robert Black, bass, Vicky Chow, piano, David Cossin, percussion, Mark Stewart, electric guitar, Ken Thomson, clarinets/saxophone, and Jody Elff, sound engineer.

"I'm excited about this concert," composer David Lang said during a telephone conversation. "I used to teach at Oberlin as a visiting composer-in-residence. I'm also happy because my daughter is a student there so I'll get to see her."

Lang pointed out that the All-Stars are used to tackling a huge range of music including experimental, and ambient rock-influenced, as well as music that is academic. "The band is built so that they can do these different things. And because this concert is taking place at a conservatory, we also want to play music that highlights the fact that our players are

amazing musicians. So a lot of the music on the concert is jaw-dropping difficult, but not jaw dropping difficult to listen to. We also knew that it's a place where the audience appreciates spectacular playing. This concert has a lot of fast-moving fingers."

Saturday's program starts off with Lang's *Sunray*. "The piece begins in a simple way and tries to figure out how to take this wispy beam of light and make it solid. The intensity continues to get turned up over the course of the entire piece. So it begins in a very gentle place, but it doesn't end there."



Lang described Julia Wolfe's *Believing* as a "tour de force" for the players, who are required to sing and to perform different actions that are super fast and hard.

Commissioned as part of Ban on a Can's People's Commissioning Fund, Lang said that *Ridgeway*, by Australian composer Kate Moore, is a beautiful, introspective piece about the Ridgeway, an ancient pathway that connected all of the Iron Age monuments in the middle of England, including Stonehenge. "Her ancestors come from there, so it's a walk through cultural and personal history."

Lang said that a lot of Michael Gordon's music is made through collisions of very complicated rhythms and that *For Madelin* has two different rhythmic structures moving simultaneously through the entire piece. "It was also written in memory of his mother, so it, too, has some introspection to it."

“Steve Martland was a young composer who died suddenly last year. His music is very rock-influenced and *Horses of Instruction* is so rhythmically up-tempo that one cannot believe that it could get more intricate and exciting and then it does. The final work will be Philip Glass’s *Closing*. This is his own arrangement of the piece, which is very beautiful, and a serene way to end the concert.”

The Bang on a Can Story is an inspirational one. I tell David Lang that I’m struck by three words in the group’s resume — “over 27 years.” “If you think *you’re* old,” he said laughing. “But that’s what I think is interesting — people our age, we remember what life used to be like, but imagine what it’s like for the students who are at conservatory now. They don’t remember what the world was like before Bang on a Can or the Kronos Quartet or before lots of other things that we saw struggle to grow and then thrive. They only see the size of the world as it is now, and I find that to be kind of exciting.”

Lang is proud that he and his co-founders began with one goal in mind. “We thought that there really needed to be an organization that would try to do as much for experimental music as it could think of. And wow, we have our festival, and our Marathon, the All-Stars, the summer school, the record label and the commissioning program. But I don’t think we’re done. There still is a lot to do if we’re going to make sure that this little niche survives.”

In 1987 did he think the organization would grow to this size? “No! The funny thing is that we had the idea to do the one 12-hour festival and we thought it would be a one-day event that would never happen again, because who would have the energy to do it again? We didn’t have any money, so we did everything ourselves — we bought the beer and sold it, we cleaned the bathrooms, we did everything. Then it was two o’clock in the morning, the concert was over and we thought, that was so much fun. We have to do it again. We never planned on creating a giant international corporation. It has just grown organically from the needs of what our little world presented us. And no one was going to do it unless we did it. So we did.”

At 1:30 pm on Saturday, David Lang and his All-Star colleagues will present a Career Development Session, which is free and open to the public. “I’m really excited. I always want to participate in Career Development sessions because there are still niches that need to be filled and problems to solve, and young musicians are going to solve those problems differently from the way that we solved them. They’re going to find something that they want, that nobody else is going to put in their world unless they do it. And that’s exciting to me. Yes, it is a lot of work, but a lot of work means that you get to help shape the world that you’re living in. And once you start asking, ‘how do I take control and shape the world?’ it can be hugely empowering. That’s why it is so important for us to go

to places like Oberlin and talk to young composers and performers, and tell them that they actually can make the world themselves.”

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