

Otherworldly Sounds, Not Polished but Full of Passion

By ANNE MIDGETTE

Merkin Concert Hall was a mob scene on Thursday night. At five minutes to 8, the line of ticket buyers snaked out the door. Inside the lobby, the crowd ranged from elderly couples to bearded twentysomethings. Among the reasons for starting a concert late, the WNYC radio host John Schaefer said, taking the stage a half-hour after the scheduled cur-

Bang on a Can All-Stars

Merkin Concert Hall

tain time, "the audience is lined up around the block" tops the list."

The event was the annual concert of Bang on a Can's People's Commissioning Fund, and in the crowd were some of the 200-plus people who had given as little as \$5 to help sponsor the creation of three new works for the Bang on a Can All-Stars. A main attraction was the all-stars themselves. This eclectic ensemble — piano, cello, clarinet, bass, electric guitar and percussion — has achieved the equivalent of rock stardom among a certain segment of the music world, as evidenced by the whoops that greeted the players and the music.

It was a fitting reception for pieces that were filled with creative energy, worked out with the brave eagerness and unevenness of youth. The music wasn't polished or perfect, but it was alive, eminently cool and actually about something. Carla Kihlstedt's "Long and Short of It; a Brief History of Chatter" dealt with mass communications, its rhythms dictated in part by those of the first Morse code transmission, "What hath God wrought." It was also bursting with ideas and sounds from the very first bars: whalelike growls produced by the pianist, Lisa Moore, playing the strings of her piano by pulling other strings across them in an act that evoked everything from the birth of cable to evisceration.



Photographs by Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Four of six Bang on a Can All-Stars, from left: Mark Stewart, Robert Black, Wendy Sutter and Evan Ziporyn.

Works with the brave eagerness of youth, plus a golden oldie from Philip Glass.

There were similar otherworldly sounds, like monsters waking, in J. G. Thirlwell's "Anabiosis," whose title refers to the state of suspended animation of aquatic creatures like sea monkeys — a comic-book evocation appropriate to this intense piece of climactic outbursts and sudden stillnesses.

In "Songs Before Love Songs (A Post-Apocalyptic Requiem for the Human Race)," perhaps the bravest piece in its ambitions, Cynthia Hop-

kins called on the players to sing, creating the atmosphere of a folk church service with untrained voices over the strumming of piano and guitar, down to a sing-along of "Hallelujah, hallelujah" from the audience.

After the intermission, the all-stars offered an earlier product of the commissioning fund, "The Plonsey Episodes" by Dan Plonsey, an antic, episodic, wacky exegesis. The night concluded with a piece that seemed veritably antique in this context: Philip Glass's "Music in Similar Motion" from 1969, with the master himself on keyboard.

The show was taped for later broadcast on WNYC's "New Sounds," and Mr. Schaefer's interviews with the composers only added value to an evening that was packed in every sense: with people, with ideas, with music.



Philip Glass, the all-stars' guest.