

Sextet does bang-up job at Davies

- [Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

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One of the exciting things about the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the virtuosic new-music sextet that gave a swift, high-intensity concert in Davies Symphony Hall on Friday night, is its determination to balance up-to-the-minute offerings with older works that are just beginning to emerge as classics.

Both were in the mix Friday when the All-Stars, appearing under the auspices of San Francisco Performances, shared the stage with minimalist pioneer Philip Glass for a program combining recent works with two of Glass' pathbreaking works from the '60s, "Music in Similar Motion" and "Music in Fifths."

The performances were sharp and streamlined, fitting out Glass' simple but intricately patterned melodies with a glossy, high-tech sheen. Both pieces work in quick parallel lines whose limited melodic range and rhythmic sameness hide a wealth of variety.

Yet even more arresting was the evening's subtext. By laying claim to this music (the group's performance of "Music in Fifths" is available on a dynamic new CD on the Cantaloupe label), the All-Stars have made it plain that Glass' early works -- originally written for performance by his own ensemble -- have now become repertory items, available to whatever performers have the stamina, the interest and the virtuosity to undertake them. Artistically, if not legally, they've joined the works of Beethoven, Brahms and Stravinsky in the public domain.

And make no mistake, the All-Stars -- a touring offshoot of the indispensable New York new music festival -- are just the ensemble to take this music on. Bassist Robert Black, percussionist David Cossin, pianist Lisa Moore, guitarist Mark Stewart, cellist Wendy Sutter and clarinetist Evan Ziporyn boast the unflagging precision needed to give Glass' mechanistic textures the momentum they need.

At the same time, there is a rhythmic freedom and breath of spontaneity to their readings that sets them apart from the original versions of the Philip Glass Ensemble.

It's as if, having completed the original experimental project -- the ruthless stripping down of textural, rhythmic and harmonic language -- musicians can now go on to see what else might be lurking within these pages. The pieces, in other words, are now open for new interpretations and new approaches.

The evening's short first half was devoted to music that took Glass' lessons -- if not his actual sounds -- to heart. Most powerful was "Dalem and Sangut," a concert suite of short pieces from Ziporyn's Balinese puppet opera "Shadow Bang."

It opened with a dense, hyperactive moto perpetuo driven by the clarinet ("traveling music," according to the composer) and continued with a pair of more lyrical interludes before winding up with the rock-tinged overture. The rhythmic profile was fascinating throughout, and the range of colors -- particularly in a high-pitched, grainy solo melody for bass -- remarkable.

Michael Gordon's "Light is Calling" made an alluring curtain-raiser, its gently lapping sections arrayed like the pieces of a dappled musical quilt. For contrast, there was Julia Wolfe's "Big, Beautiful, Dark and Scary," a piece whose title describes its contents with absolutely succinct accuracy -- it's a series of ominous group tremolos that get blacker, louder and more uncontrollable as the piece progresses.

Glass did a solo turn at the piano, playing three of his dullish etudes, and joined the ensemble for an encore of the sweet-toned "Closing" from "Glassworks."

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The Bang on a Can All-Stars sextet performed at Davies on Friday, bringing spontaneity to classics by Philip Glass.

