



## Let's doo it again

Irmin Schmidt revisits Can, aided by the London Symphony Orchestra, Malcolm Mooney and more. By Ian Harrison.

### The Can Project

The Barbican, London

For Can-heads, one of the more startling moments of tonight is the realisation that Malcolm Mooney, the volatile New Yorker who left the fabled Cologne group midway through a four-day engagement in Munich back in 1970, is about to sing *Mother Sky*, the foaming midnight powerdrive recorded by his successor Damo Suzuki. As his Thurston Moore-led group crank up the velocity, it's clear that this is not canon – but is it still, somehow, Can?

It's a question the event poses deliberately. A two-part affair that seeks to mark the roughly 50 years since the

group came into existence, tonight we're treated to *Can Dialog*, a collage'd suite of Can music played by the 72-piece London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Can keyboardist Irmin Schmidt, and the abovementioned Mooney-fronted stand-in formation revisiting early songs from the catalogue. The sense of removal is deepened by the absence of the band's drummer Jaki Liebeck, who died in January; sadly, bassist Holger Czuckay and Suzuki don't make it either.

Even so, expectation is high when Schmidt, who was conducting large ensembles before Can even formed, takes to the podium. Placing the emphasis squarely on the classical aspect of the group's esoteric, eclectic output, the imaginative transition's an easy one to make, as he places motifs from multiple Can pieces into a four-movement symphony. His back to us, Schmidt sways as the strings fill the hall and the work takes shape: its bassline replayed by brass, *Father Cannot Yell* rolls sideways into a broiling *Halleluwah*; plucked violins channel the musky

Yes, they Can: (above, from left) drummers Valentina Magaletti and Steve Shelley, James Sedwards, Deb Googe, Malcolm Mooney, Pat Thomas and Thurston Moore; (below from left) Irmin Schmidt on the rostrum with the London Symphony Orchestra; Mooney, bracingly alive.

snakiness of *One More Night* before *Sing Swan Song* shears into starlit dissonance and Spoon builds into a chariot-racing crescendo. This is the musical language of the 18th century in service of a multi-legged war machine, and the standing ovation is warm and sustained. Those who haven't read the programme aren't aware that the piece Schmidt conducts after the shortest of intervals is no radical Can rearrangement (*Aumgn off Tago Mago*, possibly?), but is his Bartók-meets-Herrmann music from 2008 ballet *La Ferosa*.

After a somewhat indistinct screening of the 1972 *Can Free Concert* movie in the foyer, it's time for the rock group-with-light show segment. They leave nothing to chance: in place of the original quartet, Moore has a back-up guitarist, two drummers and two keyboardists. Mooney, rangy and grooving in a suit and baseball cap, dedicates the night to late bandmates Liebeck and Michael Karoli, and kicks off a loose, NY loft take on careering 1969 track *Outside Your Door*. The group, who recall a mid-'80s Fall line-up, cannot have the clairvoyant surety of Can in full flight, but in the scrape of the guitars, the single-minded rhythms and Mooney himself, the "cosmic coldness" of Can (as Karoli had it) can be felt. The material feels bracingly alive, with *Thief* reinvented as existential R&B, *She Brings The Rain* a desolate confession, and *Mother Sky* as glorious space blues with strobes and bang-on percussive fealty from drummer Valentina Magaletti. To close, there's a wildly jubilant glam-thunder through *Yoo Doo Right*, with Mooney shaking all over as he croaks words written by a long-ago girlfriend, and a *Hendrix-meets-Can* take on *Mary, Mary So Contrary*.

As they line up for a group bow, bassist Debbie Googe embraces Mooney and Moore says simply, "Can." And tonight, they really did.

#### SETLIST

Irmin Schmidt With The LSO: *Can Dialog* / *La Ferosa*  
Mooney, Moore And Friends: *Outside Your Door* / *Father Cannot Yell* / *Thief* / *Deadly Doris* / *She Brings The Rain* / *Mother Sky* / *Yoo Doo Right* / *Mary, Mary, So Contrary*

"A JUBILANT THUNDER THROUGH YOO DOO RIGHT, WITH MOONEY SHAKING ALL OVER."



Andrew Cottenill (3)