

MUSIC | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Two Downtown Luminaries, Still Blazing

By SETH COLTER WALLS APRIL 20, 2018

On the website where the veteran composer and performer Eve Beglarian provides a trove of streamable music and downloadable scores, she often includes a simple note: “You are warmly invited to support this low-key way of publishing.”

This informal, D.I.Y. attitude stretches back to the 1970s and '80s, when downtown music was actually performed in downtown New York ZIP codes. (Today those neighborhoods have more bank branches and fewer artists' lofts.) But, happily, some composers who emerged from that vibrant period and locale can now be heard all over town — even uptown.

On a recent Friday evening, the Morgan Library & Museum hosted an invigorating 80-minute set of selections from Ms. Beglarian's ongoing “A Book of Days” project, performed by her and a dedicated group of interpreters. In what amounted to a dueling programming move, the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the same night presented a song cycle by the composer and vocalist Joan La Barbara, celebrated for her own works and for collaborations with Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Robert Ashley.

With a bit of hustle — and a cab ride between the Upper East Side and Midtown free of too much traffic — it was possible to catch both performances, letting me, in quick succession, check on two artists who have done much to shape experimental sound in New York.

At the Met, Ms. La Barbara's program began with “Windows,” a recent electroacoustic piece inspired by Joseph Cornell and Virginia Woolf. From the

outset, it took advantage of the extended vocal techniques she has long practiced — indeed, pioneered. Some of her live sounds — including gentle whispers and back-of-the-throat clicks — were blended with prerecorded tracks in a surround-sound miasma.

This clinic in avant-garde singing recalled past items from Ms. La Barbara's catalog, like "as lightning comes, in flashes," while the lapping, ambient background waves seemed to channel "Cyclone," another important early piece. (Both those works are available on the crucial reissue set "The Early Immersive Music of Joan La Barbara.")

But any sense that Ms. La Barbara was content to stay in greatest-hits mode was soon dispelled by "The Wanderlusting of Joseph C.," a cycle inspired by Cornell's life, with lyrics by Monique Truong. The writing, for baritone and soprano accompanied by cello and flute, often skated surprisingly close to more traditional forms. A mournful duo passage between the still-obscure artist Cornell (Mario Diaz-Moresco) and his caring if uncomprehending mother (Lauren Flanigan) had a wounded grandeur worthy of opera. (No surprise that "Wanderlusting" has its roots in this composer's long-developing Woolf-Cornell opera.)

The dramatic irony of Cornell's conflict with his mother — centered around the viability of his artistic career — hit an expressive peak as Ms. La Barbara (conducting), the performers and the audience paced the galleries of the museum's modern wing, including near some Cornell pieces. But this music would have worked well in any space.

Half an hour later, Ms. Beglarian's crew amassed on the Morgan's stage for a program of a dozen pieces, written between 1986 and 2013. She cites a diverse array of influences; any given work might bear traces of early music, Motown or the Minimalist-adjacent Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. (Ms. Beglarian cites Mr. Andriessen in the notes for "Did He Promise You Tomorrow?" — the harmonically arresting opening track from her latest self-released recording.)

It's the mixture of this wild stylistic synthesis and an overall relaxed mood that makes Ms. Beglarian's music feel so personal. At the Morgan, pieces premised on driving rhythmic verve and timbral relationships (like "Douce dame jolie") were

made more distinctive by coming next to compositions that created drama through dryly absurdist theatrical recitations (“Landscaping for Privacy”) or dreamy counterpoint (“Lullaby”).

The cumulative impact was similar to that of Ms. Beglarian’s recent EPs, but greater, thanks to the extended engagement with her eclectic imagination. The performers communicated a clear reverence for the material, with the soprano Tony Arnold and the percussionist Al Cerulo being standouts in a small ensemble that also included Ms. Beglarian, who sang and played a bit of toy piano. The spare, subtle use of video to illuminate certain entries in this “Book of Days” also tended to work much better than most new-music-meets-multimedia conceits.

Swinging from one concert to the next brought on a kind of ecstasy: a blazing musical high fired by old-downtown decadence. But I regretted that the two events were scheduled in such uncoordinated fashion. For all the charm of low-key nonpromotion, both these composers could do with some more shouting-from-the-rooftops advocacy.

Just think: What would it sound like if, at some major celebration of Minimalism or of the broader downtown New York aesthetic, Ms. Beglarian and Ms. La Barbara were at the center of the proceedings and given the career-retrospective treatment?

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