

AMERICAN COMPOSER

ELODIE LAUTEN

BY KYLE GANN

Elodie Lauten occupies an enviable, if little-known, place in American poetry: in the 1970s—she used to accompany the great counter-cultural American poet Allen Ginsberg when he sang and chanted. “He was quite a good singer,” she remembers. “He always had music in his head.” And so one of the last things the poet did before he died in 1997 was send his old friend Lauten a group of his poems for her to set to music, out of which she fashioned an ambitious 70-minute chamber song cycle called *Waking in New York*. Subtitled “a musical portrait of Allen Ginsberg,” it is also a joyous hymn to the city he loved to wake up in:

As I cross my kitchen floor the thought
of Death returns,
day after day, as I wake & drink lemon juice
and hot water,
brush my teeth & blow my nose, stand at toilet
a yellow stream
issuing from my body, look out curtained
windows, across the street
Mary Help of Christians RC Church,
how many years
empty the garbage pail, carry the plastic
bags to the sidewalk,
before I boil the last soft egg.

As this connection suggests, Lauten was pretty deep into the counter culture herself in the 1970s. Fresh from her native Paris (daughter of a jazz drummer, she came to New York at 20), she fronted an all-female rock band called Flaming Youth, played at CBGB's in the East Village alongside the Ramones and Talking Heads, interviewed Mick Jagger and James Brown, got photographed by Andy Warhol, studied with new-music guru La Monte Young, and shaved her head long before it became hip. Stories of her “wild” years, however, embarrass her today, and indeed it's difficult to imagine all this given her current quiet life in a Downtown apartment with her two cats, her concert career which has included a showcase on Lincoln Center's Serious Fun festival, and her status as one of Downtown music's mystic saints.

For there is something mystical about Lauten, from her pale skin, raven-black hair, and softly intense demeanor to her intimate acquaintance with the Chinese *I Ching* oracle. There's also something saintly about her music. Those lines by Ginsberg, for all their earthy sensuality, are delivered in the music with the ecstatic, endless melodicism of Gregorian chant. The ensemble (flute, percussion, string quartet, double bass, and Lauten herself on synthesizer) surges in mild yet propulsive rhythmic grooves, often in a single key for a long time, then abruptly modulating. The music's solid center of gravity can absorb anything. At the 1999 world premiere,



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one of the soloists was a gospel singer, one classical, one Broadway, yet the three styles blended in rich counterpoint.

Lauten has been called a postminimalist—a pioneer, in fact, in that little-recognized but far-flung American movement of subtle forms within simple tonalities. A more specific stylistic locator, though, is Erik Satie; in particular, Lauten's endlessly rhythmic yet meditative vocal works continue a genre begun with Satie's *Socrate*, and hardly continued elsewhere by anyone except for perhaps Virgil Thomson. Lauten's charming approach to setting English text, in fact, calls Thomson's to mind—simple, memorable, in conversationally chantlike lines, often with deliberately misplaced accents that only bring out the meanings more tellingly.

Like so many Downtown Manhattan composers, Lauten has primarily led a career as a solo performer of her own music, though often working with sympathetic soloists like flutist Andrew Bolotowsky and soprano Mary Hurlbut. Also like many Downtown composers, she has expanded into the realm of large chamber works in recent years. In her solo music, she improvises within an intuitively-defined system she calls Universal Mode Improvisation (UMI), in which scales, keys, and rhythmic patterns are correlated with Indian Vedic cosmologies, hexagrams of the *I Ching*, and astrological signs. Carried over into her ensemble works, these correlations become a sort of personalized Doctrine of Affections like that of the Baroque era, and lead to a neo-Baroque tendency to use only one tempo, mood, and rhythmic character within each movement.

Which may also explain why Lauten has written some of the only modern works for Baroque ensemble. Before her Ginsburg portrait, she spent the 1990s working on a two-hour-plus chamber opera for three voices and Baroque instruments, although the term "opera" seems a stretch: the work, *Deus ex Machina* [available on 4Tay Records, CD 4013], is more of an extended song cycle. She calls it an opera because it is a portrayal of emotions—not, however, the

kinds of emotion one finds in the operatic repertoire, for she feels that we have new kinds of emotion today that haven't been dealt with in music. "What used to be considered romantic in the nineteenth century," she says in explanation, "is now considered neurotic. Or sick. Or masochistic. Today people would tell Madame Bovary, 'Get a divorce.'"

Even so, *Deus ex Machina* sets poems by dead people (like Rilke, Verlaine, and Pascal—people emotionally ahead of their time, perhaps) among the texts by Lauten herself and Melody Sumner Carnahan, an innovative Santa Fe writer famous for her collaborations with musicians. Baroque flute, harpsichord, and strings dot out simple, reiterative harmonies as the soloists sing Sumner Carnahan's words, equally simple and equally ambiguous:

"He wrote me that love yes he did me. He had me for it. Not in a way but the fine true small. The purity of it gave me a drama. He the man was I first entered being. Less whole but completely, I refuse could not his entire love."

The music's repetitive momentum, graced with simple themes, exists somewhere in a realm between Lou Harrison and Philip Glass, though neoclassic Stravinsky sometimes

comes to mind. Such comparisons, however, don't really place Lauten in a stylistic camp—her primary classical teacher was the seminal drone-minimalist La Monte Young, and her music certainly doesn't sound like his. Rather, they suggest that a concern for mysticism seems inevitably to push music in a certain direction. In Lauten's case, it is a direction marked by curious contradictions: on one hand, clear, simple harmonies and chantlike melodies over a gently bouncy beat, on the other an other-worldly air of mystery, a poignant blend of joy and sadness. But the contradiction itself indicates a spiritual complexity that is no stranger to the best works of the classical chamber music tradition. ■

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Poet Allen Ginsberg, subject of Lauten's new work, *Waking in New York*

