

# A M E R I C A N

by KYLE GANN

## composer

**It may not be claiming too much to insist that Eve Beglarian is writing a new kind of chamber music. The membrane between pop and classical has become more porous lately; electronic music has started to speak with a rock beat, people write symphonies for electric guitars, pop rhythms find their way into orchestral pieces about Barbie and Superman. Chamber music has not remained unaffected, but it's remained, well, chamber music. Wordless. Grooveless. Rhythmically delicate. But Eve Beglarian has been making inroads into the chamber field these days, and she brings to it a bracing pop sensibility. She's writing pop songs for chamber groups, and pop songs with a humanist, political punch at that.**

**A**nd what credentials she's got for doing it! Beglarian burst onto the Downtown Manhattan scene in 1991 and turned out to be an apostate from Uptown. The daughter of a composer—the late Grant Beglarian, a Russian immigrant and composer of semi-dissonant chamber music—Eve earned degrees at Princeton and Columbia, studying advanced serial techniques with Milton Babbitt and others. In the 1980s, though, she was already shocking her teachers with her post-minimalist tonality and pop references. After a few years working as an administrator for the high-modernist International Society for Contemporary

Music and feeling like a fish out of water, she “came out” as a Downtowner, admitting that she found the world of Philip Glass and Sonic Youth more congenial than that of twelve-tone music and elitist complexity. It lost her some friends.

It also changed her performance habits. From writing notated ensemble pieces, she became a performance artist, making her own music via electronic gizmos. For several years she and avant-garde pianist Kathleen Supové were a duo called twisted tutu. Beglarian would speak, sing, and run electronics, while Supové mangled a synthesizer. In a typical piece called *No Man's Land*, Supové made grating industrial noises over a backbeat, while Beglarian read a poetic description of a dark, dirty corner in New York City. Despite the occasional noise, you could call Beglarian's music minimalist, for she certainly inherited from Steve Reich a concern for continuous texture and gradual process. But really, her two-measure phrases, her rounded-off harmonic progressions, her enticing rhythmic grooves prove that, for some, minimalism was just a hallway from classical music back into the world of the vernacular. And unlike most composers who dabble self-consciously in the pop world, Beglarian isn't plying the conventions of '80s rock but keeping abreast of the latest dance-music trends and learning from them.



# Eve Beglarian

Thus, Beglarian has made theater pieces, songs of nonsense syllables, contrapuntal variations on medieval chansons, computer-altered disco collages, and even a couple of post-minimal orchestra pieces. Words, however, are really the constant in her work, even if sparingly used or only offered in the program notes. Her *Cave* (2001), for instance, is a lovely piece for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, keyboard, and tape. Over languid repetitive patterns in changing bittersweet harmonies, Beglarian speaks, intermittently, a text by Eileen Myles: "Now more than any other time in history, you really ought to please yourself—because in mysterious winds a cave inside your soul might be the only place to go." In *Five Things* (2001), reiterative melodies in flute and bassoon form a deadpan background to an ancient Zen text: "What has been long neglected cannot be restored immediately.... Ills that have been accumulating for a long time cannot be cleared away immediately.... Calamity cannot be avoided by trying to run away from it."

It's a hybrid medium, but Beglarian, with superb sophistication in both classical music and pop, has the genre surrounded. One brilliant example: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1994) is a continuous pop-tinged texture gradually built up by the addition of syncopated lines in flute, soprano sax, oboe, bassoon, viola, bass, piano, and percussion. The few words are all drawn (as one might expect from the work's title) from William Blake: "Opposition is true friendship," she repeats rhythmically over several measures in section one,

and "Eternal delight" in section two. In the final section she sings, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." The ambience is pop, but the ostinato runs E-flat, F, G, A over and over, and finally the piano breaks into the J.S. Bach chorale "Es ist genug"—"It is enough." I broke out laughing the first time I realized what was happening, and the joke is both erudite and emotionally satisfying, bringing to mind the similar use of that chorale in Berg's Violin Concerto.

An even greater complexity of references: *The Bus Driver Didn't Change His Mind* is a jangling continuum of syncopated 5/4 meter for clarinet, electric guitar, cello, bass, piano, and percussion. It's based on a poem by a Bangladeshi feminist named Taslima Nasrin:

*You're a girl  
and you'd better not forget  
that when you step over the  
threshold of your house  
men will look askance at you...  
If you've got no character  
you'll turn back,  
and if not  
you'll keep on going,  
as you're going now.*

But the words aren't sung. Instead, the clarinet plays its tune to their rhythms and contours. Not until the end of the piece do words come in rhythmically, "Keep going, keep on going...." And that's a subtle reference to the "Keep on going" section of Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*, acknowledged by

drawing the piece's harmonies from Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony, on which *Sinfonia* is partly based. What a Pandora's box of nested references, Western and non-Western, classic and postmodern! And the title comes from something Al Sharpton said about Rosa Parks's refusal to sit in the back of the bus in 1955: "The bus driver didn't change his mind; Rosa Parks changed hers."

That's really the energizing thing about Beglarian's music, that such sophisticated means are focused on urgent human ends. She's got every base covered, from Bach to hip-hop, from primitive South American instruments to digital technology, from Confucius to living Third-World poets, but her emphasis is never on the means. Her music is feminist, humanist, in-your-face; inspired by words but using them sparingly, reluctantly, ultimately resorting to them only because the message is too important to chance anyone missing it. Full of conscience and compassion, cognizant of classical music's past, willing to speak truth to power in a language that the pop part of the populace will understand—Eve Beglarian's music may be just what the doctor ordered. ■

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