

# READER

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## On Stage: mystical music

Composer Elodie Lauten has consulted the **I Ching**—the ancient Chinese “Book of Changes”—every day since 1975. “At this point,” she says, “I no longer have to consult the book for the reading.” Composer John Cage made the **I Ching** famous among musicians by throwing coins to arrive at random procedures for his music. Lauten, however, is more interested in the oracle’s meanings than in its randomness. In her **Tronik Involutions** she depicts 12 of the book’s hexagrams in music that’s mellow, modal, detuned, rhythmic, cosmically expressive. On Saturday she’ll play that music in her first-ever Chicago appearance.

For years Lauten has been one of the best-kept secrets of New York’s new-music scene. Daughter of jazz drummer and pianist Erroll Parker (a Duke Ellington sideman), she was born in Paris and moved to New York in the early 1970s, where she found herself in the midst of a whirlwind drug-music-poetry scene. She worked with Allen Ginsberg and was one of the few musicians to study with that guru of sustained drones, La Monte Young. Fronting an all-female band called Flaming Youth, she shaved her head before such a thing was heard of, and performed at CBGB next to the Ramones and Talking Heads. With her video opera **The Death of Don Juan**—a powerful feminist statement despite its muted, mystical ambiguity—she emerged as a premiere postminimalist composer.

But she didn’t emerge very far. Lauten composes slowly, hibernates between pieces, won’t rush her work to take advantage of public demand, and may have inherited a little of La Monte Young’s reclusiveness. To make things worse, in 1993 she moved with her architect husband to

Albuquerque, a locale she doesn’t find congenial, either socially or musically. “It’s a strange place, like living in another country,” she says. “I’ve already moved to another country once, and I didn’t wish to do it again. Most people are incredibly right-wing, and even the left-wing people I call puritans. They have to be absolutely vegetarian and absolutely politically correct. It’s a kind of reverse fascism.”

Yet New Mexico has influenced her work. Lauten recently wrote a piece titled **Unknown Presence at the Mesa**, which she says was “dictated” to her at Chaco Canyon: “I’ve never had an experience like this. I heard these notes coming from my head. I was in the car. I didn’t have any paper, so I wrote them down on the back of a tourist pamphlet. It was a compelling series of notes I wouldn’t have normally come up with. I brought that home, and it became an obsession. I had just bought a sequencer, which enabled me to build up textures on the computer.”

More often, Lauten begins by improvising at the piano, but her improvisations succeed because so much prior thought goes into them. On Lauten’s wall in Albuquerque hang elegant diagrams that form a basis for her music. Color coded and illustrated, the charts correlate the months of the year to the 12 keys of the scale, the astrological signs, and selected hexagrams from the **I Ching**. For all her immersion in the New York rock world, she’s a musical magus in the Renaissance tradition, with a philosophy of correspondences like that of Pico della Mirandola or Robert Fludd. “I don’t know how it comes,” she says. “I don’t force it. That’s why I compose so slowly. I just have to wait. When it



Elodie Lauten

comes, I put the first take in the computer, and then I can manipulate it. I work from that.”

**Tronik Involutions** is a 12-movement, evening-length work couched in what Lauten calls her “universal mode improvisation,” a system by which she can wander fluidly from tonality to polytonality to atonality. Most of the contrapuntal lines that make up the piece’s rich tapestry are played on tape, while she improvises the final layer on a sampler. The drum patterns that form the basis of each movement are drawn from Indian classical technique, which she studied for two years. There’s no literal repetition in **Tronik Involutions**, but the swirling melodies outline the same images over and over, drawing you into the work. The piece is recorded on a Studio 21 CD, but even New York hasn’t heard it live yet.

Elodie Lauten will perform **Tronik Involutions** at 6 PM this Saturday in the Festival Hall of Navy Pier, Grand Avenue at the lake; tickets cost \$10, \$7 for students and seniors (includes admission to Art 1995 Chicago). Call 899-5082 for more.

—Kyle Gann