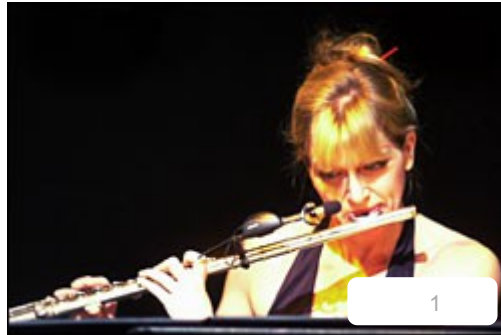


Are We Experienced Yet?

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2002 AT 4 A.M.



Lancaster is our leading exponent of the avant-garde flute.

photo: Joshua Farley

It's become increasingly common Downtown style for performers to segue from one piece to another without pause, departing from program order and leaving the audience with little hint as to which composer wrote what part of the program. This has the laudable intent of weaning the audience from composer-based preconceptions, and making the concert more of an "experience," with all the increased attentiveness to unauthored sound for which John Cage so eloquently argued. It must be ear-opening for the lay audience member, and I suppose the composers are all liberal enough not to mind, but for the critic who is expected to go home and write about which pieces he liked, it's a little like finding the prime rib and potatoes you ordered dumped into your clam chowder and wondering if the asparagus is down there too.

The November 10 concert of flutist Margaret Lancaster, part of the ThreeTwo concert series at the Sanford Meisner Theater, was such an event. Now, I've met Margaret and I could e-mail her and ask, "Which was the piece that opened with the perfect fifths, and which one had the recorded drum track," and she'd cheerfully respond. However, I've ended up doing that after too many concerts lately, and it's a dictum with me that the critic should be able to get by on no more info than the audience was given. I try to go with the flow; if concert-as-experience is the wave of the future, I will resignedly run up ahead and pretend to lead that procession, let the chips (or potatoes) fall where they may. But I don't vouch for the clarity of the results.

On the other hand, the practice does refocus attention on the performer, which may help attract

good instrumentalists into the otherwise unremunerative world of Downtown music. Margaret Lancaster has been in New York for several years, but only in recent months has she burst onto the scene as our leading proponent of the avant-garde flute, her uninhibited persona more than filling the void left years ago by Barbara Held's return to Spain. Good flutists are not difficult to find, even in new music. What distinguishes Lancaster is her versatility, a willingness to let her flute be the focus of anything from technopop to theater to tap dancing, along with a breathless fluidity of line that raises every performance above the merely technically correct.

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Lancaster's first splash of fame came with the Bonk Festival in Tampa, which nurtured a particular type of composition that could be characterized as lengthy and wandering, electronic, and full of pop culture references. She began this program with an example, *pomme de terre* by Paul Steenhuisen, playing in hectic unison with a mechanical tape of sampled noises. Far more natural and evocative was Kathryn Alexander's . . . *And the Whole Air Is Tremulous*, in which the pre-recorded track fused so smoothly with Lancaster's flute that its oceanic atmospheres seemed to emanate from her. Unless part of that was Zack Browning's *Network Slammer*. Or possibly Carolyn Yarnell's *10/18*, which was scored for flute and guitar processor.

Of course, Yarnell's piece may instead have been the one that opened with rising perfect fifths and drew a supple line of tonal melody through the air, unless I'm confusing it with Molly Thompson's *The Great Hush*. In any case, I'm pretty sure *The Great Hush* was the piece in which Lancaster played arabesques over a tape (or more likely CD, but we're still in the habit of saying tape) of repetitive flute melodies and a quasi-Arabic hand-drum beat. The unmistakable emotional center of the concert was a song sung by Eve Beglarian to Lancaster's reflective bass flute commentary. "When I had no roof I made audacity my roof," Beglarian sang. "When I had no friends I made quiet a friend. . . . Detachment is my strategy." Beglarian's father, the composer

Grant Beglarian, died this year, and recently her music has taken on a powerful emotive directness that relegates aesthetic issues to the background.

Not true of *Stop Time* by Jon Appleton, the fluffy dessert at the end of the experience. Lancaster played little tunes and then, as they were played back on recording, tap-danced in rhythm. An interesting electronic pioneer, Appleton has done better than this. But the bare fact that Lancaster pulled the feat off with credible panache dramatized how much more than just an expert flutist she is, and how much work composers will have to do in the future to do justice to her theatrical and choreographic potential. When that time comes, drop me a note telling me which piece was yours.

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