

Photographs of Songs

BY KYLE GANN

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Left to right: Margaret Lancaster, Eve Beglarian, and Corey Dargel at Opia Lounge

photo: Cary Conover

Anybody seen the line between classical music and pop lately? I can't seem to locate it. In the '80s, composers and incipient rock stars played in each other's spaces and stole from each other, the composers adding backbeats and the guitar bangers fixating on the harmonic series—but as with mismatched roommates, you could generally tell whose clothes were whose. Now the strategy, on both sides, is to sidle up to that line so gradually that you can't tell when they start sticking one foot over it.

In fact, I have a theory that post-minimalism is a kind of sonic Silly Putty, capable of taking impressions of world music, reggae, birdsongs, whatever. Ever hear a piece by San Francisco composer Belinda Reynolds called *Sara's Grace*? It's a boogie-woogie for orchestra, very nice, only no one would ever mistake it for real boogie-woogie—it's a stylized *photograph* of boogie-woogie, pixilated so it's a little cleaner and more formal, but with that boogie energy trapped in there like a fly in amber. Classical people, knowing that they're not really going to be rock stars—I mean, c'mon, get real—are taking musical photographs of pop songs and resolving them a little differently.

Certainly that's what Eve Beglarian and Corey Dargel were doing June 20 at the Opia Lounge (what a weird, corporate place for a new-music concert, up on 57th and Lex). They sang songs to taped electronic backgrounds, with liveliness added by amplified flutist Margaret Lancaster, who sometimes played in rhythmic unison with the lyrics, and elsewhere leaped in with virtuoso riffs. Beglarian is an established composer with orchestra pieces behind her, and her basslines were a little too interesting, her lyrics too spiritual and literary, her textures too conceptual, to avoid raising suspicion in a pop context. But her recording technique is cutting-edge, and her

electronic backgrounds, like the richly textured drone with illusionistically realistic bird chirps in *Robin Redbreast*, made you listen hard to try to fathom what was in there.

Dargel, though, is a young composer only a few years on the New York scene, who with his static songs and deadpan persona could be mistaken for an ironic pop icon. Has anyone else ever hit Downtown with such full-frontal vulnerability? His every song is about how he can't swim, or how in high school a girl called him a sissy, or how he used to love karaoke but now he can't remember the words. And yet there's something bold and simple about his delivery, like it wouldn't occur to him to regret these calamities. His post-minimal backgrounds, too, comprised elements too neutral to draw notice, yet combined in rich profusion. The drums never outline a regular meter or punctuate the words; they're just kind of back there as a symbolic presence. Unlike David Garland's, his lyrics aren't creatively wacky; he's just telling you what happened—but somehow the phrases come out symmetrical, and the singing and electronics, which never seem to be coordinated as they're going on, suddenly end together. A lot of art goes into Dargel's music that he doesn't call your attention to.

He and Beglarian took turns singing each other's songs, which was a trip—she having to tone her bad-girl sassiness down into innocence, he having to loosen up and emote. From my perspective they ventured dangerously close to commercial viability, but that line must still be out there, because afterward a woman came up to Dargel and asked, "Do you ever do *pop* music? My daughter works with [celebrity's name withheld], and if you have any recordings of yourself singing pop songs, she might be interested." That made me feel better.

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