

KYLE GANN

Twisted Tutu's Music Plays Hell with Critics Who Try to Keep Track of What Goes Where

Monkless Chants

Watching Meredith Monk's *The Politics of Quiet* at BAM was exactly like watching a dark comedy played by people from some planet where they sing instead of talk, where melodic contour is a language. One singer would trill, hiccup, bleat wordlessly, and another would respond with a knowing look that suggested, "Hey, you're tellin' me?" Only two instrumentalists in the wings (Harry Huff and Allison Sniffin on synthesizers) provided accompaniment, yet the musical continuity was enchanting, ranging from delicate to archaically powerful. I kept up my jaded "Well, this is typical Monk" response for about seven minutes. Then suddenly, Theo Bleckmann blurted out a two-octave vocal leap, daring three other singers to join in with him, and I and a few hundred other people broke into giggles despite ourselves. From that moment on, the piece was pure, unpretentious delight.

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Twisted Tutu
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Recently a friend e-mailed to ask if I'd write an article about pieces that are based on, and deconstruct, earlier pieces of music, like Berio's *Sinfonia* or Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*. I replied, a little self-righteously, that Downtowners don't pay much attention to earlier music, that they prefer to escape the weight of history and reinvent music from scratch. The next day, I heard Twisted Tutu at Roulette. In pieces performed there, composer Eve Beglarian reworked music chosen from the 12th through 20th centuries. So, let me revise my distinction: Europeans and Uptowners tend to rework recent music as a way to pay homage to a teacher, or to align themselves with a tradition they want to be seen as belonging to. When Downtowners use quotation, the original music is usually from such a distant source that it has the character of a random found object. Except, of course, for some of the free-jazz guys, who play postmodern covers of jazz standards to align themselves with greats like Thelonious Monk. Come to think of it, may I opt out of this argument?

What I can say is that when Beglarian uses songs by the 14th-century master Guillaume de Machaut, it's not to make herself cool by showing what tradition she belongs to; it's to make people realize how cool Machaut is by

tailoring their pieces so that they run continuously, and you can't tell where one ends and another begins. It makes for an agreeably disconcerting experience, sort of like ambient, but it plays hell with critics who are trying to keep track of what goes where. In particular, at this gig they played a piece by Randall Woolf (Supové's husband), segueing

made her sound like an obnoxious little boy. The text was from a peculiar interview with a 13-year-old Tibetan lama living in Wyoming:

"The Dalai Lama... has got 12 bodyguards around him when he travels. What do you think would happen if some butthead pulled a gun on His Holiness? Do you think those

I. Beglarian had made this mix for her brother Spencer's performance-art piece about AIDS activist David Feinberg. The mix was full of late-'70s gay culture icons, such as Gloria Gaynor's "Don't Leave Me This Way" and Thelma Houston's "Never Can Say Good-bye." In an inspired technological gambit, Beglarian had computer-altered the tempos and keys of all the songs until they were identical, merging into a seamless texture, a ghostly effect, like five bands playing at once, each fading in and out. What intrigued Beglarian, she said, was that "all these songs, which came out before anyone knew anything about AIDS, were weirdly prescient, all with lyrics about death and loss and absence."

Crunch! went Supové's sampler as this was ending, and *No Man's Land* began, a gritty homage (with text by art critic Janet Malcolm) to the intersection of Church Street, White Street, and Sixth Avenue that we all had all crossed to get to the concert: "an unpleasantly wide expanse of street to cross, interrupted by a wedge-shaped island on which a commercial plant nursery has taken up forlorn and edgy residence, surrounding itself with a high wire fence and keeping truculently irregular hours." All these pieces being run together gave a lot of information in a short time. Luckily, the concert's second half was more leisurely, with pieces separated by pauses: a perky



CHRIS HOLT/PHOTO

Bang! Crunch! Who's on First?

cal continuity was enchanting, ranging from delicate to archaically powerful. I kept up my jaded "Well, this is typical Monk" response for about seven minutes. Then suddenly, Theo Bleckmann blurted out a two-octave vocal leap, daring three other singers to join in with him, and I and a few hundred other people broke into giggles despite ourselves. From that moment on, the piece was pure, unpretentious delight.

The choreography of singers in overcoats each doing his or her own suspiciously peculiar walk; the video clips of children role-playing with Slinkys poised with '50s innocence; the artificially aged photographs that made each member of the cast look like one of his or her own ancestors; these hinted voluptuously at themes of guilt, innocence, and nostalgia that you could project onto whatever situation came to mind. The more amazing achievement was that, removing herself from the cast, Monk managed to make each singer play his or her own persona, and each one a star. Stephen Kalm's bemused awkwardness, Dina Emerson's frenetic emotionalism, Ching Gonzalez's pirouetting energy, Allison Easter's wary skepticism, and so on through Thomas Bogdan, Katie Geissinger, Carlos Arevalo, Randall Wong, and Janis Brenner—every cast member was authentically and touchingly him- or herself. Not until the piece was long over did I remember to regret that I hadn't seen Monk perform.

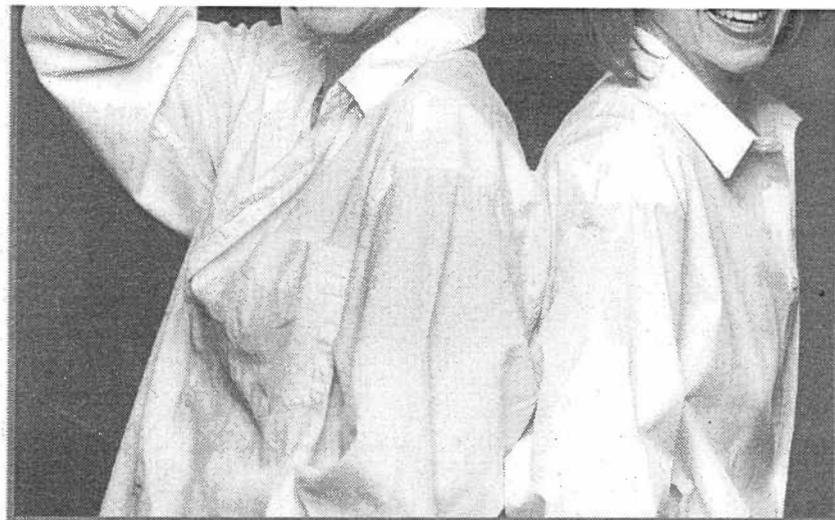
—K.G.

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What I can say is that when Beglarian uses songs by the 14th-century master Guillaume de Machaut, it's not to make herself cool by showing what tradition she belongs to; it's to make people realize how cool Machaut is by bringing him up to date. She gives back to her source as much as she gets from it.

Beglarian is also an apostate Uptowner. She went to Princeton and Columbia, and knew Babbitt pitch sets and Wuorinen time-point systems inside and out. To the despair of her profs, though, her music got more and more consonant, rock-influenced, and audience-friendly. During the '80s she was president of the academically stodgy International Society for Contemporary Music, a day job that had no more to do with her composing life than being a short-order cook would have. For years her music went unheard, and when heard was condescended to by her Europhilic associates. Then in 1993 Kitty Brazelton and David First discovered Beglarian and started programming her on various Downtown series. And so she exploded on the new-music scene as a kind of full-grown miracle, sprung from the head of Zeus.

In flat contradiction to the old cliché about women artists not being innovators, Beglarian has been innovating at a pace that some of us have trouble keeping up with. For example, lately she and her pianist partner Kathleen Supové have been monkeying with Twisted Tutu's concert format by dove-



Twisted Tutu: full-grown miracle Eve Beglarian and partner Kathleen Supové

ROBIN HOLLAND

directly into some Senegalese and Vietnamese folk songs, fading into a Beglarian song sharply interrupted by a disco sound mix. Since I don't know much of Woolf's music, I thought for a while the whole thing was his piece and that his sense of form had gone haywire. When I realized my mistake, I knew I was going to have to talk to Beglarian to find out where the lines were.

The evening's first piece was clear enough: *Hildegurbs*, a setting of Latin chants by Hildegard von Bingen, the 12th-century mystic composer and poet who has skyrocketed to faddish popularity in recent years at the hands of feminist musicologists. Beglarian and Supové sang the chants in a reverently literal setting. On the taped background, the chant (played on violin) was surrounded by a halo of shimmering sounds, which had been orchestrated in great detail, Beglarian told me, from recorded samples of a harp, ukelele, blown glass, a rattlesnake, and viola harmonics: an effect amazing in its textured complexity. Next, Supové spoke Woolf's *One Tough Lama* over resonant synthesized chords, reciting into a harmonizer that

bodyguards would practice nonviolence? No way, man. Some dweeb with a gun shows up, he's gonna pop a cap in his ass."

I hadn't digested that insight before two taped folk songs began simultaneously, sung by women Beglarian had worked with this summer: Treva Offutt of Senegal and Thi Hong Ngat Nguyen of Vietnam. Beglarian had recorded the songs separately, then later realized that they were in the same key and worked together in touchingly beautiful counterpoint. This bled into the most emotionally exposed song of Beglarian's I've heard, *My Feelings Now*. Over slow, bittersweet jazz piano chords, Beglarian sang a "found" text she had heard from an Indonesian friend, a kind of association game that, in her friend's fractured English, ruminated on the words "Makes me thinking of. . ." The subdued liveliness of the taped-drone background, it turned out, was due to Indonesian flute and vocal music subliminally mixed within the electronic sound.

Then, Bang!, the quiet was shattered by a bunch of disco songs in a collage called *Spontaneous Combustion*

as this was ending, and *No Man's Land* began, a gritty homage (with text by art critic Janet Malcolm) to the intersection of Church Street, White Street, and Sixth Avenue that we all had all crossed to get to the concert: "an unpleasantly wide expanse of street to cross, interrupted by a wedge-shaped island on which a commercial plant nursery has taken up forlorn and edgy residence, surrounding itself with a high wire fence and keeping truculently irregular hours." All these pieces being run together gave a lot of information in a short time. Luckily, the concert's second half was more leisurely, with pieces separated by pauses: a perky theme and variations on Machaut's "Douce dame joli," an electronically tampered recording of a personals ad recorded off the phone, and Beglarian's *Buncacan Song*.

The climax was the last piece, a Twisted Tutu arrangement of Beglarian's *Wonder Counselor*. It was originally a commission for pipe organ and tape, based on the Bible verse "his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor . . ." With typical joie de vivre, though, she filled the tape part with samples of a snake hissing, birds croaking, waves splashing, and a woman having an orgasm, the last of which rendered the result somewhat questionable for liturgical use. The core was a thick taped drone in which higher overtones ebbed and flowed, as Beglarian and Supové tossed off flurries of rhythmically complex counterpoint derived from a 13th-century chant sequence, "Res est admirabilis"—"It is a wondrous thing." In so doing they tapped some element of medieval mysticism, and a stream of ecstasy shot in from the ancient world to give us a spiritual high. Stravinsky said, "The great composer does not borrow—he steals." But Beglarian does more than steal; she hooks into some weird things and always brings the energy back alive and kicking. ❖