

# Hello, Dalai Lama

By Kyle Gann

Linda Fisher  
Glenn Branca

Like a medieval jongleur bending under the weight of her instrument, Linda Fisher plodded through the audience in the Anchorage, the huge stone arch below the Brooklyn Bridge. Barbara Merjan followed, slowly beating the drum on Fisher's back. From one of the drum's faces glared Sigmund Freud, his dignity undercut on the other side by the Marx Brothers. Tibetan *gyaling* trumpets blared distantly from the loudspeakers, and over them, with deadpan irony, Fisher began to sing an aria by Massenet.

*Alexandra in Tibet*, premiered September 5, is the newest, most complex, most theatrical, and best installment in Fisher's series of mini-operatic portraits of women scientists. On the surface, it's the story of Alexandra David-Neel, the famous singer who gave up opera to trek across Tibet. (David-Neel was also the subject of Meredith Monk's recent *Atlas* opera.) But, as always with Fisher, there was a subtext, and here it had to do with attitudes about women, Western and Eastern.

Over a litany of Freudian ailments—"Anxiety, hysteria, hypochondria, insomnia, penis envy, Oedipus complex, phobias, indifference, apathy, nervous exhaustion, melancholy, despair, an



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insufficient adjustment to my gender"—Fisher's David-Neel recounted how she gave up opera for séances, contemplated suicide, then asked, "Buddha! If I kill myself will I be reincarnated to suffer the consequences? And do all this again? No!" Instead, she headed for Tibet, quoting passages of the search for Shangri-la from the '30s pop novel *Lost Horizon*, and finally asked the 13th Dalai Lama for enlightenment. "But you're a woman!" he says. "Your Holiness," she replies, "that's quite observant." (Actually, *Alexandra* grew partly from a meeting between Fisher and the present Dalai Lama, who picked her out of a crowd to bless her.)

Fisher's songs, like Laurie Anderson's, are channels for femi-

nine anger, and she veers more toward performance art than she did in her David Tudor/electronic-gizmo days. Her beef, briefly, is the worship of science as the ultimate patriarchal authority symbol, and the resulting undervaluation of spirituality, art, and women. But for Anderson, music is a pretext, and the anger is meant to galvanize the audience; for Fisher, musical form is a lightning rod to absorb the anger, and the anger melts the quotations to make the form. Anderson is an activist, but Fisher is all composer, one whose music is fueled by rage and tempered by humor and resignation.

The "Scientist" series, in three sections so far and all performed at this concert, documents Fish-

er's search for a congenial persona. *The Scientist* hid its anger beneath a surface objectivity and abstract text, intriguing but difficult to connect with. In *Margaret in Bali*, resentment burst onto the surface; questioned about sex, Margaret (Mead) fumes, "Me? I'm a scientist, not an artist. I have an international reputation!" Counterpoint was elegant in both *Scientist* and *Margaret*, but the latter was more seductive and better-humored, punctuating Margaret's protests with a resigned "ohhhhhkay," and surrounding them with gorgeously synthesized gamelan patterns. The concert's one non-scientific work, *Girlfriends*, was a beautiful, Harold Budd-ish ambient piece, repetitive without being minimalist, and mellow despite its raucous sampled noises.

If *Margaret* was a telling, two-sided snapshot of Mead/Fisher, *Alexandra* was a three-dimensional portrait, fleshed out by Merjan's presence as interrogator and by its wealth of references: Tibetan music, French opera, and the film score from *Lost Horizon* linked by a chirpy ritornello. If there's a difficulty in perceiving Fisher's work, it's that it comes so close to rock and performance art without abandoning an intricate sense of composition. Her pieces are so packed with detail, and brief enough, that you want to hear them again immediately. *Big Mouth*, her most widely performed theater work (though omitted from this concert), is a funny, Warner Bros.-inspired parody on psychoanalysis, but every time I've heard it new levels of satire have come to the surface. The same will be true, I'm sure, of

*Alexandra in Tibet*.

I wish I could report that I heard Glenn Branca's five orchestra works August 14. What I heard, though, was a mass of quasi-orchestral air waves bounced into sonic mush by the World Financial Center's canyonlike acoustics. Glen Cortese had to conduct his New York Chamber Sinfonia pretty lugubriously in order not to end each piece before its first note's echoes had died away, and I strained my ears trying to distinguish between contrapuntal lines and acoustic illusions.

What made the mush especially sad was that Branca's jangling orchestral minimalism, full of bell chants and repeating rhythmic figures, already sounds distressingly reminiscent of swelling, melody-less tone poems with titles like "The Sea" by mystic Britishers such as Sir Arnold Bax and Cyril Scott; a little blurring was enough to tip it over the edge. An exception was *Harmonic Series Chords*, whose 12-, 16-, and 20-beat-long sonorities offered new definitions of consonance and dissonance in their crescendoing resolutions. I respect what Branca's trying to do in revamping the concept of his guitar music for unamplified ensemble, but the result increases my suspicion that the orchestra, with its organlike choirs of blended colors, is an inherently romantic/early modernist medium that no 1990s American will ever make gracefully his own.

Too, these pieces were written as backgrounds to dance and were thus out of context, perhaps another reason for not reviewing them. Come to think of it, forget I said anything. ■

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