

KYLE GANN

Elodie Lauten's Opera for the Psychoanalyzed Generation

Beauty Guerrilla

One of the most accessible—indeed most romantic—composers around joins Lauten for the October 30 Interpretations concert. Beth Anderson writes music somewhere between minimalism and romanticism: sweetly melodic and sometimes repetitive, though not particularly more so than a lot of 19th-century music was. She calls most of her instrumental pieces "swales," a term for a meadow or marsh in which a lot of plants grow together. The pieces are collages, not of quotations from other music, but of her own original material cut up and spliced together. "In 1985," she explains, "a horse named Swale won the Kentucky Derby." Anderson's originally from Kentucky. "I'd never heard the word, so I looked it up, and thought, what a great name for a genre." Just as you'll see Queen Anne's lace recur from one meadow to another, some of the same tunes end up in one of Anderson's swales after another.



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Suite Emotion

Death of Don Juan and her synthesizer improvisations called *Tronik Involutions*, consists of tonal, minimalist melodies so chaotically layered that your ear can't find a single line to focus on. The other stream, heard in keyboard pieces like *Sonata Ordinaire* and *Imaginary Husband*, is moody and dark, yet couched in clear-cut, classical melodic textures; it always reminds me of the murky transitional pieces of Baroque-Classical composers like W. F. Bach. So she's kind of a neo-Baroque, meditation-oriented postminimalist. No wonder the public can be enchanted by her music yet almost immediately forget what it sounds like.

Further, the two streams are unified by a theoretical construct I have trouble explaining, and I've studied it: Universal Mode Improvisation, wherein the 12 musical keys are correlated with hexagrams from the *I Ching*, astrological signs, colors, even seasons and animals. Lauten works in pre-20th-century tunings such as Velotti-Young temperament, and tunes her music not to A-440 as modern orchestras do, but—like Indian musicians—to a slightly flat C# that is supposedly an octave related to the rotation of the earth, and

But what I realized is that if you go through the intensity of emotion, at some point there's an awakening that opens you up to another plane of consciousness. Most of the time, people will not start praying until they're under a lot of emotional stress. Then they start thinking about what will uplift them. The purpose of opera is to uplift people."

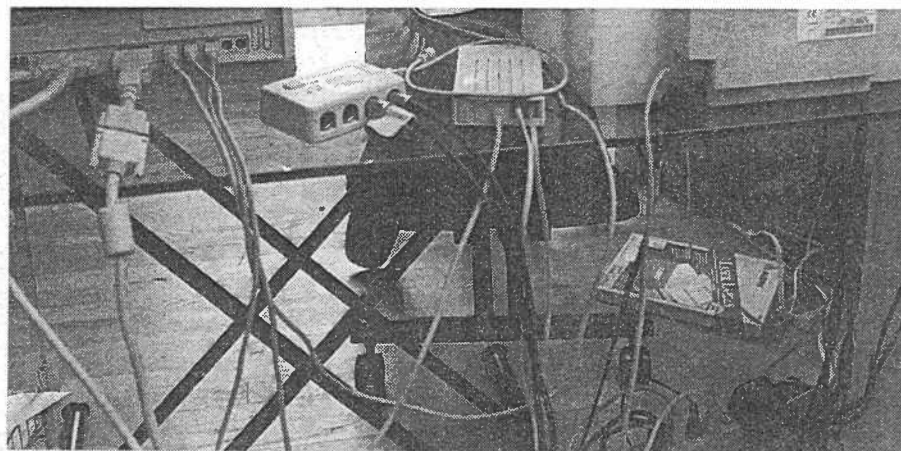
And so, while living in the early '90s in Albuquerque, where her now ex-husband had an architect job, Lauten began *Deus ex Machina* as a fantasy of cataloguing emotional types. She calls it an opera in defiance of old operas, which are based on emotions she thinks people no longer experience in the late 20th century. "The whole pace of life is faster. Families are often apart. The media give you so much information. Even children find out things maybe they shouldn't, or maybe they should. This overload of information changes the nature of emotion. People know about psychology, so they are aware of their emotions in a different way than they used to be. What used to be considered romantic in the 19th century is now considered neurotic. Or sick. Or masochistic. Today people would tell Madame Bovary, 'Get a divorce?' And I think there are new emotions as well. Speed can give you emotion. There is a kind of elation that comes from the experience of speed that people didn't used to have."

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After being trained to dutifully write 12-tone pieces in Kentucky, Anderson studied in California in the '70s, where John Cage, Robert Ashley, and Terry Riley freed her to write text-sound and minimalist pieces that she found far more congenial. Her music's extreme audience-friendliness has caused her trouble with more conservative composers; she recalls an ISCM festival in which, after days of 12-tone music, her own pretty modal lullaby was played, and everyone quit speaking to her. The concert will include four of Anderson's swales: *Pennyroyal Swale* (her first, from 1985), *Rosemary Swale*, *January Swale*, and *New Mexico Swale*—the last, written after a stay in New Mexico, includes Hispanic-style percussion. Joseph Kubera will also perform her new *Piano Concerto*, a one-movement work based in gospel, rock and roll, and Mussorgsky. "To make something beautiful," Anderson likes to say, "is revolutionary."

—K.G.



SANDRA-LEE PHIPPS

Kind of a neo-Baroque, meditation-oriented postminimalist

Quick: what current New York composer spent the '70s fronting an all-female rock band called Flaming Youth that sometimes backed up Allen Ginsberg? Played CBGB alongside the Ramones and Talking Heads? Hung out with David Hockney, Patti Smith, David Bowie, and John Cale, and interviewed Mick Jagger and James Brown? Introduced Suicide to the Farfisa organ? Got photographed by Andy Warhol? Studied with La Monte Young and Sri Chinmoy? More recently received a commission from Lincoln Center? And has two performances at the end of this month, one of them a harpsichord piece involving the great soloist Igor Kipnis, the other a major new work that's taken years to write?

It's embarrassing that you can't come up with the name, but hardly surprising. For some reason, Elodie Lauten scores success after success without ever quite sticking in the public memory. Since coming here from her native Paris in the early '70s, she's garnered two decades of rave press from Tom Johnson, Bernard Holland, Greg Sandow, and myself; and has been championed by new-music radio man John Schaeffer. And yet, when I refer to her music, whether among amateurs or aficionados, I draw blank stares, or

at most an occasional "Oh yeah, I've heard of her; what's her music like?" If Elodie Lauten has been so good for so long, why isn't she famous yet?

"Because I'm a woman," is her off-the-top-of-her-head answer, delivered matter-of-factly and without rancor. Though indisputably partly true, it's not the complete story. She's a difficult person to grasp. Even visually, her straight black hair, dark eyes, and elegantly thin nose suggest an uneasy compromise between a hardheaded practical musician and a saintly mystic. She seems to be psychic. Over the years, running into me at concerts, she has occasionally told me things she thought were going to happen to me, and she's generally been right. Like Laurie Anderson's and Robert Ashley's, her conversation takes you on circuitous routes far from the ruts of small talk. She's undoubtedly wincing at the references I chose to open this article with, for her "wild years" as an acid-head rock star and groupie are long behind her. It's difficult to imagine someone so calmly spiritual, so sensitive to psychic forces, having played a rabble-rousing role in '70s protopunk.

Her music is made difficult to grasp, too, by the very quality that makes it distinctive: its vagueness. Her output divides into two streams. The first, typified by her feminist opera *The*

can be characterized by her music yet almost immediately forget what it sounds like.

Further, the two streams are unified by a theoretical construct I have trouble explaining, and I've studied it: Universal Mode Improvisation, wherein the 12 musical keys are correlated with hexagrams from the *I Ching*, astrological signs, colors, even seasons and animals. Lauten works in pre-20th-century tunings such as Velotti-Young temperament, and tunes her music not to A-440 as modern orchestras do, but—like Indian musicians—to a slightly flat C# that is supposedly an octave related to the rotation of the earth, and thus tuned for maximum psychic wholeness. Her first performance this week, *Indigo* for two harpsichords, uses tonalities she associates with deep blue, and will be premiered by the famous harpsichordist Igor Kipnis and a friend of Lauten's, Elaine Comparone.

Perhaps her biggest PR obstacle, though, is that she nurtures new work slowly, and doesn't emerge often. That's why she's premiering a major opus this year that has been coming together since the early '90s: *Deus ex Machina*. After exploring her mystic-postminimalist side in *Tromik Involutions*, this new piece is a massive expansion of her Baroque vein, centered around her longtime love for the harpsichord. She calls *Deus ex Machina* an opera, though even by the relaxed standards of Downtown music the term is a stretch; the piece is a huge song cycle for two sopranos, flute, harpsichord, and strings. What is operatic is the piece's central focus on emotion, for Lauten—one of the most spiritual of composers—has decided that emotion is the key to spirituality.

"This is something I didn't understand for a long time," she muses with her slightly French-tinged accent in her East Village apartment. "I thought that emotion was something to be avoided if you wanted to be spiritual.

The media give you so much information. Even children find out things maybe they shouldn't, or maybe they should. This overload of information changes the nature of emotion. People know about psychology, so they are aware of their emotions in a different way than they used to be. What used to be considered romantic in the 19th century is now considered neurotic. Or sick. Or masochistic. Today people would tell Madame Bovary, 'Get a divorce.' And I think there are new emotions as well. Speed can give you emotion. There is a kind of elation that comes from the experience of speed that people didn't used to have."

Though the emotions are new, Lauten's heterogeneous texts for *Deus ex Machina* are often drawn from the past: Pascal, Rilke, Verlaine, the 17th-century magus Agrippa Von Nettesheim. Others she wrote herself, and some come from a novelist many recent composers have relied on because she expresses modern emotional life so eloquently: Melody Sumner Carnahan. The Summer Carnahan text, Lauten notes, "is about passion, but the way she interprets it is very complex. Many levels are expressed simultaneously. It's not like opera arias where somebody expresses love or passion and it's very simple. The way she puts it, the syntax is misplaced. She has this feeling, but she's holding back, and maybe feels a little bit negative or resentful about having it. I think mixed emotion is more modern. Who has the luxury to feel a simple emotion nowadays? These are the days of stress." ▣

Lauten's *Indigo* for two harpsichords will be played October 22 at 8 p.m. at St. Peter's Church, along with works by Bach, Handel, Couperin, and others. Call 932-9462 for info. The first half of *Deus ex Machina*, along with works by Beth Anderson (see sidebar), will be played October 30 at 8 at Merkin Hall, 129 West 67th Street. Call 545-7536 for reservations. The work's second half will premiere next February 5, also at Merkin, in John Schaeffer's *New Sounds* series.