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A Different Kind of Vocal Virtuoso

Joan La Barbara Takes the Stage at Performa 13

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Updated Nov. 1, 2013 2:24 p.m. ET

Joan La Barbara's vocal virtuosity has little to do with a three-octave range or hitting all the divalicious high notes.

When the celebrated experimental singer, composer and sound artist takes the stage Saturday at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, audiences will hear the full range of her adventurous vocal vocabulary, from throaty "glottal" clicking and the trilling howls of ululation to the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches, called multiphonics.



Singer Joan La Barbara in her studio on Minetta Lane in Manhattan. She takes the stage Saturday at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. *Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal*

Then there is Ms. La Barbara's "circular singing," a signature technique that lets her vocalize unbroken lines for minutes at a time without stopping for air.

"It's astonishing to come to grips with the physicality of it—I'm forcing my body to do something that it doesn't want to do," Ms. La Barbara, 66, said of her unconventional sound-making.

Saturday's concert, "Voice Is the Original Instrument," is part of the opening weekend

of Performa 13, a three-week, multi-venue performing arts festival devoted to blurring the lines between artistic disciplines.

"I've been involved for years in crossing over between the music world and the art world," said Ms. La Barbara, who has collaborated throughout her more-than-40-year career with visual artists, choreographers, filmmakers and poets, among others.

Her wide-ranging work has included everything from composing a score for an underwater dance film to creating abstracted vocal renderings of contemporary poetry.

"It was incredible to have someone coming out of the Modernist tradition interpret popular culture in ways I never could have conceived," said Kenneth Goldsmith, the poet she worked with on "73 Poems," inspired by a book rooted, he said, "in pop culture, hip-hop and a lot of trashy stuff."

Ms. La Barbara, he said, is "one of the few people around to make that bridge in a convincing way. Joan is this essential link from the history of Modernism into the present."

Ms. La Barbara's experimental leanings were fostered in New York in the 1970s, when she started working with composers Steve Reich, Philip Glass and John Cage, seminal figures in the movement to free music-making from centuries-old strictures of rhythm, melody, harmony and instrumentation. She met Mr. Cage, who she calls her mentor, in 1972 at a performance of his expansive multimedia piece

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"There were things going on all over the place—slides of the moon landing and various projections, an orchestra playing in one room, keyboards that people were playing while talking to the audience, thousands of people milling around," she said.

Amid the din, she said, she found Mr. Cage in the audience and asked, "With all the chaos in the world, why do you make more?" His answer, she said: " 'Perhaps when you go back out into the world, it won't seem so chaotic anymore.' "

After that, she struck up a working relationship with Mr. Cage that lasted 20 years, lending her voice to many of his compositions.

Ms. La Barbara's own music is hard to categorize. Her compositions have riffed on genres ranging from classical and jazz to sounds from all over the globe. In addition to developing her extensive range of vocal techniques, she has also experimented widely with electronic manipulation of sound.

One of her most playful works, from 1977, involved fashioning electronically-tinged vocalizations in a piece called "Signing Alphabet," made for broadcast on "Sesame Street."

Despite the widespread use of electronic processing in pop music and commercial culture today, Ms. La Barbara said she finds it "numbing when it's the same processing all the time," since "the voice is unbelievably flexible and can do so many different things." Her retrospective solo-vocal collection, "Voice Is the Original Instrument," for example, flits between gritty, grotty mouth sounds and beautiful imitations of birds.

"I think people find it more crazy now than they did back in the '70s," Ms. La Barbara said of her early work. "In electronic music and visual art in the '70s and early '80s, there was a lot more experimentation than there is now."

Currently, she is working on an opera inspired by the life and work of writer Virginia Woolf and the dreams of artist Joseph Cornell.

Younger artists are taking notice. Her work has been cited as an influence to unorthodox musicians such as the singer Björk and Caroline Shaw, a composer who won a Pulitzer Prize this year for her a cappella work, "Partita for 8 Voices."

"With Joan's contribution, we have reached beyond the initial shock of how the voice can be used," said Maja Ratkje, a younger artist from Norway who will share the stage with Ms. La Barbara at the Performa show. "In avant-garde music, the full range of possibilities is the norm with instruments...so why shouldn't that include the voice as well?"

Corrections & Amplifications

Singer and composer Joan La Barbara created a playful vocal piece for Sesame Street in 1977 called "Signing Alphabet." An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the piece as "Singing Alphabet."

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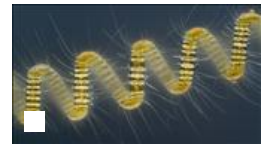
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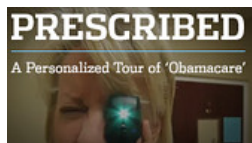
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