



## Concert Review - Patricia Barber at Logan Center

Howard Reich

10:09 a.m. CDT, April 27, 2014

We're so accustomed to hearing Patricia Barber in rambunctious, atmospheric jazz clubs – most notably at the Green Mill in Uptown – that we forget what it's like to encounter her in the sanctuary and near-silence of the concert hall.

All at once, we can sense the subtlest inflections of her voice, the true character of her touch on piano and the incremental melodic and harmonic turns of the songs she writes.

When her work unfolds in a room as sonically pristine and embracing as the Performance Hall in the University of Chicago's Logan Center for the Arts, we're encountering Barber's art at something close to an ideal setting. That experience, which occurred Saturday night, reminded at least one listener of Barber's knack for turning an already fine auditorium into a space of dramatically charged intimacy, performer and audience sharing a music that mostly whispers its secrets and implies its deepest meanings.

The occasion carried additional significance, for it marked the 10th anniversary of the Contempo Double Bill, which pairs jazz with contemporary classical music. These two ostensibly separate worlds hold much more in common than devotees of either might be willing to acknowledge, and Barber's appearance – her second on the series – poetically underscored the point.

For like classical musicians, Barber makes the most of every sound, every silence, every pianissimo utterance, every passing note. She chooses her sung pitches and accompanying piano phrases carefully, her compressed, less-is-more aesthetic suggesting the efforts of a fastidious composer – albeit one who works in the freer realm of jazz improvisation.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Barber's original works, which in some ways recall the art songs of Claude Debussy or Maurice Ravel, at least in the sensuousness of her vocal lines, the ambiguities of her harmonies and the economy of her gestures. This music packs a great deal of impact into a brief period of time, its combination of translucent textures and often enigmatic lyrics drawing listeners into Barber's world but revealing only so much.

That certainly was the case in a work-in-progress, "Higher," which even at this stage of its development crystallizes many facets of Barber's songwriting. In a few tautly compressed sentences and a gently ascending melodic line, Barber just hints at her subject matter: nothing less than death and transformation. Played with zero sense of pulse, its phrases seemingly suspended in air, "Higher" drifts into the listener's consciousness then disappears, like a soft breeze that's gone before you knew it was there.

As it now stands, "Higher" is sheathed in mystery, its haiku-like verse telegraphing a message that's only partially discernible. For this listener's tastes, a few more words would shed welcome additional light, though that may not be Barber's intent. As a songwriter, she thrives on leaving a great deal unsaid, and the song's equivocations surely heighten curiosity and inspire contemplation. The accompaniment from guitarist Gilad Hekselman and bassist Patrick Mulcahy added appropriately gauzy layers of sound.

"The Swim," from Barber's recent album "Smash," is a bit less cryptic, its wit and bittersweet narrative evoking Cole Porter, the pre-eminent songwriter whose work surely has had the greatest influence on Barber. Here, Barber's pianism – with its surprising chord changes and crystalline touch in the upper registers of the keyboard – stood out. There are very few jazz singers who play this well, and fewer pianists who sing with so much control.

Barber allowed herself to howl a bit in "Scream," also from the "Smash" album, but even here, there was an other-worldly beauty to the openness of her sound. The anguish of the text, with its darkly political undertone, gave this song its driving power.

To their credit, drummer Ari Hoenig, guitarist Hekselman and bassist Mulcahy provided crisp accompaniments, but Barber's vocals and pianism ultimately provided the musical focal point. A bit of confusion over which players were performing on which pieces led to some unintended comedy, but perhaps this offered respite from Barber's otherwise unflagging intensity.

It was thoroughly fitting, at any rate, that Barber should have shared a program that opened with classical compositions of similar depth, if different musical language.

The tour de force was "Space Model," by University of Chicago professor Marta Ptaszynska, in which solo percussionist Nicholas Reed played each of three movements on a different battery of instruments. After he moved from the first grouping to the second, he played along with a recording of what he had just performed; and when he moved to the third set of instruments, he was accompanied by a recording of his work on the first and second.

This intricate layering of interlocking rhythms, colors and pitches was a feast to hear and a spectacle to watch. More important, it represented a kind of sublime convergence of composer and performer, each sharing ideas on a single work – just as in jazz.

Earlier in the evening, the Pacifica Quartet found surging lyricism in Elena Firsova's String Quartet No. 11, "Purgatorium"; and cellist Nicholas Photinos produced the sweeping virtuosity of a romantic concerto in Franghiz Ali-Zadeh's "Habil-Sayagy," with Lisa Kaplan drawing unexpected sounds from prepared piano (in which the instrument has been mechanically altered).

Music of this sort does not often share a marquee with jazz of comparable stature.

We in the audience were the primary beneficiaries.

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