

MUSIC REVIEW

A cello, sounding for all of the world

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March 11, 2006

The intense cellist Maya Beiser gave a cappuccino concert at Zankel Hall Thursday: a rich, powerful concentrate topped with a foam of fine intentions.

Beiser is not the sort of musician who zigzags around the planet playing catalog concertos for polite and sleepy audiences. She throws down a gauntlet with every program and in this one, titled "Almost Human," she dared listeners to deny that a cello possesses the power of speech. Beiser spurred the curvaceous wooden box she plays into bouts of lyric eloquence, or at least nearly intelligible mutterings over the expressive hum of electronic sounds.

She opened with literal voices: the a cappella sextet Lionheart, which clothed her cello's baritone in lovely choral clusters. Australian composer Brett Dean leans on the untrustworthy shoulder of 16th century composer Carlo Gesualdo, notorious for his piquant dissonances and for the slaughter of his wife and her lover. "Sparge la morte" is the title both of one of Gesualdo's morbid madrigals and of Dean's addition, in which the stirring cello line and electronics are etched over the original in a textured, mysterious palimpsest.

What followed was a howl. Chinary Ung wrote "Khse Buon" in 1980, when he arrived in the United States from the blood marsh of his native Cambodia, and it remains a wrenching spasm of music. Beiser has played the piece often, with her trademark passionate violence. On Thursday, she dug and dragged the bow across the strings, eliciting a deep, raw moan, ancient and nocturnal.

Her sound came even more serrated in "Motion Detector," by the young British composer Joby Talbot. The cello was amplified and roughened to resemble an electric guitar, while a rumbling Taiwanese chant emanated from the battery of speakers. Tan Dun, too, drew on Chinese vocalism for "Antiphonal Song," an excerpt from his multimedia cello concerto "The Map." While on the screen a young woman unfurled her haunting caw, the live cello filled in the pauses with answers from a distant corner of the globe: ours.

Beiser's program was a musical Queens, a multicontinental amalgam of languages. But the pieces were bound together, too, by a kinship between the cello and the voice, and by the sense that distance has become an illusion. Michael Gordon's "All Vows" is a run-on sequence of cello arpeggios and Jewish liturgical melodies kneaded together with a computerized orchestra and a video montage of written Hebrew and footage of men praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall.

Eve Beglarian's "I am writing to you from a distant country," had a similar warm-bath-of-sound aesthetic. Beiser murmured surrealist poetry by Henri Michaux into a microphone, mezzo-soprano Alexandra Montano emitted throaty wails and artist Shirin Neshat supplied video of sere Middle Eastern landscapes shot in black and white. The world compacted into Zankel Hall. Music gave Beiser the power to bestride oceans and pluck the common utterance from regions thousands of miles apart.

MAYA BEISER, CELLO. Music by Brett Dean, Chinary Ung and others. Zankel Hall. Seen Thursday night.