

Beiser takes cello on a magic ride at Ravinia

August 4, 2005

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If the title of cellist Maya Beiser's solo recital Tuesday night at Ravinia, "World to Come," is taken literally, the future will be filled with mournful, soulful song by such notable 21st century composers as Arvo Part, Osvaldo Golijov and Steve Reich.

But Beiser also had her eye firmly on the present during her 90-minute performance in the Martin Theatre. A savvy theater artist as well as a gifted cellist, Beiser managed to plant her vision of the world to come squarely within the four walls of Ravinia's intimate theater. Her tools were technically sophisticated though relatively few: her own voice, a single, amplified cello; a multitude of pre-recorded, taped cello and vocal tracks, often-abstract projections and videos by artists Irit Batsry and Anney Bonney, and evocative sound and light design by David Cook, Ben Kato and Stephen Arnold.

Beiser combines the best of two worlds. She is a classically trained cellist with the technical and interpretive resources to draw whatever kind of music she wishes from her instrument. She also has a keen appreciation of stagecraft. Beiser has clearly decided that even the most tradition-bound audiences might respond to some onstage commentary in her low, sexy voice. They probably would be intrigued by her long, flowing locks and an all-white concert uniform of form-fitting pants and sleeveless top. On Tuesday night, her little bit of nightclub chanteuse, touch of downtown hipster and bounty of straight-up musical taste and musicianship added up to a concert that lingers in the memory.

For a decade beginning in 1992, Beiser was a member of the innovative New York-based ensemble the Bang on a Can All-Stars, and she remains fascinated by their minimalist-influenced aesthetic. "Fratres," a 1980 work by the Estonian composer Part, and "Mariel," an elegy by the Argentina-born Golijov written between 2001 and 2003, were studies in long, ardent solo lines tinged with hints of exotic keening. A tense undercurrent ran through "Mariel," pulsing like the nervous breathing of a heart both frightened and heavy with grief.

Reich's "Cello Counterpoint," an intricate work from 2003 for seven pre-recorded tracks and single live cello, bounded along with his usual insistent little melodic ideas and infectious, repetitive rhythms. Bonney's abstract video danced across the entire back wall of the Martin Theatre stage, its bits and pieces of fractured cellos evoking images of Picasso's Cubist guitarists.

In Louis Andriessen's "La voce," Beiser spoke the brooding text by Italian poet Cesare Pavese in a quiet, throaty murmur. Batsry's projection of a lonely, loftlike room loomed behind her, and her Italian words moved alongside the slow-moving, lyrical cello lines like wreaths of shifting smoke.

Cambodia-born Chinary Ung's "Khse buon (Four Strings)" was a dynamic fusion of East and West. The final piece, David Lang's four-movement "World to Come," combined convulsive rhythms with sumptuously shaped lyrical lines. Images of water, with their blurry, racing streaks and moments of profound calm in Batsry's video, enhanced the otherworldly atmosphere.