A Bird’s Eye, a Wonderer’s Ear

Most music, even the most cutting edge and willfully experimental, arrives before us with fairly preconceived parameters and conditions under which we should best appreciate it. We come to it knowing the proper set of aesthetic values and attitudes required in the mental dress code. The best means by which to find your way into Eve Beglarian’s music is to arrive naked to the party, more or less free of expectation. Expect only a musical head trip according to Beglarian’s creative world view.

That view involves manipulation of texts from wildly diverse sources, and the kind of cultural hunger and curiosity of one who studied and rejected the twelve-tone orthodoxy of old and found in the “outside world”—the world(s) of dance, sampling, ensemble-specific chamber music, reinvented text-setting notions, etcetera—a dizzying playground of possibilities.

Much has been made of the expanded palette of new-music thinking in the twenty-first century—a status of either emancipation from confining dogma or a rootlessness for a socio-cultural epoch in flux, depending on whom you talk to (or listen to). Beglarian has been surfing for inspirations and fundamental materials for many years, and has now reached the point where the surfing itself, the endless searching, researching, and remolding, is integral to the process and result of her work.

Tell the Birds is Beglarian’s latest sampler plate of ideas, a set of pieces both cohesive and pleasingly eclectic. It is the latest field report from the uncharted adventure of Beglarian’s musical life. Four of the six pieces here deal with texts, from such disparate writers as William Blake, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, and American poets Linda Norton and Stanley Kunitz. Musically, Beglarian charts her progress in finding ways to combine her use of samplers and electronics with breathing, real-time musicians, extant new-music ensembles, and an orchestral showpiece for good measure.

The compositions contained here represent a range of ideas and vintages in the Beglarian oeuvre, from the mid-nineties forward, with some revision of older works and a generally gleaming account of her continuing artistic saga. Beglarian continues to carve out a path in music not quite like any other in contemporary music, not so much breaking rules as ignoring the ones she has no use for, and nurturing ideas or combinations she finds useful and appealing.

On the evidence of her work so far, the compositional act is an unusually expansive, searching, and continually redefining process for Beglarian. Hers is a holistic creative endeavor, concerned with much more than such basic composerly issues as where the notes go, how the harmonic and rhythmic codes of a piece work, and how to deal with structure. Beyond the basics, she seems more interested in writing—and appropriating—music and contextualizing it with other elements, as part of a grand, genetic cultural experiment.

Her experiment has followed an elaborate and not always straight course. The daughter of composer and academic administrator/USC dean, Grant Beglarian, Beglarian the Younger came into close contact with a variety of notable musicians and composers in her youth, an experiential proximity to culture which no doubt influenced her creative process—if not her very thought patterns—years later. After first avoiding the musical path, studying biochemistry at Princeton, she gave in to the muse, fighting the academic fight with music studies at Princeton and Columbia, during the waning years of tone-row hegemony in academia.

Once left to her personally expressive devices beyond schooling, Beglarian found herself working in the less judgmental or dogmatically minded dance scene, in theater, and other avenues peripheral to the pursuit of pure music-for-music’s-sake.

Even when in pure music mode, Beglarian keeps her options and ears open. An impelling and playful sense of rhythmic energy in her writing might logically stem from that dance connection, as well as an ear kept to the “street,” picking up strands of pop, jazz, and Latin music, among other things, for later tweaking and processing. Such basic instincts made her ripe for the so-called “downtown” scene buzzing in New York City as her work began in earnest in the eighties, and her aesthetic has steadily evolved and become more focused over twenty years. In the twenty-first century, she’s bringing forward the humor, the edge, the deceptive simplicity, and the dignified accessibility of her musical language.

On this album, the first words you hear are Blake’s, repeated mantra-like: “opposition is true friendship.” The piece is The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, performed by the MATA Ensemble (commissioned by the Philadelphia Relâche ensemble in...
Bielawa’s performance is both spoken and sung, in the Steve Reich–like melodic pattern of the Blake proverb “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.” After the grooving machinery, the work glides, without apology (or need for it), into the Bach chorale “Es ist genug (it is enough),” a graceful and soothing denouement. This piece is as fine an introduction as any to Beglarian’s modus operandi, and the complicated fabric of this recording.

Just as Beglarian seeks to find through-lines and new bridges between varied musical dialects in her work, her approach to text is similarly broad and non-traditional. Each of the four text-based pieces on Tell the Birds follows a distinct procedural pattern and language/music relationship. Just as she seems to address each new work as a unique problem requiring unique solutions and resources, Beglarian sets text perhaps more like a theatrical set designer dealing with varying contexts than as a latter-day practitioner of art song.

In Creating the World, the treatment of text—Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz’s “Creating the World”—is at times comically theatrical. The text is affectively illustrated by the musical tapestry around and behind it, by the electro-acoustic Paul Dresher Ensemble (which commissioned the work in 1996) and Beglarian’s elaborate banks of samples. British actor Roger Rees’s delivery is sometimes quite chipper and overstated, sometimes moody and brooding, as when the emotional arc of the piece finally bows languidly into its final lines: “Oh, to have so little, nothing except feasts of love! / How feeble your defense against the abyss!”/And the sun rises and the sun sets, / and the sun rises and the sun sets/While they go on running, running. Subsequently, a rock riff and an elemental piano solo turns a corner into a musical space, like a coda slapped onto the end credits of a Hollywood sci-fi film.

In Creating the World, the carefully laid out, furtive word fragments are enveloped in alternating sonic textures and fleeting swatches of genre—a Mozartean splash here, a Middle Eastern lament there, a Medieval chant there, a rock groove there. These play out like teasingly recognizable bursts of clarity in an ambiguous domain.

By contrast, Corey Dargel’s singing of the Stanley Kunitz text in Robin Redbreast, laid out in a fairly static, introspective melodic pattern, evokes a melancholic, world-weary sentiment. The vocalist plays the protagonist role, but with a chilling restraint rather than any overt emotionality, over a keyboard drone and piccolo twittering (performed by Margaret Lancaster), by turns bubbly and atmospheric. Commissioned by the Guggenheim Works & Process in 2003, the work—clocking in at just under five minutes—is the shortest on the album, but it also serves as a contemplative transitional piece.

Elements of surprise, and of surprising juxtapositions of musical structure and content, line the course of the album’s sequence. Perhaps the most surprising track is also the most “traditional” piece, at least on first, superficial impression. One of two instrumental pieces here, Wonder Counselor was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists for the Biennial National Convention in 1996 and demonstrates the potentially liberating freshness of Beglarian’s creative approach, when invited into a particular, ostensibly alien, musical setting.

The work’s title was initially inspired by a verse in the Jerusalem Bible, Isaiah 9:6: “. . . and this is the name they give him: Wonder Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” But Beglarian, an inveterate researcher, delved deeper into Biblical sources and found a richer, more meaningful reference point:

*Three things are too wonderful for me;  
  four I do not understand:  
  the way of an eagle in the sky,  
  the way of a serpent on a rock,  
  the way of a ship on the high seas,  
  and the way of a man with a maiden. (Proverbs 30:18–19)*

With this proverb, Beglarian discovered the conceptual underpinning for her piece. Wonder is the subject and the turbine in this music, from spiritual and natural awe to the subtly implied realm of the erotic. (Beglarian has never been one to shy away from or lurk in euphemism when it comes to dealing with erotic texts or sounds in her work.)
The organist works with variations of a thirteenth-century Gradual of Eleanor of Brittany, “Res est admirabilis” (“It is a wondrous thing”). Before any keyboard-based material is introduced, however, the piece eases into being with an introduction of found nature sounds: lapping water and tranquil birdsong, and the soft erotic vocal moans (also the last sound we hear). Taken in historical context, it’s as if these essential, pre-literate, pre-instrumental sounds set the stage for the feelings later codified in the church. Ecstatic swirls of arpeggios on the organ suggest ineffable—and musically unfettered—cosmic incantations, over a shape-shifting drone of a single synthesizer chord. Meditative or devotional music is given a new countenance and methodology here, right down to the final orgasmic sighs of the ending.

Beglarian’s own easy-does-it narrator’s voice, lightly spiced with ironic amusement, gives proper form and flavor to Linda Norton’s poem in Landscaping for Privacy, a bittersweet and witty foray into yet another corner of the words-music realm. Originally written in Italy in 1995 for the entity known as twisted tutu—Beglarian, vocals, with keyboardist Kathleen Supové—the piece originally relied on the sequencing capability of a synthesizer for its rapid, fluttering tremolos, but later morphed into a piece for disciplined pianist.

In Norton’s deceptively breezy poem, polarities of urban life in lower Manhattan versus the suburban yawn and sprawl of Long Island and imagined realities become the focus of a conversational flow of words and reflections on mortality. Through the narrative prism of one side of a conversation, the implied character goes on an escapist drive with her lover, into an uncertain neighborhood and future. They head off under a canopy of impressionistic clouds, a “bouffant armada, fluffy but cruel, ushering last days for many,” before a long stretch of percolating, pointillist massage of sixteenth-notes on piano suggests another quasi-coda, an unusual touch of structural framing.

A different sort of crosstown musical traffic appears in the other instrumental work on the disc, FlamingO, originally commissioned and performed by Eric Grunin and the Crosstown Ensemble in 1995. In its first incarnation, the piece celebrated the qualities of compounded energy and layered ensemble forces, with three separate bands working in accord and in tension on the musical stage set by Beglarian. She has divided the groups into three distinct entities, keyed to samples that form the thematic core of the piece: the “wolf chaser” is named after an Inuit instrument, its sound digitally manipulated; honking flamingo calls; and a sampled birdcall the composer describes as “metalistic bird.”

Atop these samples, a much more elaborate sound world is laid out in the expanded and retooled orchestral version heard on this recording, which was premiered by the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall on January 21, 2005.

In this experiment in swarming sonorities and rippling post-Minimal cadences and motivic networks, Beglarian creates a big and engaging sound, with writing containing faint echoes of Charles Ives’s and Elliott Carter’s multiple-ensemble works and John Adams’s Harmonielehre. In the middle of the piece’s linear mesh, a pared-down complement of brass, winds, and samples offer a “breather” between the thicker, more active orchestration. By the work’s end, the cumulative aural effect, an undulant mass of lines and long tones, is at once bracing and mesmeric. A slow, swelling crescendo effect yields to a trailing-off into a not-unpleasant nothingness. The end of the piece—and the CD sequence—amounts to a manual fade-out in real time, a telling gesture for a composer who has gradually found new beauty in life beyond circuitry.

If the music gathered for this recording can be viewed, in some sense, as a retrospective of Beglarian’s assorted creations over the past dozen years, such a backwards-glancing effect combines with a decidedly forward motion. With the album’s ambitious reorchestration of FlamingO and other examples of revision and technological updating (or de-technologizing and semi-unplugging) of past works, Beglarian deals with her musical catalogue in a dynamic way. Ideas are subject to change and evolution in her mind. Fixity is anathema. Our ears remain naked.

—Josef Woodard

Josef Woodard has been a music critic for the Los Angeles Times since 1993, and for Opera Now since 2000. He has also contributed to Down Beat, Jazz Times, The Wire, Option, Musician, Rolling Stone, Entertainment Weekly, and other publications. He won an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for Jazz Writing in 1998.
Creating the World
Czesław Milosz

Celestials at the Board of Projects burst into laughter,
For one of them has designed a hedgehog,
Another, not to be left behind, a soprano;
Eyelashes, a bust, and ringlets, plenty of ringlets.

It is superb fun in the ocean of seething energy,
Among bursts and clacks announcing electric currents.
Buckets of protocolors gurgle, protobrushes labor,
A mighty whirl of almost galaxies beyond nearly windows
And pure radiance that has never experienced clouds.

They blow conchs, somersault in protospace,
In their realm of archetypes, the seventh heaven.
The earth is practically ready, its rivers sparkle,
Forests cover it, and every single creature
Waits for its name. Thunder strolls the horizon
But the herds in the grass do not lift their heads.

Towns come to be, narrow streets,
A chamber pot poured out a window, laundry.
And immediately freeways to the airport,
A monument at a crossroads, a park, a stadium
For thousands when they get up and roar: goal!

To invent length, width, height,
Two times two and the force of gravity
Would be quite enough, but on top of it panties
With lace, a hippopotamus, the beak of a toucan,
A chastity belt with its terrible teeth,
A hammerhead shark, a visored helmet,
Plus time, that is, a division into was and will be.

Gloria, gloria, sing objects called to being.
Hearing them, Mozart sits down at the pianoforte
And composes music that had been ready
Before he himself was born in Salzburg.

If only it could last, but no way.
It iridesces, passes, turns inside a soap bubble
Together with an invocation the Celestials address to mortals:

“Oh, dizzy tribe, how not to look at you with pity!
Your bright rags, your dances
Seemingly profligate but in truth pathetic,
Mirrors in which you leave a face with earrings,
Painted eyelids, eyelashes with mascara.
Oh, to have so little, nothing except feasts of love!
How feeble your defense against the abyss!”

And the sun rises and the sun sets,
And the sun rises and the sun sets
While they go on running, running.
Robin Redbreast
Stanley Kunitz

It was the dingiest bird
you ever saw, all the color
washed from him, as if
he had been standing in the rain,
friendless and stiff and cold,
since Eden went wrong.
In the house marked For Sale,
where nobody made a sound
in the room where I lived
with an empty page, I had heard
the squawking of the jays
under the wild persimmons
tormenting him.
So I scooped him up
after they knocked him down,
in league with that ounce of heart
pounding in my palm
that dumb beak gaping.
Poor thing! Poor foolish life!
without sense enough to stop
running in desperate circles,
needing my lucky help
to toss him back into his element.
But when I held him high,
fear clutched my hand,
for through the hole in his head,
cut whistle-clean . . .
through the old dried wound
between his eyes
where the hunter's brand
had tunneled out his wit . . .
I caught the cold flash of the blue
unappeasable sky.


Composer, performer, and audio producer Eve Beglarian’s chamber and orchestral music has been commissioned and performed by the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the California EAR Unit, Relâche, the Paul Dresher Ensemble, the American Composers Orchestra, Sequitur, Dinosaur Annex, and the Robin Cox Ensemble, among many others.

Her experience in music theater includes music for Mabou Mines’s Obie-winning Dollhouse, Animal Magnetism, and Ecco Porco, directed by Lee Breuer; the collaboration Hildegarde’s Ordo Virtutum, directed by Grethe Barrett Holby, which premiered at the Lincoln Center Festival; Forgiveness, a collaboration with Chen Shi-Zheng and Noh master Akira Matsui; and the China National Beijing Opera Theater’s production of The Bacchae, also directed by Chen Shi-Zheng. She has worked with choreographers Stephanie Nugent, Victoria Marks, Susan Marshall, Robert La Fosse, Monica Levy, Cydney Wilkes, Ann Carlson, and Hilary Easton.
Current projects include *From a Far-Off Country*, a collaboration with cellist Maya Beiser and visual artist Shirin Neshat, which was recently premiered at Carnegie’s Zankel Hall; *The Libation Bearers*, with director Lee Breuer, which will premiere at the 2006 Patras Festival in Greece; *End Zone*, a dance-theater piece with choreographer David Neumann; *The Man in the Black Suit*, based on Stephen King’s story, with co-librettist and director Grethe Barrett Holby; *Re-Thinking Mary*, a performance project initiated at the Atlantic Center for the Arts; and *A Book of Days*, a long-term project of 365 multimedia pieces for live performance as well as Internet delivery. Recordings of Beglarian’s music are also available on CRI Emergency Music, O O Discs, Cantaloupe, Accurate Records, Atavistic, and Kill Rock Stars. For more information about Eve Beglarian, visit www.evbvd.com.

Vocalist/composer Lisa Bielawa has appeared in performances of her own works in Japan, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Italy, and Russia, and at the Bang On A Can and Lincoln Center festivals. A member of the Philip Glass Ensemble and the early music group Pomerium, she has sung major roles in operas by Anthony Braxton and Michael Gordon, and has premiered and recorded works written for her by Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Daugherty, Randall Woolf, and Toby Twining. A recent recipient of the Aaron Copland Award for young composers, Lisa is also one of the Founders and Artistic Directors of the MATA Festival, which commissions and premieres work by young composers from all over the world.

In addition to singing his own music, composer/lyricist/singer Corey Dargel has performed works by k. terumi shorb, Pauline Oliveros, Brenda Hutchinson, Phil Kline, Nicholas Brooke, Philip Glass, and others. He writes, produces, and distributes the podcast Composers and the People Who Love Them. www.coreydargel.com

The Paul Dresher Ensemble performs the work of a wide range of contemporary composers, with instrumentation that combines traditional acoustic and contemporary electronic instruments. In 1993, Paul Dresher formed the Electro-Acoustic Band in order to offer to composers a group of virtuoso musicians who are able to use rapidly evolving advances in music technology, and who possess the ability to perform music rooted variously in the classical tradition, rock and roll, jazz, and world music. The band’s goal is to expand the limits of what is considered chamber music, challenging the boundaries that separate “serious” and “popular” culture, and drawing on musical styles with origins in diverse cultures.

Since 1993, the Ensemble has commissioned and/or premiered works from such composers as John Adams, John Luther Adams, Eve Beglarian, Martin Bresnick, Alvin Curran, Anthony Davis, Paul Dresher, Bun Ching Lam, David Lang, Steve Mackey, Ingram Marshall, Roger Reynolds, Terry Riley, Carl Stone, Lois Vierk, Erling Wold, and Randall Woolf, among others. The Ensemble is featured on recordings on the New Albion, Starkland, MinMax, innova, New World, and Tzadik labels. More information on the Ensemble can be found at dresherensemble.org.

Noted for her interdisciplinary collaborations, flutist Margaret Lancaster has premiered more than one hundred pieces and has built a large repertoire of new works composed specifically for her, employing extended techniques, dance, drama, multimedia, and electronics. She performs solo and chamber music concerts worldwide and acts in Lee Breuer’s Obie-winning *Mabou Mines Dollhouse*. www.margaretlancaster.com

Conductor/composer Brad Lubman was assistant conductor to Oliver Knussen at the Tanglewood Music Center from 1989–94 and has since emerged as an unusually versatile conductor of orchestras and ensembles all over the world. He has worked with a great variety of musical figures including John Adams, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Elliott Carter, Elvis Costello, Steve Reich, DJ Spooky, Michael Tilson Thomas, Charles Wuorinen, and John Zorn.

Lubman has appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Ojai Festival Orchestra, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Ensemble Modern, Musik Fabrik, Steve Reich Ensemble, Saarbruecken Radio Orchestra, Deutsches-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, New World Symphony, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Finnish Radio Symphony, Rochester Philharmonic, ASKO Ensemble of Amsterdam, New Millennium Ensemble, New York New Music Ensemble, Ensemble 21, and the Zankel Band. Several of his compositions are available on the Tzadik CD label.

He has recorded for Auvidis Montaigne, BMG/RCA, Bridge, col legno, CRI, Centaur, Koch, Nonesuch, and Tzadik. Lubman is an Associate Professor of Conducting and Ensembles, and Music Director of the Eastman Musica Nova Ensemble at The Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. www.bradlubman.com
Founded in 1996 by Philip Glass, Eleanor Sandresky, and Lisa Bielawa, the MATA Festival and its Ensemble of performers serve the needs of young composers entering the field through a week-long festival in New York City, annual commissions, and professional workshops and education programs. The MATA Festival showcases a cross-section of young composers from all over the world and their works, performed by artists of the highest caliber. Every season, MATA commissions and presents a minimum of four new works. To date, MATA has commissioned and presented thirty-six new compositions by young composers. The works commissioned have represented a broad range of media, from traditional instruments to beyond, including Harry Partch’s instrumentarium, a cappella solo voice with quadraphonic live electronics, and gamelan orchestra.

Born in Wales, Roger Rees started his career with the Royal Shakespeare Company. He created the title role in the original production of the play The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, winning both an Olivier Award and a Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play in 1982 for it.

Rees became an American citizen in 1989, and in the 1990s, continued his work in the theater, both as an actor and a director. From 1989 to 1993, he appeared intermittently in the long-running American TV series Cheers as the dashing, feckless English tycoon Robin Colcord. In 1995, he was nominated for a Tony for Best Actor in a Play for his role in Indiscretions. He has been a guest star on many television programs, including as British Ambassador John, Lord Marbury, on The West Wing. In November 2004, he was named artistic director of the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Williamstown, Massachusetts, only the fourth person to hold the post in its half century.

Vibraphonist Bill Ware started out as a bass player and later trained at the Harlem Jazzmobile Workshop. In 1987, Ware became a charter member of the acclaimed Jazz Passengers. In 1990, Ware formed a backing group called the Club Bird All-Stars, who later recorded with him on his 1993 Knitting Factory debut as a leader, Long and Skinny. Ware has since worked with the acid jazz outfit the Groove Collective, and with the reunited Steely Dan. With The Jazz Passengers' rhythm section of Brad Jones and E.J. Rodriguez, Ware formed a side project called Vibes, whose debut record appeared in 1998 on a Knitting Factory CD of the same name. Ware has since recorded five more solo CDs. Among Ware’s more recent credits are a song book for Deborah Harry and The Jazz Passengers, three symphonic works, and two concertos for full orchestra.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY
Overstepping. Eve Beglarian, vocals; Kathleen Supové, keyboards; Margaret Lancaster, flute. OO Discs OO33.
Play Nice. twisted tutu: Eve Beglarian, vocals; Kathleen Supové, keyboards. OO Discs OO66.

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**EVE BEGLARIAN** (b. 1958)
**TELL THE BIRDS**
80630-2

Lisa Bielawa, voice; MATA Ensemble: Patti Monson, flute; Andrew Sterman, soprano saxophone; Libby Van Cleve, oboe; Martin Kuuskmann, bassoon; Seth Josel, electric guitar; Douglas Mapp, bass; Eleanor Sandresky, piano; David Cossin, percussion

Roger Rees, voice; Jessica Gould, soprano (“Gloria”); Paul Dresher Ensemble Electro-Acoustic Band: Craig Fry, violin; Paul Hanson, bassoon; Paul Dresher, electric guitar; Phil Aaberg, keyboard; Amy Knoles, electronic mallet percussion; Gene Reffkin, drums

Corey Dargel, voice; Margaret Lancaster, piccolo

organ and tape

Eve Beglarian, voice and electronics

Bill Ware, vibes solo; Margaret Lancaster, flute; Jackie Leclair, oboe; Andrew Adelson, English horn; Michael Lowenstern, clarinet, bass clarinet; Janet Grice, bassoon; Daniel Grabois, French horn; John Ferrari, percussion; Margaret Kampmeier, piano; Jon Nelson, trumpet; Ben Herrington, trombone; Todd Reynolds, violin; Caleb Burhans, viola; Edward Arron, cello; Mat Fieldes, double bass; Brad Lubman, conductor

Total time 65:25