

Praised by Morton Feldman, courted by John Cage, bombarded with sound waves by Alvin Lucier: the unique voice of singer and composer

Joan La Barbara

has brought her adventures on American contemporary music's wildest frontiers, while her own compositions and shamanistic 'sound paintings' place the soprano voice at the outer limits of human experience. By Julian Cowley. Photography by Mark Mahaney

Electronic

voice

phenomenon

Joan La Barbara has been widely recognised as a peerless interpreter of music by major contemporary composers including Morton Feldman, John Cage, Earle Brown, Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley and her husband, Morton Subotnick. And she has developed herself into a genuinely distinctive composer, translating rigorous explorations in the outer reaches of the human voice into dramatic and evocative music. In conversation she is strikingly self-assured, communicating something of the commitment and intensity of vision that have enabled her not only to give definitive voice to the music of others, but equally to establish a strong compositional identity owing no obvious debt to anyone. Her vocal techniques extend across an extraordinary range from whispers to screams, from high trills and ululations to deep slurring groans, from bold gestures of acoustic calligraphy to elusive vaporous sighs and whimpers. But as her CDs *Sound Paintings* (Lovely Music 1991) and *ShamanSong* (New World 1998) impressively show, she has learnt to orchestrate her voice and to blend it with instrumental, electronic and environmental sounds to create a unique and fully realised music.

"Some composers have used certain aspects of my extended technique vocabulary," La Barbara remarks. "Charles Dodge, for example, in his 1984 piece *The Waves*, used my multiphonics and reinforced harmonics along with computer generated sounds. Others shy away because they feel that vocabulary is

so particularly identifiable with me, although they still want to utilise my expertise. That's OK. I'm willing to share my vocabulary, but I'm also willing to approach a new idea and try to bring my knowledge and curiosity to that situation, to help the composer realise what she or he wants to do. In return, I've learnt compositional tools by apprenticing, essentially, with each of the composers I've worked with."

Curiosity has played a consistently important role in La Barbara's musical life. She was formally trained as a classical singer with conventional operatic roles in view, but at the end of the 1960s her imagination was captured by unorthodox sounds emanating from instruments played by adventurous musicians she encountered in New York. "I heard instrumentalists experimenting, really beginning to expand and thinking about the sound of their instruments, but I didn't hear vocalists doing the same thing," she explains. "Of course, there was Cathy Berberian's vocal work with Luciano Berio, but her extensions were mostly basic human sounds – some gasping, coughing or laughing. I wanted to move beyond that, to do what I heard those experimental instrumentalists doing."

Inspired by hearing the way scat singers imitate horns, La Barbara's initial approach was to ask friends in the jazz community to play sustained tones so she could work on adjustment of her timbre, trying to match closely the actual character of their sound and in that way stretch the limits of her voice. Soon she got caught up in the ferment of creative interaction then taking place between exploratory jazz and the classical avant garde. During the early 1970s, she attended the Free Music Store improvising sessions at New York's WBAI radio station, where she got to play with musicians who both shared and fuelled her curiosity. They included saxophonist Anthony Braxton, singer Jay Clayton and Musica Elettronica Viva members Steve Lacy, Frederic Rzewski, Garrett List and Alvin Curran. The dissolving of boundaries within those sessions, their openness and inquisitiveness, confirmed for La Barbara the need to move beyond established categories and discover the terms of her own creativity.



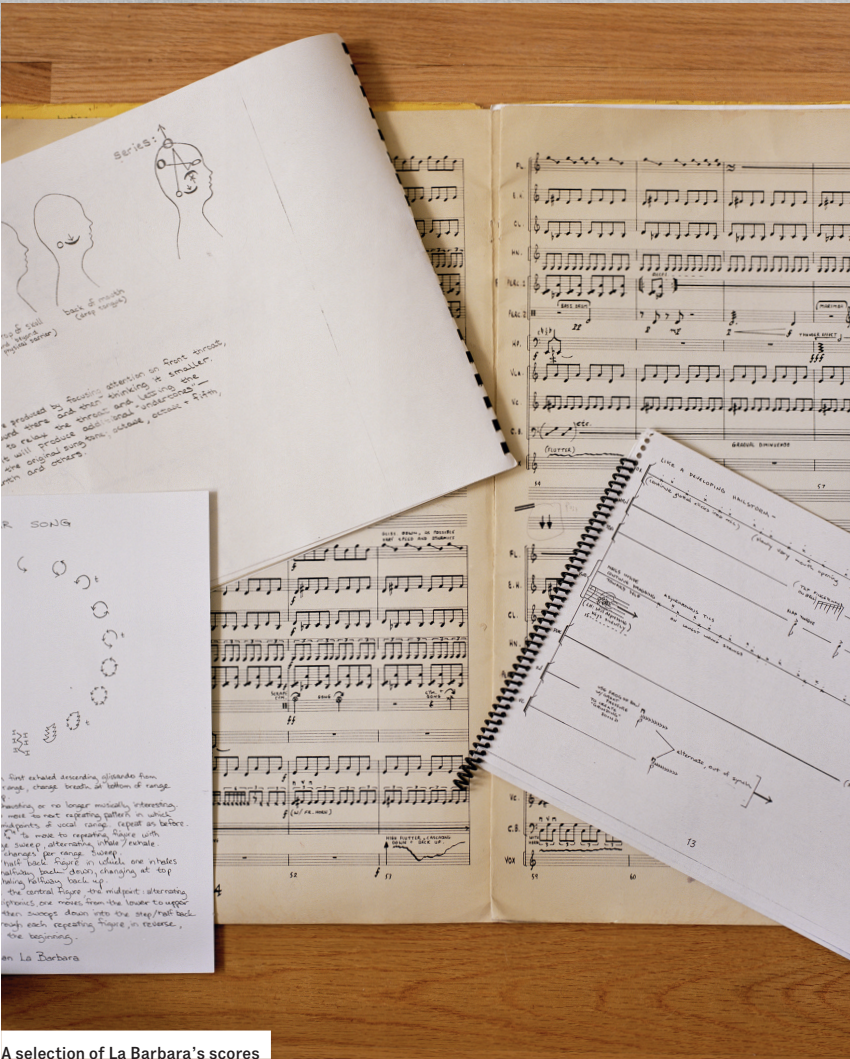
Joan La Barbara at home in New York City, January 2009



Rehearsing with Alvin Lucier at Merce Cunningham Studio, New York City, 1974



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A selection of La Barbara's scores

Mary Lucier (Alvin Lucier); scores © Joan La Barbara



Around the same time an unexpected and invaluable opportunity arose out of an unlikely connection. La Barbara started making radio commercials with composer Michael Sahl. The first ad was for a Japanese perfume. A Japanese singer had originally been hired, but agency executives thought she sounded too Japanese for an American audience. La Barbara took her place and, hoping to evoke Kyoto, mimicked the plinking strings of a koto – or rather, she laughs, “for American ears, a harp imitating a koto”. In 1970 Steve Reich was beginning work on his minimalist tour de force *Drumming* and happened to be looking for singers who could imitate instrumental sounds. Sahl told Reich that La Barbara was perfect for that task, and soon she was improvising vocal parts, which Reich notated and fed into the piece. It was the beginning of a mutually beneficial and productive association with Reich. Soon afterwards, she met Philip Glass and joined his ensemble too, carrying with her an already sophisticated grasp of how the singing voice may integrate with instruments when performing work such as his *Music In Twelve Parts*.

In retrospect it appears that La Barbara has progressively carved out a niche for herself through such associations, the unparalleled soprano voice of music’s cutting edge. In reality, at the outset, other options vied for her commitment. During the early 1970s, jazz arranger Don Sebesky was trying to track down Yma Sumac, the exotic diva with the fabled four and a half octave range, to contribute a vocal spectacular to his latest recording. Sound artist Charlie Morrow suggested to Sebesky that he should contact La Barbara, who was then a member of Morrow’s improvising group, The New Wilderness Preservation Band. “I went with Don to Rudy van Gelder’s fabulous recording studio in New Jersey,” she recalls. “Don had a piece called “Spanish Blood” already recorded, with Michael and Randy Brecker playing on it. I improvised over that and Don totally flipped out. A promo copy was sent to Leonard Feather, who was writing the sleevenotes, and he decided my vocalising sounded like someone being raped. The album came out while I was on tour in Europe with Steve Reich. When I got back and saw the notes, I was thoroughly offended, and to make matters worse, the title of that track and of the album had been changed to *The Rape Of El Morro*. I was very young, but I wasn’t about to become Donna Summer! I was just trying to make music out of all sorts of sounds. I did some more work with Don, including a track he arranged for guitarist Jim Hall’s 1976 album *Commitment*, but that experience really threw me for a loop and probably changed the course of my career, which might well have headed more in the jazz direction.”

La Barbara also entered the world of off-Broadway theatre, joining the cast of Richard Foreman and Stanley Silverman’s Marcel Duchamp-inspired musical *Dr Selavy’s Magic Theatre*. As understudy for the production, she was required to cover a spectrum of vocal styles from classical singing to heavy rock; indeed, she remembers that at the audition she sang Mozart’s *Alleluia* and Carole King’s “You’ve Got A Friend”.

Singer-songwriters were very much in vogue in that period, and Chappell music publishers ran a workshop to nurture new talent. La Barbara was persuaded by her manager to enrol, but when he subsequently asked her to abandon her work with Reich’s ensemble and the off-Broadway show in order to focus on potentially lucrative mainstream activities, she decided it was time to assert her integrity and commit fully to exploratory music.

During those early years, the hypnotically patterned music of Reich and Glass was generally rejected by traditional concert halls, and La Barbara often found herself performing in art galleries and museums. By the mid-1970s she was taking advantage of the openness of these venues in order to present her own music: “I was part of the composer-performer movement, individual performers who were doing so much with their instruments that it became necessary to become a composer. There was no way these sounds were going to get out to an audience unless you said here I am, this is what I do – listen to me.”

A selection from her early works has been issued on *Voice Is The Original Instrument* (Lovely Music). In time she developed her investigative findings into fully fledged musical compositions, but the earliest pieces are overtly exploratory in character, as can be gauged from the prosaic title, *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation* (1974), or the blandly descriptive *Circular Song* (1975), inspired by a circular breathing technique she had heard horn players use. The most startling track, at times harrowing in the physical intensity and paradoxically intimate strangeness of its sounds, is *Hear What I Feel*. La Barbara describes it as “a sensory-deprivation performance work in which I wanted to set up a situation where sounds would come out of me that I couldn’t predict”. Prior to realising it, she spent an hour in isolation, eyes taped shut and touching nothing with her hands. During performance, working blind, she handled unknown material left in glass dishes by an assistant and responded with her voice to what she touched. “The whole idea of sensory deprivation was influenced by conceptual artists such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, some of the early work of Dennis Oppenheim,” she says. “It became a kind of psychological piece. I kept journals about the kinds of things I felt while in isolation. I wanted to communicate with the audience on a pre-verbal, non-verbal level. I hoped they would feel what I was feeling through the medium of the sound coming out of me.”

That piece was a direct outcome of La Barbara witnessing conceptual art performances in galleries. Among later inclusions on *Voice Is The Original Instrument* is a piece called *Autumn Signal* (1978), inspired initially by the flexible language of Fluxus poet Emmett Williams but developed under the strong influence of choreographer Merce Cunningham. In this composition for voice and synthesizer, which she classifies as a “soundance”, she set out to establish multiple perspectives. “It’s like dancers performing different moves simultaneously in different areas,” she observes. “The onlooker has to open her mind

and let the images exist in space with a larger focus than usual. Any way the performer faces is ‘front’. That’s all part of the way I thought about sound in this, and in other works. Sound as solid object, an independent entity existing in space, having presence and mobility.” Her creative association with Merce Cunningham as a member of his company continues, and La Barbara has recently worked too with choreographer Jane Comfort, providing a score for her dance-theatre work *An American Rendition*.

Twelvesong (1977), also to be found on *Voice Is The Original Instrument*, is the first of La Barbara’s ‘sound painting’ pieces, a variegated sonic fabric of drones, whispers, croaks and twittering that aspires to approximate within the sound field the experience of exposure to a work of visual art. Around 1973 La Barbara was a member of Reich’s ensemble when it played at the Rothko Chapel in Houston. “I was thunderstruck by the paintings and the atmosphere,” she recalls. “Years later, I did a lot of research into Mark Rothko’s work, the idea of monochromatic painting and layers upon layers of paint with God knows what else in the mix. The outcome was my composition *ROTHKO*, which I premiered in the Chapel in 1986. It’s an octagonal space that has 14 paintings arranged within it. I prerecorded microtonal and multiphonic vocal washes, added bowed piano and projected those sounds through eight separate channels. Another layer was performed live. A different mix came from each of the speakers. I wanted members of the audience to experience the sound as they experienced the paintings – differently according to their position in the room.” A stereo version of this beguiling, shimmering piece can be heard on *ShamanSong*.

Although La Barbara’s own work often takes cues from visual experience and still more often plunges beyond verbal language in its realisation, her long-standing compositional procedure involves text at a fundamental level. “When I went to university I dually enrolled in music and creative writing,” she explains. “When composing I do stream-of-consciousness writing with no censoring. I write down everything, even if it’s ridiculous. After I’ve done this brain-dump, I reread the words and find the music there.”

The particular chemistry of words, visual images and sounds in La Barbara’s compositional orientation lent itself perfectly to a collaboration with concrete poet Kenneth Goldsmith that produced the remarkable 1994 release *73 Poems* (Lovely Music). “The first 20 or so of Kenneth’s drawings that I saw had light and dark text superimposed. When he started to listen to recordings of my earlier music, the nature of his work changed, opened up and got more airy, words floating in space, gaseous stuff. I was living in Santa Fe, New Mexico at that time, and my studio was a converted two-car garage, so I had room to put up on the walls the big Xerox copies of the 79 poems he sent me – he found he couldn’t stop at 73. I sat for a week reading them, looking at and studying them, waiting for the music to come. Then I started writing a kind of word salad – noting all of the things that I wanted to do. I wanted to follow the progress of the poems, the way



dark text in one was represented in the next poem in some altered way. I wanted to deal with them also as architecture and as visual pieces, to have my sonic representation correspond to what the poem was visually. I went into the studio with engineer Michael Hoenig, who had worked with me on *ShamanSong*. We collaborated, layering it, dealing with spatial configuration and depth of field. I want people to feel this music as a sonic entity almost like sculpture.

“Over the years, if I’ve hit a dry spell in my own compositional thinking, I have contacted composers and asked them to write me a piece,” she continues. “A commission with no money attached... just the obligation on my part to perform it.”

In 1981 she made such an approach to Morton Feldman, requesting an orchestral piece with voice, along the lines of his *The Viola In My Life*. Feldman felt that an unfunded orchestral commission was unrealistic; instead he wrote *Three Voices*, an exquisite setting of a Frank O’Hara poem for one live and two taped voices. It’s a work to which La Barbara remains devoted, still performing it regularly, most recently last November, along with her own compositions, at the Ciclo de Música Contemporánea 2008 festival in Buenos Aires. “The voice changes,” she observes. “What I can do changes. There’s certain repertoire which I’ve caused to come into being and am very proud of, which I can no longer sing. With *Three Voices* I have gone back into my recordings and shifted a couple of moments, so for the very highest notes, which I now find difficult, I use in performance a prerecorded voice from my past and I sing live some of the material previously allocated to one of the recorded voices. In that way, hopefully, I can continue to sing it for a few more years at least.”

John Cage wrote *Eight Whiskus* in response to a request from La Barbara in 1984. “I expected John to use extended vocal techniques,” she comments. “But he presented me with these beautiful, lyrical songs, like lute songs without the lute. I was surprised, but they are wonderful.” Her long friendship with Cage got off to an uneasy start, however. She was travelling in Europe with Steve Reich in 1972. John Cage and David Tudor were there at the same time, so they intersected at various places. In Berlin, Cage’s sound circus *HPSCHD* was being staged. “There were thousands of people milling around, slides projected on the walls, an orchestra playing in one room, numerous pianos and harpsichords, musicians talking about politics,” she recalls. “The whole thing was cacophonous and I was young, headstrong and furious. I marched up to John and said, ‘With all the chaos in the world, why do you make more?’ His devotees, standing around him, gasped. I turned on my heel and marched out. A few minutes later there was a tap on my shoulder and it was John, smiling beatifically. He said, ‘Perhaps when you go back out into the world it won’t seem so chaotic.’ I won’t say that changed my attitude in that particular circumstance, but I did think a great deal about the fact that this person thought it important enough to find me amongst thousands of people

in order to respond to what had basically been an affront to him.

“A few years later I saw John at a concert at Phill Niblock’s loft in New York. I was about to do some of the first performances of my music, and I went up to him and said, ‘I want you to be there.’ He turned up at the first performance of *Voice Piece: One Note Internal Resonance Investigation* at a little loft in SoHo and afterwards said to me, ‘It’s wonderful; would you like to work with me?’” Cage handed her the 18-page score to *Solo For Voice 45*, from his *Song Books*. La Barbara did preparatory work on the piece for around six months, then sang it for him. Cage responded appreciatively but critically – her performance was fine, but should have been faster to meet the score’s requirements. This was characteristically exacting. “Over the years I did a lot of touring with John,” La Barbara remarks. “People would come up and ask all sorts of questions, and if it was specifically about a piece, he would examine the score to find if the answer to the question was already there in his instructions or notation, and he would then point that out.” Towards the end of his life Cage wrote *Four⁶* for performance by La Barbara, percussionist William Winant and pianist Leonard Stein, with Cage himself “singing in his *Finnegans Wake* voice, that I used to tell him sounded like a drunken monk,” she laughs. The premiere was in New York’s Central Park on 23 July 1992. It was Cage’s last performance.

It was through Cage that La Barbara began a fruitful working relationship with members of the Sonic Arts Union. He had sung her praises to Alvin Lucier, who in 1974 sought out La Barbara to work with him on *Still And Moving Lines Of Silence In Families Of Hyperbolas*, a piece in which interference tones create an undulating terrain of sound and silence. “We were in Merce Cunningham’s dance studio and Alvin said, ‘I’m going to bombard you with sound waves – just do what you want with that’,” she recalls. “So I found my acoustical centre in the room, the point where I was being bombarded equally from each of the four speakers, and by singing microtonally above or below the projected pitch I found I could move the sound waves away from me. Afterwards, I explained to Alvin what I had been doing and he said, ‘That’s just marvellous – that’s the piece’. In some ways that piece is most fulfilling to the person performing. The audience couldn’t actually hear what I was doing, just the effect of it – Alvin loved that aspect.”

Soon afterwards, La Barbara started singing with David Behrman, collaborating in 1975 on his *Melody With Voice-Driven Electronics*. In this piece, her singing activated circuitry when it hit particular pitches and triggered swooping and soaring electronic responses. After working sporadically over the years with both Lucier and Behrman, in 1990 she was approached by their former Sonic Arts Union associate Robert Ashley to contribute to his opera *Improvement*. Since then she has been a regular member of his company, a distinctive voice that along with those of Jacqueline Humbert, Thomas Buckner,

Sam Ashley and the composer himself has realised a singular and compelling operatic vision. During January 2009 she took part in the staging of Ashley’s recent trilogy *Dust*, *Celestial Excursions* and *Made Out Of Concrete* at New York’s La MaMa experimental theatre club.

As well as working with such firmly established figures, La Barbara actively supports the work of emerging composers and performers. Occasionally she has shared some of her wealth of accumulated knowledge and insight through singing workshops, including some organised internationally under the aegis of David Moss’s Institute for Living Voice. She is also on the board of directors of MATA (originally Music at the Anthology), an organisation founded in 1996 by composers Philip Glass, Eleanor Sandresky and Lisa Bielawa to promote the music of younger composers in New York, via a yearly festival. “In effect it’s the early work of composers who may in time do something incredible,” La Barbara remarks. “So I suggested a benefit event that featured some of the early work of well-known composers. I sang Morton Feldman’s *Only*, an exquisitely beautiful song written in 1947, when he was only 21. I also performed some of my own pieces and two early songs by Meredith Monk, who has been a friend since the early 1970s.”

Since 2002 La Barbara has been closely involved with the activities of Ne(x)works, a collective of young performing composers that coalesced around a shared fascination with the work of the New York School and with the more general challenge of interpreting graphic notation. La Barbara came into contact with them during a series at Carnegie Hall called When Morty Met John, for which she was artistic director. They decided to form a collaborative ensemble and invited her to become part of it. Together they have presented concerts of her music and that of other members, such as Kenji Bunch, Cornelius Dufallo, Shelley Burgon, Miguel Frascóni and Chris McIntyre. They have also interpreted open score classics such as Cage’s *Variations II*, Cornelius Cardew’s *Octet 61* and Earle Brown’s *December 1952*. *Tracer*, their debut recording of music by Earle Brown, was listed as one of the finest recordings of 2007 in *The Wire*.

In the context of Ne(x)works, La Barbara currently continues to develop *Shimmer*, her own idiosyncratic contribution to the increasingly volatile and unpredictable field of opera. Also collaborating on this shapeshifting work in progress is video artist Kurt Ralske (the former 4AD artist Ultra Vivid Scene), who projects prerecorded material and live capture as the music is performed. Initial inspiration for *Shimmer* came from the subtle and elusive qualities of Virginia Woolf’s prose, but the work has increasingly come to define its own terms. “There is a vocal quality called shimmer, a particular quality of the timbre of the voice,” La Barbara explains. “And a certain aspect of light. To me it’s also ghosts – wraiths moving across the background that you see from the corner of your eye. Sounds that you can’t hear.” □ Joan La Barbara performs at Glasgow’s Instal festival this month: see Out There



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Playing chess with John Cage, 1976



K. Michael McKenzie

