

latimes.com

Review: Eve Beglarian's 'River Project' beguiles at Meng Hall

Cal State Fullerton's Sonic Landscapes lap up 'Songs from the River Project' by Eve Beglarian with her BRIM Ensemble.

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

7:00 AM PST, March 1, 2014

Once the automobile industry began incorporating GPS functions on the same console as a car's sound system, our pleasure in navigating by song, something that goes back to the troubadours of Middle Ages, became endangered. Your dashboard may lead to the best barbecue or nearest diesel fuel, but it won't tell you whether this land is your land.

In 2009, composer Eve Beglarian spent four months kayaking and bicycling the length of the Mississippi and simply listened as ol' man river rolled along. Her redolent report is "Songs from the River Project," which she and her BRIM Ensemble performed in Meng Hall on Thursday night as part of Cal State Fullerton's annual New Music Festival, this year called Sonic Landscapes. It continues through Sunday.

Everything about Beglarian's project is quietly idiosyncratic. BRIM itself is the duo of Beglarian as vocalist and reciter and manipulator of laptop-generated electronics, along with violinist Mary Rowell. The ensemble adds guitarist Gyan Riley and the Guidonian Hand Trombone Quartet.

Beglarian's suitably Mississippian music laps repetitively. The four trombones are a sheer joy of serenading foghorns. Rowell and Riley are exciting, creative musicians.

A kind of medieval minimalist, Beglarian remains in the thrall of early music. She has written a feisty feminist opera based on St. Hildegard of Bingen called "Hildegirls" and done postminimalist mash-ups of the 14th-century French composer Guillaume de Machaut. In her river settings, she makes room for folksong, the blues and New Orleans brass bands.

But what also makes her river music beguiling is her remove as an observer. She is not a documentarian, although she showed slides of some of the sites along the way, gave brief introductions to the places and read excerpts from a blog journal she kept.

Still, she doesn't ask too much from her songs. The emotions are not specific. Without being told, you would rarely know where the music comes from. Rather the river serves as font of inspiration. Paddling far from cities and deadlines is a good way to get ideas and remove worthless distraction.

Sometimes the ideas, or the titles anyway, come from a phrase she picked up along the river — "I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long," "I am really a very simple person," "Not all good is luck but luck is good."

In "It Happens Like This," Beglarian recites a text by James Tate about a goat mistaken for the Prince of Peace, her cool, distinguished detachment being underscored by the folk-like plucked accompaniment of Rowell (who joined Beglarian on the Mississippi journey) and Riley. River pumps caught Beglarian's imagination, and she turns recordings of them into electronic drones of rich complexity in "Pump Music."

Mainly, though, "The River Project" is a frame of mind. "Unfavored House," a sad new song that she premiered Thursday, reflected her attempt to unencumber herself of a recently inherited house in Los Angeles that was mired in debt. The Mississippi is the heart of America, and her trip followed the Great Recession. A forlorn (though rather nice-looking) bungalow was shown on the screen overhead. Electronic drones had the quality of a panting dog, forlorn but also implying life continuing no matter the banks.

Beglarian's final number, "Brownie Feet," is her most site-specific, sampling the voice of George W. Bush and showing a collage of Katrina footage. But even here whimsy wins over anger. Rowell's violin alludes to Bach. The trombones offer echoes of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

Beglarian is far too cool and elegant to attempt a James Brown imitation, but in her own understated yet provocatively emphatic way, she slyly evokes him anyway. New Orleans drowns, yet Beglarian discovers the dawn.

mark.swed@latimes.com

Copyright © 2014, [Los Angeles Times](#)