

## EDITORIAL: JOAN LA BARBARA AT 75: CELEBRATIONS AND PROVOCATIONS

Christopher Fox

This issue celebrates the singer and composer Joan La Barbara in her 75th year. Six articles explore different aspects of her extraordinary career and I am grateful to Ryan Dohoney for curating this multifaceted portrait. There is always the occasional frisson of editorial anxiety as one waits to see what one's curatorial partner has drawn together, but any worries were dispelled as soon as the articles started to come in. Ryan had chosen his collaborators well and working with them has been a pleasure. It is also a pleasure to hand over the rest of this editorial to Ryan so that he can introduce Joan La Barbara more fully.

Ryan Dohoney

2022 marks Joan La Barbara's 75th year, an occasion that offers opportunity for appreciation of a career that, as it enters its fifth decade, shows no sign of slowing down. La Barbara has even thrived under pandemic conditions, making the most of technological affordances that have emerged during lockdown. She sang in Kamala Sankaram's Zoom opera *all decisions will be made by consensus*, improvised with composer-vocalist Gelsey Bell and gave numerous solo concerts across the ether from her suburban New York home studio.<sup>1</sup> Most recently she offered a virtual programme for the Neue Berliner Kunstverein in conjunction with the retrospective of Fluxus artist Tomas Schmidt.<sup>2</sup> All the while, she has remained dedicated to her teaching at the Mannes College of Music.

Somewhat to my surprise, it has been the music of La Barbara that has been a faithful companion during these years of lockdown. Early in 2020, with time on my hands, I gathered everything I could of her work, scouring eBay for an original copy of *Reluctant Gypsy*, snapping up the Arc Light Edition reissues of *Tapesongs* and *Voice is the Original Instrument* and taxing my interlibrary loan department with requests for rare scores. Making sense of La Barbara's work became my COVID-era passion project, and it became clear that the work of sense-making would require some help. I realised that 2022 was an auspicious year in which to honour La Barbara and enlisted Andrea F. Bohlman, Joy Calico, Bernard Gendron, David Gutkin and Kerry

<sup>1</sup> Sankaram's opera can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/412782729>. La Barbara's programme with Gelsey Bell is available at [www.facebook.com/NewSchoolJazz/videos/347194719593361/](https://www.facebook.com/NewSchoolJazz/videos/347194719593361/). A performance sponsored by HB Studio can be viewed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wakkbURMKMc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wakkbURMKMc). Last accessed 7 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> La Barbara's premiere of *In available light* and her sound painting *Windows* can be viewed here: [www.nbk.org/en/diskurs/labarbaraperformancebaw21.html](https://www.nbk.org/en/diskurs/labarbaraperformancebaw21.html). Last accessed 7 May 2022.

O'Brien to assist me. Our work seemed even more urgent as I discovered how little scholarship has been devoted to La Barbara's life and work.

In recent years, music studies and allied fields have produced much nuanced and compelling research on voice: its work in both forming and resisting identity, its entanglement with and opposition to language, its timbral nuances and grain and certainly (following Jacques Derrida and Adriana Cavarero) its philosophical importance.<sup>3</sup> Within the new musical praxis voice has been a fruitful site of experimentation and compositional development. Some artists – Cathy Berberian, Julius Eastman and Pamela Z among them – have attracted attention for their compelling development of voice as a matter of concern.<sup>4</sup>

Given this intense focus on voice both within musicology and new music, I remain surprised that La Barbara has attracted comparatively little research relative to her ubiquity on the international new-music scene as composer, sound artist, collaborator and technical innovator. Beyond a few scattered dissertations, articles and interviews there has been little reckoning with the challenges her work poses both to our concept of voice and our understanding of new music as a collaborative practice.<sup>5</sup> Occasionally, her name is included in lists of luminaries that suggest her importance, yet authors quickly move on to more pressing concerns. I too have committed a particularly egregious instance of this, in the opening of my book *Saving Abstraction*.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Nina Eidsheim – in an otherwise essential account of voice as vibrational practice – notes La Barbara's importance only in passing.<sup>7</sup> This paucity of scholarship is even more curious when we note that the location of her work's first flowering – downtown New York City in the 1970s – has garnered so much scholarly interest.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as the epistemological guideposts of 'network' and 'mediation' have come to dominate experimental music studies, it is all the more strange that a composer-performer-collaborator so essential to the work of Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Morton Feldman and John Cage has not figured in their histories to any significant degree.<sup>9</sup> I have, in my most recent book, partially tried to make up for this and argued for La Barbara's own work as a model for

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the state of the field, see Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, eds, *The Voice as Something More: Essays toward Materiality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Pamela Karantonis, ed., *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach, eds, *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015) and George E. Lewis, 'The Virtual Discourses of Pamela Z', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 1, no. 1 (2007), pp. 57–77.

<sup>5</sup> For La Barbara's own account of her career, see Joan La Barbara, 'Voice Is the Original Instrument', *Contemporary Music Review*, 21, no. 1 (2002), pp. 35–48.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Dohoney, *Saving Abstraction: Morton Feldman, the de Menils and the Rothko Chapel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 29, 31–32.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Tim Lawrence, *Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973–1992* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Michael C. Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2, no. 1 (2005), pp. 7–36 and Benjamin Piekut, 'Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 11, no. 2 (2014), pp. 191–215.

Feldman's composition *Three Voices*. But there is much more to be done.

The essays gathered here are then both an offering in La Barbara's honour and also a scholarly intervention into narratives of new music. Gendron takes La Barbara's as a monadological approach to downtown New York in the 1970s, documenting her participation in and contribution to the work of Reich and Glass, her collaborations with Cage, her development of extended vocal techniques through improvisation and her role as a spokesperson for the scene as a critic at the *Soho Weekly News* and *Musical America*. David Gutkin offers a set of 'listening sketches' as prompts for an interview with La Barbara that surveys her career up to her present-day activities. Kerry O'Brien zooms in on La Barbara's collective work with the New Wilderness Preservation Band and reframes La Barbara's development of her extended vocal techniques through their improvisatory collaborations. Andrea F. Bohlman follows La Barbara's occasional forays into popular culture, drawing out the ethical and aesthetics lessons of the 'signing alphabet' that the composer developed for the children's educational television programme *Sesame Street*. Joy Calico maps La Barbara's time in West Berlin in the late 1970s and early 1980s to find her voice's place in that Cold War soundscape. My own article homes in on La Barbara's body of 'sound paintings': compositions that translate gestural and visual ideas into compositional forms. I argue that La Barbara's ekphrastic conception of voice does the work of translation in her works *Klee Alee*, *Rothko* and *In solitude this fear is lived*. We hope these essays offer new insights and provocations that encourage further consideration of La Barbara's ongoing contributions to contemporary music.