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MUSIC REVIEW | 'SERIAL UNDERGROUND'

Stirring Composers, Musicians and Theater Artists Into a Stew



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

Margaret Lancaster performing at Serial Underground on Monday.

By STEVE SMITH Published: June 13, 2007

Informal salon concerts are largely a thing of the distant past. But Jed Distler and Célia Cooke, the directors of ComposersCollaborative inc, offer an attractive update of that old model with Serial Underground, the monthly series they organize at the Cornelia Street Café in the West Village. There, composers, musicians and theater artists mix and mingle, presenting recent pieces and works in progress in an unbuttoned setting.

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The latest installment, performed to a packed house on Monday night, included first glimpses of two operas in the making. "Calling," by the composer Doug Geers, is based on "A Mother's Essays From Ground Zero," a collection of reflections on Sept. 11, 2001, by the writer and director Wickham Boyle.

In the untitled selection presented here, the soprano Erin Heisel offered a plainspoken lament that was sometimes echoed or harmonized by Lesley Watson, a mezzo-soprano. Mr. Geers, using a notebook computer, fashioned an accompaniment of street sounds, glitchy bursts and mechanical rhythms; Summer Boggess, a cellist, played keening whistles and scrabbling outbursts. Despite the clangor, the tone was generally contemplative.

At the opposite extreme was Mr. Distler's "Scene From an Imaginary Opera," based on

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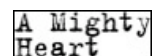
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characters and situations from a cult-classic film. (Its name was withheld, but audience reaction left little doubt as to its familiarity.) Ms. Heisel offered a brave, vivid rendition of a rangy excerpt, the expletive-filled lyrics of which made reference to an unnatural act with a chicken. Mr. Distler accompanied on piano, offering an eclectic barrage of distorted cabaret melodies and boogie-woogie rhythms.

The flutist Margaret Lancaster opened her set with Jacob ter Veldhuis's "Lipstick," a whimsical tour de force of chattering melodies derived from taped speech. In "Organum II" by the Italian composer Francesco Antonioni, Ms. Lancaster was accompanied by the long, pure tones of a sinusoid generator, which rang like rubbed goblets.

As flute and accompaniment gently drifted in and out of sync, the piece recalled Brian Eno's ambient-music recordings. Later, when Ms. Lancaster's notes coalesced into melodies and the supporting tones into chords, the music more closely resembled the blissful electronica heard on the syndicated radio show "Hearts of Space." In Lois V. Vierk's bustling "Io," Ms. Lancaster negotiated the push and pull of Larry Polansky's electric guitar and Matthew Gold's marimba.

Ms. Lancaster specializes in pieces like these and often plays them in conventional halls. The benefit of hearing them here was the mostly perky, occasionally stern stage persona she affected for the occasion.

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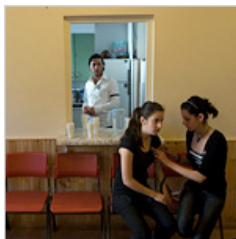
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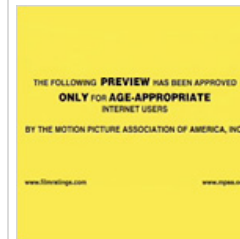


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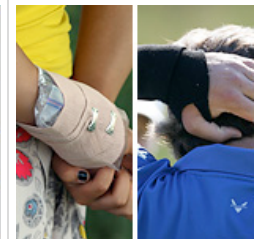
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