

'Vocal Windows' Stages Mind-Gripping Visions

"Vocal Windows," an evening of music by Joan LaBarbara in staged or electronic visualizations, ends with such a monumental outpouring of obsessive ritual and such mind-gripping montaged vocal sonorities that it can take over a corner of a listener's mind and hold it for at least a day afterward.

"Winds of the Canyon," a tape montage celebrating and heightening the hypnotic effect of certain Indian ritual sounds, was devastatingly powerful as the last of three LaBarbara works presented with visual realizations Friday night in Santa Fe's Center for Contemporary Arts.

First composed in 1982 after LaBarbara attended a Corn Dance at Santo Domingo Pueblo, the collage of segments and layers of the composer's voice became the basis for a collaborative stage piece. Created with multimedia artist Lita Albuquerque and operatic stage director Barbara Karp, the staged version showed in Los Angeles' Theatre Center before it was revised for CCA's available space.

Set in a moderately sized gallery with loudspeakers in the two rear corners and the audience seated between them on tiered risers, the staging centered around two circular copper shields on the floor and backdrop wall. The action consisted of LaBarbara entering the space, hearing voices of departed Indians (LaBarbara's vivid evocations on the tape) and becoming totally absorbed in the ritual mysticism from the site and the ambient sound.

But the massive, mesmeric sounds in the last minutes of the tape took over and dominated the mixture of media. This choir of hollow, reedy, chanting voices eclipsed the smaller sounds of the first few minutes in retrospect, although the earlier calls and cries had set the listener up for the awesome ending.

It rolled like the tide coming in, phrase after nearly identical phrase of chant with odd notes bent slightly away from their tonal centers in eerie, perfect unisons. A listener's mind thrashed on the hook of these slowly revolving, slowly evolving repetitions, thinking of gospel choirs and Gregorian chants and choirs of double-reed instruments. But the piece moved on implacably to its own static ending.

The staging projected deference to this collective voice from the center of the earth, but once that sequence started, it almost didn't matter what happened visually. Artist Albuquerque, who crouched motionless as an Indian crone at stage rear, made the most convincing response.

Each of the three major performances of the evening took place in a different room at CCA. "Winds of the Canyon" was in the center's Gallery Space, the preceding "Berliner Träume" ("Berlin Dreams") was in its Sound Stage, while the opening "Voices Windows"/"Gaia" was in the Theater.

The Berlin piece was based on another

David Noble



MUSIC

THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS will repeat "Vocal Windows," an evening of staged or visualized performances of music works by composer/performer Joan LaBarbara, at 8 p.m. tonight in the center's facility at 1050 Old Pecos Trail, Santa Fe. Tickets are \$7. For reservations call 982-1338.

tape composed in LaBarbara's intense, personal version of the reiterative Minimalist style. Based on LaBarbara's year as a composer in residence in the German city, the music grew from cycles of city sounds, voices and rhythmic breathing tightly montaged together.

Melodramatic photos of the city back-projected onto hanging screens in a darkly lit set designed by Albuquerque provided the frame for a not-quite-drama devised by Karp of two couples, one of which melts and interacts while the other doesn't. The fragmentary, teasing staging was not as well knit as the taped music; it came off as a satiric nightclub skit with inaudible or nonexistent punch lines.

LaBarbara starred in this terse presentation of her memories. Three supporting players, Craig Syverson, Diane Armitage and Gregory Waits, projected impassive intensity in their non-speaking parts. But there wasn't really anything for them to do, nothing for them not to say, so to speak. So their projections came from and went to a virtual limbo, even while LaBarbara's music developed palpable power.

The program opened with a demonstration of a video technique that used input from an outside signal — in this case, LaBarbara's voice — to inject one video picture into the midst of another. The apparatus was wired so that the strength of LaBarbara's voice controlled the degree of transition from one image to another on the identical multiple screens set up around her.

The pictures that were thus modulated, taken from sequences by video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka, her husband, appeared to be views of northern New Mexico.

Imposing ideas in search of a format seemed to be the consistent factor in these presentations. And in "Winds of the Canyon," the format was found; it was worth the price of admission.