

The Boston Musical Intelligence

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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Blackstar's Lively Ambience

by STEPHANIE SUSBERICH

A diverse crowd packed MIT's Kresge Auditorium to hear Evan Ziporyn's 80-person orchestra play *Blackstar*, David Bowie's last album. The Ambient Orchestra formed in January 2016 as a tribute to the late artist, who died just two days after *Blackstar's* release. Last year, the orchestra—composed of local musicians, students, faculty and community members from MIT and Boston—performed Philip Glass's two Bowie-inspired symphonies, *Low* and *Heroes*.

Even before the music started, one witnessed a colorful orchestral tableaux: asymmetrical haircuts, electric blue, red and pink hair, futuristic concave heels and red platform shoes, shiny sequins and stud diamonds interspersed with cascading gold neck armor, androgynous raiments, black fingerless gloves and leather, and colorful silk scarves hanging from the ends of violins.

Faculty Director of the MIT Center for Art, Science, & Technology Ziporyn emerged in a long, popped collar trench coat. Greeted by a warm applause, he began with something of his own, *Frog's Eye* (2002), which he wrote after observing “a 99% immersed amphibian near the shore of Walden Pond; a model of stillness and serenity, he seemed to be meditating on the panoptical sky...”

The gratifying clarity of striking wooden blocks opened the scene as life in the pond slowly emerged in its myriad forms. Through buoyant music that seemed to bounce just as water striders dance over water, one could hear and vividly imagine bubbling insects, curious creatures and the frog's unfurling thoughts. Employing over 30 cellos, violins and violas and a healthy brass and percussion section, *Frog's Eye* evoked life on the pond with undertones of Elliot Carter's Pastoral for English Horn, Marimba and String Orchestra. The wooden blocks repeated an eight-clack motive throughout the scene, echoing ever more softly with each click, creating a soothing effervescence. Then serenity seeped into cacophony, revealing the morass and chaos of life, as fluttering violins captured the buzz of horseflies. Yet even with its dose of dissonance, Ziporyn's music pleases and leaves one feeling refreshed from a journey.

The conductor then told us how we are living through an amazing time here in Boston replete with many trail-blazing musical ensembles—many members of whom constitute the Ambient Orchestra. He explained that the concert strived to communicate the power of moving music through mediums, and that the next piece, *240 Gymnopédies*, was a world premiere (though it is based on Erik Satie's well-known piano *Gymnopédies*).

The conductor writes that 120 years ago, Debussy orchestrated the outer two movements of the *Gymnopédies*. Last summer, Ziporyn came across Queens-based Hey Exit musician, Brendan Landis' “stunning piece of sound art,” *Every Recording of Gymnopédie 1*, which inspired him to “re-cast all three movements: the first two as sonic silkscreens of Debussy and the third as an aleatoric analog to Hey Exit's electronic processes.” We were then treated to a sobering soundscape: the orchestral version of all 240 *Gymnopédies*, “via Claude Debussy, Brendan Landis, and Evan Ziporyn.” Gleaming gold flutes and a hefty brass section entwined with strings and percussion to paint a placid, familiar sonic world. Landis on electric guitar sat in the center of the orchestra, his asymmetrical hair and lavender guitar strap placed him befittingly amongst the colorful players. Yet, with roots in 19th century Paris, the piece belonged to a more traditionally classical palette that grounded its audience after the excitement of *Frog's Eye*. Its soothing complexity continued an underlying sonic thread of the night—something unexplainable, mysterious, even sinister lives beneath the surface.



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Alan Levitan on H+H and Youngsters Now and Then

After intermission, a striking woman dressed in a leather corset, glittering black blouse, six-inch heels, and long, flowing brown hair took her place on a platform to the left of the conductor. A sustained, excited applause greeted her, cloaking her in an aura of glamour and glitz. She was Maya Beiser, a world-renowned cellist with a rock star's chops and charisma.

Blue backlighting created an electric-dreamscape as pulsing percussion awakened us into the world of *Blackstar*. Maya's playing flowed freely along invisible lines, traced by an unencumbered, swaying body, which like her spontaneous smiles, exuded a confident pleasure in Bowie's music. Playing both lead singer and lead guitarist, she carried the melodies familiar to millions of fans, while the orchestra filled in a fantastic sonic dimension never before heard in this context.

Loud crescendos exploded into quieter, introspective moments; luscious melody punctuated by purposeful, scratchy clashes of the bow to string. Orchestral cacophony melted into haunting delay effects, strategically added to Beiser's cool, intense, serious, and fierce mastery. Bowie would have been dazzled.



Maya Beiser (Jill Steinberg photo)

High hats mimicked electronic drum beats, making it feel like a great pop album had come to life before us. Only the sound was richer than the experience of listening to a pop album could ever be: one could here and feel the confused, downward-spiraling percussion—its ever-presence and its foreboding. The sheer power of the orchestral sound could suddenly sweep you up by a current of strings and leave you suspended in uncertainty. A full-bodied orchestral crescendo culminated in a victoriously rising wave of sound, leaving you on the other side of a cohesive musical experience started at the very beginning of the night with *Frog's Eye*. We had witnessed a mysterious, beautiful world where the incomprehensible momentum of life relentlessly brewed. A standing ovation greeted the players.

Maya told us, "We really wish David Bowie were here tonight, so with that we'll play *Wish You Were Here*." After the song's three minutes of familiar tranquility, it descended into the now recognizable, cool tone colors of *Blackstar*'s soundscape, leaving the audience once again excited enough to provide another standing ovation.

With that, Ziporyn announced, "This one needs no introduction." Bowie's 1983 hit, *Let's Dance* spun into our ears, infusing everyone with a brimming desire to do just that. The orchestra's very coordinated ending showed every player landing on the same exact sonic point, arms raised in mid-air after one final breath of sound. This created a delightful, uplifting moment that spontaneously spread a smile across faces, both within the audience and onstage. It felt like we were all in on it together. This was showmanship at its finest and most playful.

Side bar: I duly note one problematic component of the evening in MIT's new web app Notestream that delivered "real-time content to audience's smart phones at precisely timed moments" during *Blackstar*.

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Happily cocooned in the luxury of live sound, I reluctantly turned my attention to the screen, but felt a duty to give this optional experiment a chance. I found my acute listening senses were immediately tuned out, overburdened as I was to figure out how to make the thing function and then read its precisely timed program notes as well. Keeping up with the screen and following its orders (it often told me what I should be listening to) detracted from a rich immersion in the orchestra's holistic complexity. This led to a frustrating anxiety that violently tore me from the soothing, stimulating musical escapade I had been on that entire evening. After one and a half songs I put it away all together and spent the remainder of the concert trying to recover that splendid, authentic engagement that happens only when one's full attention is married to the musical experience.

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