

MUSIC REVIEW

Bowie's 'Blackstar' performed in totality by an orchestra at MIT

By **Marc Hirsh** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 04, 2017

David Bowie's "Blackstar" was from the very start an album fundamentally concerned with transformation. When it was released on the singer's 69th birthday, it was one album; when he died two days later, it quietly but irrevocably metamorphosed into another entirely. So Friday's sold-out recasting of Bowie's swan song as an extended orchestral piece at MIT's Kresge Auditorium by cellist Maya Beiser & The Ambient Orchestra, conducted by Evan Ziporyn, was in its way more faithful to his intentions than a straightforward duplication of the record.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Cellist Maya Beiser performed at MIT in 2015.

The program opened with Ziporyn's own "Frog's Eye," which began with claves mimicking amphibious throat clicks as the light, curious plucked strings and the reeds holding sustained notes inverted those instruments' usual roles. As the violins played across one another in mildly dissonant harmony, the collectively haphazard up and down movement of the bows resembled cattails swaying in the wind. Guitarist Brendan Landis then joined

the orchestra for what Ziporyn described as 80 versions of Erik Satie’s three *Gymnopédies*. The lulling, dreamlike rise and fall generated discordance without discomfort, as if the instruments refused to quite synch.

The orchestra’s approach took advantage of the rich, jazz-infused harmonic palette of “Blackstar.” As the rest of the strings rose up in deep menace and then flitted away like shadows, Beiser’s cello replaced the vocals of “Sue (Or In A Season Of Crime)” with a shivering panic, and “Girl Loves Me” tick-tick-ticked along implacably while she captured the curvy fillips of Bowie’s singing. And as it pressed forward, “Lazarus” reached further down into the grave and further up toward the stars all at once.

But the ensemble oddly wasn’t bold enough at times. Certain arrangements seemed too beholden to the source material, like the way the unbroken segue between “Dollar Days” and “I Can’t Give Everything Away” was retained instead of approaching them as independent compositions. Simple rock drumming kept the latter from soaring and exploring the way the percussion-free encore of Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here” — with its soft, multidimensional string arrangement — did effortlessly. A much-touted app, meant to provide real-time program notes as the music played, was an impressive technical achievement and, ultimately, a distraction to be shut off. But boldness wasn’t necessary for the finale of “Let’s Dance,” a straightforward pop song played in a straightforward Pops arrangement that argued that sometimes the best approach to Bowie is simply to follow where he led.

Music review

Maya Beiser & The Ambient Orchestra

your inbox:

The Globe's top picks for what to see and do each weekend, in Boston and beyond.

Sign Up

At: Kresge Auditorium, MIT, Friday

Marc Hirsh can be reached at officialmarc@gmail.com.

0 COMMENTS

Stay updated, right in your news feed.

Like 458K

Real journalists. Real journalism. Subscribe to The Boston Globe today.

My Account

- Log in
- Manage my Account
- Mobile Customer Service
- Sign Up For Newsletters

Contact

- Help
- FAQs
- Globe newsroom
- Advertise

Social

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google+

More

- ePaper
- News in Education
- Archives
- Privacy policy
- Terms of service
- Terms of purchase
- Your Ad Choices
- Work at Boston Globe Media