

LAURIE ANDERSON
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The songs from *Life on a String* by Laurie Anderson are a great example of how a master combination of elements can create a deep emotional experience that supports the theme revealed by the lyrics. This excerpt, from the multimedia show *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*, is a strong and solid work. Even when concentrating solely on the music, the multimedia experience still remains. Laurie succeeds in creating a world that appeals to mind, emotion, and all senses.

This journey takes us through moods such as expectation, dreamlike fantasy, hope, and general ups and downs that constitute a holistic experience of her opera. Furthermore, an evident coherence among musical elements holds together the songs that generate a positive result. Despite the dark and cerebral tendency that characterizes Laurie Anderson, she presents us with intense moments that save the pieces from monotony. Instead, the richness of gloomy moods and dark concepts bring life to the compositions.

The beat of these excerpts is a slow one and sometimes is marked by a silent space. In the case of *My Compensation* for example the beat is irregular. In the case of *One White Whale*, the keyboard sets the canvas for Laurie's voice to give the song an epic characteristic with traits of new age and religious undertone. The slowness of the

beat varies depending on the songs. In *Broken*, which is the most upbeat of the compositions, a drum kit is utilized and even though the vocals are still slow, the beat provides a feeling of activity. *One White Whale's* mood exposes the main theme of search and longing, that will be developed in the rest of the songs.

In regards to the rhythm, *Life on a String*, contains a series of layers that complement one another resulting in a fusion of moods. Each instrument brings a special characteristic in terms of rhythm without falling out or jeopardizing the context of the composition. In Laurie's songs it is as though each instrument, specially her voice as mentioned before, served as characters with respective personalities, that interact with one another while sharing the same goal and motivation: the theme.

The instrumentation is one of the most interesting areas of experimentation for Laurie Anderson. She invents her own instruments and is always at the vanguard of technology. There is a highly electronic arrangement in most of her compositions. However, the most essential instrument is her voice. The vocals in the songs are the leading layer. In addition, the instruments serve as ambience and decoration for the voice. Instruments such as the keyboard or violin seem to create a supportive dialogue and the necessary context for the voice, which is the heart of the song, to give its performance. Furthermore, Laurie extends her experimentation with her own voice. In order to enhance the certain moods and give character to the lyrics, she utilizes both, speaking and singing.

In regards to the harmony, it is clear that it is meant to be pleasant. I find this to be a smart element, for it allows the listener to engage and be taken in an enjoyable journey. Even further, Laurie's harmonies explore spaces that stimulate hidden or uncommon feelings and sensations. Thanks to this, the mind is also stimulated and the experience becomes successfully multidimensional. As Pythagoras taught, all the universe's aspects can be represented by music, including human elements. I believe that Laurie's harmonies have the characteristic of appealing to certain truths of life. There is definitely tension in the compositions that generates expectation from the listener. However, there is no sense of urgency, but rather of natural progression and enhancement of the mind.

The melody is the protagonist element of these compositions. Laurie's unique use of her voice has a huge range of tonalities and textures. At times she speaks with a soft voice in a lower tone, at other times she holds notes for a longer time as heard in *One White Whale*. In the case of *Slip Away* she alternates from a rhythmic speaking style to singing the chorus. This contrast provides tension and release, which is emotionally appealing. There is no real technical difficulty in singing these songs. However, the challenge lies in the ability to express and emphasize the lyrics with such talent and sensitivity.

A subtext of spirituality, grasping of human truths and longings, is felt through these compositions. Nevertheless, Laurie does not make use of these elements in a direct and evident way to avoid didactic peachiness in what can become uncomfortable subjects. Instead contagious inspiration and poetic lyrics can create such discourse on their own. When singing Laurie enhances the text according to its meaning, creating musical momentums full of meaning, throughout the songs.

In my experience, every time I hear music that opens a door to a new space of perception, I consider it highly successful. What I mean by perception is not only a function of the mind, but also an involvement of feelings and senses. Through the

experimentation in her music, I believe Laurie portrays a deep content. In contrast to much avant-garde experimentation that begins and stays within the formal aspect of the discipline that is being worked with, *Moby Dick* shows a genuine interest for a theme that triggered necessary experimentation. The way this can be recognized is by observing at what levels is the result appealing to the listener. In my opinion, some artists set themselves the goal or creating new trends and breaking rules for the sake of doing so, while others come across such process because of the necessity to find new ways to say and materialize something they have to say. When such content is present, it becomes the fuel, the inspiration, and the cohesive force of the outcome. In these excerpts of *Moby Dick*, we can recognize the content has preoccupations regarding the life, search, meaning, through the stories and songs that make up this opera.

My emotional reaction when listening to the music tells me that there is something pleasant I would like to keep on listening to. However, I don't mean pleasant in a condescending sense. On the contrary I mean pleasant in a way that the music, the lyrics, and the instruments create a world that I can dwell in while it lasts. Specially these selections from *Moby Dick* have left a very strong impression. There are explorations of deep human questionings and portrayals of behaviours through the material of this novel. We encounter concepts such as search, lostness, questionings, meaning, and hope. In conclusion I believe that Laurie Anderson, after her long trajectory of experimentation, has created a universal language in which she can express herself, which is in my opinion the ultimate goal of every artist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Songs and Stories from *Moby Dick*, by Laurie Anderson. Selections