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‘Bowie Cello Symphonic: Blackstar’ by Maya Beiser Review: Tribute to a Rock Icon

The cellist reworks and expands David Bowie’s final album.

By

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Cellist Maya Beiser, a celebrated master of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, David Lang, Arvo Pärt, Steve Reich and other composers, is a surprisingly natural fit for the music of David Bowie. Ms. Beiser, who is 56 years old, has made a habit of balancing her activities in classical music with excursions into rock. Ten years ago, she began performing the Jimmy Page/Robert Plant Led Zeppelin classic “Kashmir,” and a few years later she adapted Lou Reed’s Velvet Underground song “Heroin.” Then, in 2014, she released “Uncovered,” an album of rock and blues songs, with repertoire ranging from Muddy Waters to Janis Joplin, AC/DC to Nirvana.

But in tackling Bowie, Ms. Beiser has not picked an acknowledged cornerstone like “Space Oddity” or “Heroes.” Instead, she has taken on a much bigger challenge—focusing on his final recording, “Blackstar” (Columbia), which was released just two days before he died of liver cancer on Jan. 10, 2016. The timing gave Bowie’s recording the weight of a career summation, his frequent themes of alienation, transformation, love and angst receiving their final exposition.

Ms. Beiser’s “Bowie Cello Symphonic: Blackstar” (Islandia), which will be released on the fourth anniversary of the rocker’s death, is both a tribute to the spirit of the music and an expansion of it. Ms. Beiser collaborated with composer Evan Ziporyn, with whom she worked on “Uncovered,” to create a 30-piece orchestra of strings, brass and woodwinds to back her. Although Bowie’s “Blackstar” was co-produced by longtime associate Tony Visconti, the music was different from his previous work. He collaborated with stellar jazz saxophonist Donny McCaslin and his band, which broadened the range of tonal color on the recording and made it especially adaptable to Mr. Ziporyn and Ms. Beiser’s arrangements.

Ms. Beiser’s cello has a uniquely commanding tone. Like John Coltrane’s saxophone or Duane Allman’s guitar it is able to convey the sound of an urgently impassioned voice in many guises, and that is what makes this album work so well. Bowie was one of the greatest rock singers in

that he adapted many different styles—crooner, belter, folk singer—and excelled at each. He had similar success with his wide range of stage personas. The impact of the Beiser-Ziporyn take on “Blackstar” is best illustrated in “Sue (Or in a Season of Crime),” a driving, tensely coiled piece. The “Cello Symphonic” version offers a short prelude that isolates the atmospheric sounds that characterize the version of the song on “Blackstar” before diving into the original composition, elevating the anxiety. On “Lazarus,” the effect is the opposite: The orchestra adds a richness to the mood, leavening the regret and sorrow in the song. But Ms. Beiser’s pungent sound lends a poignant air, giving this performance a sense that it was Bowie’s self-eulogy. Ms. Beiser’s takes on the two tracks that ended Bowie’s “Blackstar”—“Dollar Days” and “I Can’t Give Everything Away”—feature passages in a similarly mournful tone.

Bowie was one of Ms. Beiser’s idols growing up, and both have had idiosyncratic and wildly successful career trajectories. Ms. Beiser confirms their affinities in the press materials and in the album’s bonus tracks: “Life on Mars” and “Ziggy Stardust,” two of Bowie’s most iconic songs. On the latter, which was the song that triggered her decades-long love affair with Bowie’s music, Ms. Beiser captures the authority and tone of the power chords and keening vocals that begin the original version of the track, but she precedes them with a 39-second segment from Bach’s “Suite for Solo Cello in G Major”—thus merging her interests and reminding us that great music’s emotional breadth and reach go far beyond the marketing categories that serve as arbitrary borders. Ms. Beiser will perform “Blackstar” this Friday in a free performance at the Winter Garden at New York’s Brookfield Place.

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