

La Barbara

as lightning comes, in flashes;
Autumn Signal; Cyclone

Joan La Barbara (singer), Bruce Ditmas
(synthesizer, steel guitar, percussion)
Mode mode 298 (CD & Blu-ray) 65:64 mins



Prepare to be mesmerised. Joan La Barbara was a key member of New York's Downtown

experimental music scene in the 1970s, a remarkably febrile period of exploration beyond the usual confines and templates of musical expression. Having trained as a traditional opera singer and performed with jazz ensembles as well as those of Reich and Glass, La Barbara systematically investigated the capabilities of the human voice. The performer of choice for numerous composers, her own music pushes the boundaries of vocal flexibility and stamina.

This release, available on both CD and audio-only Blu-ray, brings together three works where studio techniques turn La Barbara into a one-woman polyphonic instrument. *as lightning comes, in flashes* (1981) was originally an outdoor performance piece for singers and dancers. Reimagined for an LP recording, La Barbara recorded each track in real time so that the sense of being in the

moment is retained. The new remix presented here sounds great on CD, but is truly hypnotic in the surround sound of the Blu-ray version. From the opening clicking sound, floating around like a dolphin with a Geiger counter, this is striking, transfixing music. It is hard for description of the multifarious chants, whoops and ululations not to seem flippant, but this is truly beautiful music and it is a shock to discover 22 minutes have passed.

Cyclone (1977) is even longer and is especially compelling in surround, placing the listener inside a tornado, with vocal and percussion noises emerging from the swirling wind sounds like debris caught in the storm. Contrasting the sustained world of these pieces, *Autumn signal* (1978) is a knitting of segments that are individually fascinating, including La Barbara's voice transformed by synthesizer, but do not make an entirely convincing whole. Overall, though, this is a very welcome release. *Christopher Dingle*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING (BLU-RAY) ★★★★★
(CD) ★★★★★

BACKGROUND TO...

Joan La Barbara (b1947)

Born in Philadelphia, Joan La Barbara trained as a classical soprano, but in the course of her studies came to feel that her training imposed a repressive conformity. She starting to sing with jazz and avant garde ensembles, and in 1971 became a vocalist with Steve Reich and Musicians. While still performing with that group, she joined the Philip Glass Ensemble in 1973. She explored extended vocal techniques including circular breathing, multiphonics, clicks and vocal fry, and began to compose for her own voice. She teaches at New York University's Steinhardt School.

