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MUSIC REVIEW

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Women composers are no longer scarce or unaccepted. The glass ceilings in concert halls and opera houses are lined with cracks. Kaija Saariaho's latest opera premieres at the Paris Opera later this month. Augusta Read Thomas has been composer in residence of the Chicago Symphony for nearly a decade. The Cleveland Orchestra recently played a piece by Chen Yi in Carnegie Hall.

The list goes on. Avant-garde women make edgy electronic music; ambitious women serve up banal crowd-pleasers for orchestral audiences in Atlanta or Philadelphia. Just like men.

So who now needs the Women in New Music Festival, which Cal State Fullerton presents each year?

"Voices on the Edge," this year's festival, featured Pamela Z — the extraordinary Bay Area composer and performer — in an inexplicably rare Southern California solo appearance Friday night...

... Pamela Z sports dreadlocks, has a gracious manner, a rich, alluring voice, a dry sense of humor and a style of performance that is sometimes compared to Laurie Anderson (more about that later — she hates it)...

You can hardly miss that Pamela Z, who performs much of her own music, is female. But she was also the first to complain about ghetto-izing by gender or race...

... At her performance, Pamela Z made one wonder all over why she is not better known to a broader audience. She is a mainstay on the new-music circuit; she arrived Friday having just finished touring Europe. Her performances use her sonorous voice and electronics.

She creates repetitive loops with her computer. She works at high- and low-tech simultaneously, such as in "Bone Music," in which she uses a 5-gallon plastic water bottle as a drum that her computer then turns into looping, accompanying drum tracks. She includes video and speaks texts, some of them "geekspeak" — hence the Laurie Anderson comparisons she railed against on Saturday's panel.

Still, there are obvious similarities between her and Anderson as well as important differences. Pamela Z is a more sophisticated and questing composer than Anderson but less sophisticated visually and less connected to commercial culture. She has but one solo CD, and it is on a small label (Starkland).

Friday's grab bag proved an OK introduction to Pamela Z... But the scale always felt too small for so large a talent. She does create and participate in theatrical events, but even they tend to be modest. She's long been ready for the big time.