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PERFORMING ARTS

Pamela Z at the Tivoli

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By Stephen Brookes

Squalling babies, screeching birds, Puccini arias and the bland recorded voice of an answering machine -- it's all raw material for the relentlessly inventive singer and sound artist Pamela Z, who appeared at GALA Theatre-Tivoli over the weekend for three performances of "Voci," her electroacoustic meditation on the human voice.

For Z, the natural voice is just a starting point; it's the extended possibilities of singing that intrigue her, and for nearly two hours on Sunday she turned her classically trained soprano into a kind of cybernetic chorus.

Dressed all in black, hooked up to a Mac laptop and strapped into microphones, sensors and other electronics, Z prowled the stage like some postmodern ninja chanteuse, using her meta-voice to create vast sonic soundscapes and explore the human voice in all its incarnations -- from the first cries of an infant to the terrifying voices people hear in their heads.

And despite a few problems (there's no dramatic structure to keep things moving, and it sometimes felt as if Z were determined to use every vocal effect in the book), "Voci" was genuinely engrossing and often extremely funny.

Z is clearly willing to leap boldly into the unknown, and she's filled "Voci" with sonic wonders -- singing into amplified sheets of metal, for example, or bringing off Catalani's famous aria "Ebben? Ne andro lontana" while a computer-generated voice clumsily reads the lyrics.

Few other sopranos could even imagine it; Z turned it all into poetry.