

Lisa Gerrard Live in San Francisco, 24 October 1995

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Lisa Gerrard, lead female vocalist of the possibly defunct British group Dead Can Dance, performed at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts on 24 October 1995. Loreena McKennitt fans often mention Dead Can Dance and Gerrard as sources of music of similar taste and inspiration, so perhaps members of the "old-ways" electronic mailing list for McKennitt admirers will not mind that I have written this review for them.

I remembered getting lost in the one-way streets and traffic diverters near the Palace of Fine Arts on the way to McKennitt's May 1994 concert, but was too cowardly to seek the path of virtue by taking the obvious illegal left, out where everybody could see me. So I turned right instead, made an illegal U turn in the secrecy of a dimly-lit side street, crossed Richardson, and was parked in the Palace's side lot two minutes later. Salvation by moving-traffic violations: It works every time, particularly in San Francisco.

I came early, because I had an extra ticket. All seats had gone within two hours of the start of sales, so I foresaw no trouble selling it. Sure enough, it went within two seconds of entering the group of fans clustered at the theater door.

The subtle, dark beauty of Gerrard's powerful music inspires enthusiasm in particular subcultures; I expected San Francisco's Goth community out in force for the concert. Right again: Knots and clusters of elegant black-clad attendees swirled on the stoop and lurked in the lobby, graceful and overwhelming as an emergence of bats from a cave at twilight. I admire the goth style of dress, particularly for men, as the first real breath of fresh air in western men's formal dress in two hundred years. It's been a long wait...

No one would take me for a goth, but so as not to ruin the atmosphere for others, I dug out some vaguely appropriate vague Medievales -- gray jeans, black muslin shirt, black Celtic belt, and black knee-high moccasins, with my old brown wool cloak for warmth. I had enough silver on my fingers to give any thoughtful werewolf serious pause in fisticuffs, and a new pennant, a pointy oval of black jade, set in darkened silver, with seven tiny stars left shining in clear, bright metal.

Not goth, but good enough to pass unnoticed in the darkness. Hey, how come nobody ever told me it was fun to dress up?

There are no bad seats at the Palace of Fine Arts. For the McKennitt concert, your eager beaver author had lucked out and gotten into the center of the front row, but his friend trying to duplicate

the feat for Gerrard's performance had fallen victim to a phone-system crash at the ticket agency, and been fortunate to get seats at all. We were in the center of row "R", two from the back of the hall. So what: Acoustics were excellent, and the sharp upsweep of the theater floor afforded a fine view of the stage. I had brought a tiny 6x15 binocular, not an opera glass but a fancier and more powerful instrument. Its field of view was just right for close-up views of individuals on stage.

The curtains stood already open. A stand for Gerrard's personal instruments occupied the center of a close group of stations for support musicians Pieter Bourke, Robert Perry, John Bonner, Ronan O Snodaigh, and Jacek Tuschewski. No backdrops, props or other decoration complicated the view; the entire assemblage filled only the middle third of the wide Palace stage. The tight arrangement effectively focused attention on the star performer.

The lights came down to an opener of prose and poetry written by T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare, Mallarme, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud. Reader Mark Ellis did a fine, expressive job, and the selections set a dark mood for the performance to follow; however, the reading was too long for my taste, and its contribution was diminished by the considerable interval following in which house lights were raised and late-comers seated. Surely it would have been more effective to fade out on the recitation and in on the opening music at the same time. In any case, I was glad when the reading was over and the singing began.

Lisa Gerrard has an incredible voice, a powerful and precisely controlled alto, pitched more deeply than most women but lacking the distinctive timbre and overtones of most men. Her first few numbers, as darkly beautiful as polished ebony, gave full expression to the lower part of her range. They seemed almost to be sung by a member of some species other than ours, unhuman but not inhuman, originating in the voice and mind of another kind of being, with a different kind of perspective than our own.

Unfortunately, I don't know what they were. I knew of Gerrard mostly through *Dead Can Dance*, and only recently had obtained her solo album, "The Mirror Pool". Though I recognized many songs as familiar, I was too new to her repertoire to identify most of them on hearing, and although there was a nice souvenir book for sale, it contained no list of songs; thus I cannot tell you what she performed. How disappointing not to have a real program for a preplanned concert in a major theater.

In any case, the singing was first rate; Gerrard certainly went through most of her released repertoire, and did so in superb form, visual as well as vocal. A thick braid of hair coiled about the top of her head, dark lipstick emphasized the motions of her wide, sensuous mouth, and her flowing, white gown, Grecian in purity of line, expressed the very essence of simplicity. Several reviews of

earlier dates on this tour suggested that she had been a little nervous on stage; my binocular showed what might have been heightened tension in her face during the early part of the evening, but it certainly did not show up in her voice, and after the first few numbers Gerrard had clearly warmed to her work.

The pieces that I did recognize by name, such as the haunting and beautiful "Sanvean", were as rich and powerful as on the released recordings. As the evening progressed, the emotional aspect of the selections gradually augmented the brooding quality of the first few numbers with a sense of exaltation, balance and beauty, as if the darkness itself had begun to glow. It's no wonder goths love this artist. A transition so carefully obtained must have been deliberately planned; therefore the evening was not merely a sequence of songs, but a dramatic event in the whole, with structure and direction beyond the individual works. As such, it gave marvelous testimony to Gerrard's artistic skill and musical ability.

Several band members had opportunities to play on their own; most remarkable was the percussion of Ronan O Snodaigh, who achieved an octave or more of pitch in a fast and skillfully played drum -- I could not quite tell whether it was a tar or a bodhran. The wide-ranging melody and quick, strong rhythm of his solo performance would put any talking drum to shame.

Of particular note in Gerrard's work that none of her program featured any language I even recognized, much less understood. Libretto has always been an important part of my enjoyment of music, and its importance cuts both ways. When a vocalist sings well of themes that I find meaningful -- as does Loreena McKennitt -- my experience of the music is enhanced by the words; yet when I do not find libretto interesting or compelling -- as in a depressingly large proportion of popular music -- I tend in consequence to ignore the non-verbal aspects of performance. Lisa Gerrard's choice, to sing in languages unfamiliar to most of her audience, combines risk and opportunity. She may lose the particularity of subject that language conveys, yet she stands to gain an emotional participation that transcends specific meaning, abstracting from the familiar while still preserving the richness of deep feeling, thereby achieving not strangeness but universality.

I was delighted to find that for me, at least, the risk paid off. I enjoyed the concert immensely, and take pleasure in recommending Lisa Gerrard to all of you as a musician of remarkable talent, whose works consistently have enormous power and great emotional depth. I shall be eager for a chance to hear her perform again.