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Derk Richardson

Derk Richardson began writing about music in 1978 and is host of "The Hear & Now," a free-form music show (every Thursday, 10 p.m.-midnight) on KPFA 94.1 FM. He also writes a column, also called "The Hear & Now," at SFGate.com.

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Beth Custer on the victory stand again

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If an Olympics decathlon is ever staged for musicians, put your money on **Beth Custer** for the gold. In fact, ten events might not be enough to test the mettle of the all-purpose clarinetist/composer who makes her home in Bernal Heights.

This week, for instance, Custer played a reunion gig with the pioneering world-fusion band **Trance Mission** at Yoshi's on Fillmore Street on Tuesday. On Saturday, Aug. 16, she leads the latest version of her **Beth Custer Ensemble** (with drummer Jan Jackson, guitarist David James, and bassist **Lisa Mezzacappa**) at the Red Poppy Art House on Folsom St.

In October, she's off to the University of Wyoming as a composer-in-residence with the Laramie Contemporary Music Project; and her **Clarinet Thing** quartet (with Sheldon Brown, Ben Goldberg, and Harvey Wainapel) is booked into the **Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse** in Berkeley on Nov. 8.



The core Beth Custer Ensemble.

I've been following Custer's prolific career for two decades, and I still get dizzy trying to keep track of her various projects. Here are just a few of the works you should know about.

My Grandmother: The Pacific Film Archive commissioned Custer to write a score for the 1929 silent film, *My Grandmother*, by Georgian director Kote Mikaberidze. Banned by the Soviet government for 40 years, the film is a satirical critique of Soviet bureaucracy, and Custer's score (which she toured to Russia in 2007) captures the humor, drama, poignancy, and absurdity of the scenario. The ensemble occasionally performs the music at screenings, but a DVD is now available.

Vinculum Symphony: An ever-morphing (albeit captured on CD) symphonic piece for experimental instruments, *Vinculum* came to Custer after working with instrument builders **Oliver DiCicco**, Trimpin, Chico MacMurtrie, Barry Schwartz, and Brenda Hutchinson. She tweaks the score for different collaborators and composes new movements each time she takes the piece to another city. "Vinculum" is Latin for "a bond of union": Custer is the unifier.

The Beth Custer Ensemble: After working in (the occasionally revived) **Club Foot Orchestra** (a pioneer in performing new scores to classic silent films), the ethno-ambient **Trance Mission**, and the trip-hop **Eighty Mile Beach**, Custer entered the 21st century with a working band all her own. **Dona Luz 30 Besos** evolved into the Beth Custer Ensemble, whose members have included guitarist **Will Bernard** and pianist **Graham Connah**, with such guests as the inimitable **Ralph Carney**. The Ensemble released the brilliant *Respect As a Religion* in 2005.

Then there's **Clarinet Thing**; music for the film-history DVD *A Trip Down Market Street 1905/2005*; loads of music written for major dance productions by **Joe Goode** (some captured on *Maverick Strain and other Stories*); the *Bernal Heights Suite*, performed and recorded with the **Left Coast Chamber Ensemble** ... and you begin to see what even a voracious Custer fan runs up against.

"People have said to me, 'You do all these different styles,' but in the end, that is my style," Custer told me a few years ago. "I think it still sounds just like my music."

Watch a clip from *My Grandmother*: