

Custer's grand stand

Composer showcases skill at rare showing

BY ANDREW GILBERT
Special to The Examiner

Beth Custer began her composing career in the dark, writing scores for classic silent films with Club Foot Orchestra. That was back in the early '80s, when she was newly arrived on the Bay Area music scene and establishing herself as a formidable multi-instrumentalist and singer.

Her hard labor over the past two decades has paid off. Custer recently was awarded a prestigious, three-year Meet the Composer Residency Grant, making her one of only four composers in the country to receive the honor this year.

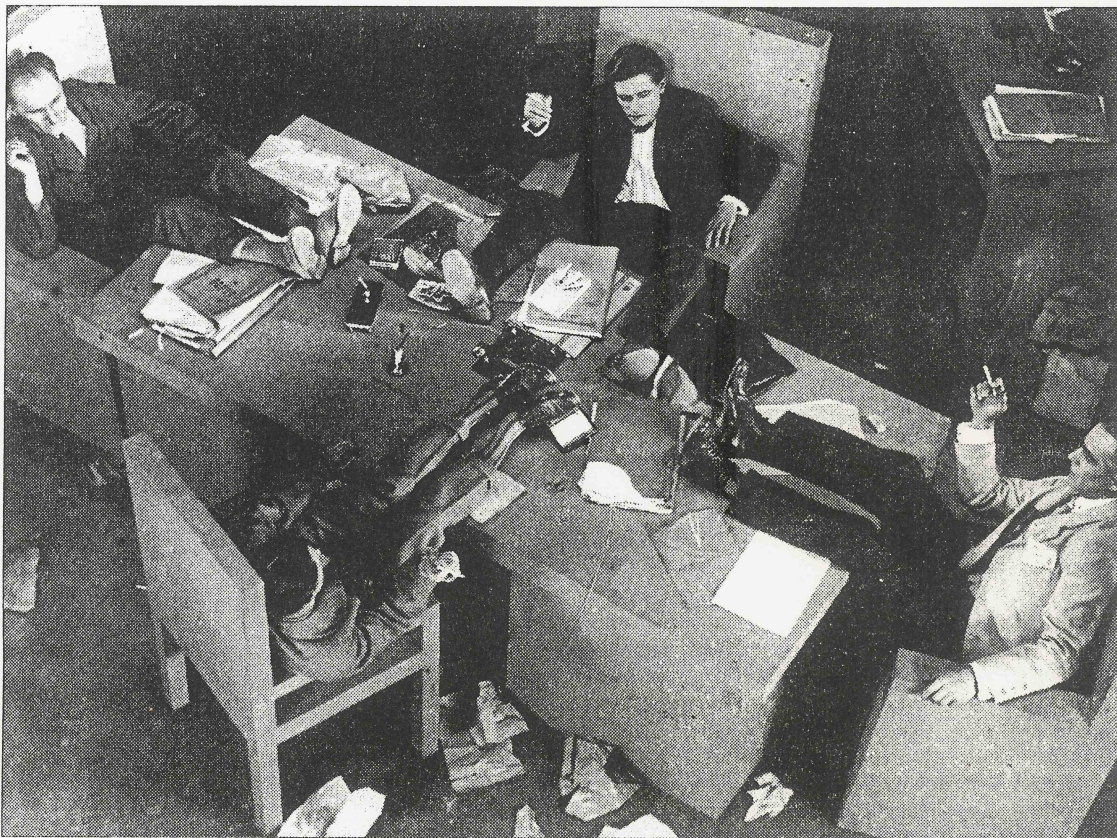
The grant will underwrite her work as composer-in-residence at the San Francisco multidisciplinary performance space The Lab, as well as her ongoing collaboration with the Joe Goode Performance Group and workshops with filmmaker Lise Swenson's community organization Tilt, where she'll be teaching children about composing for film.

There's a prime opportunity to experience Custer's scoring work this weekend, when she returns to the dark of the Castro Theatre to debut her beautiful, exhilarating score for Kote Mikaberidze's "My Grandmother" (Chemi Bebia), an amazing Soviet silent film from 1929.

Forgotten for a half-century, the film was restored by the Soviets in the mid-'70s, and rarely has been seen in the United States. Considered a masterpiece of the Soviet Eccentric Cinema movement, it's a scathing satire of the already moribund bureaucracy that defined the Soviet system even in the early years of Stalinism.

Custer first encountered "My Grandmother" two years ago when the Pacific Film Archive hired her to perform live for a screening of the film. The Castro's print is courtesy of the Pacific Film Archive, which commissioned the score and is co-presenting this screening.

"Some of the original stuff from the PFA screening stayed in there," Custer says from her



Triumphant returns: Composer Beth Custer comes back to the Castro Theatre to debut her beautiful score for Kote Mikaberidze's "My Grandmother," a masterful Soviet silent film from 1929.

The Beth Custer Ensemble

performs at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday for screenings of "My Grandmother" at the Castro Theatre, 429 Castro St., San Francisco. Tickets are \$12. Call (415) 621-6120.

Hunters Point studio. "But I've taken it under my compositional wing. It's an amazing film. It actually has nothing to do with a grandmother. It's about cronyism, how you have to know somebody to get a job."

The film follows the misadventures of a Georgian functionary who loses his precious job. The character is modeled after the knockabout American silent film comic Harold Lloyd. Custer's kinetic score matches the amped-up energy of the film as it veers between stop-motion animation, puppetry, expressionist camera angles and angular constructivist sets.

Building on her regular band with guitarist David James, drummer Jan Jackson and bassist David Rosenthal, Custer has

assembled a highly flexible ensemble featuring trumpeter Chris Grady (a former Club Foot collaborator), Zeitgeist Ensemble violinist Yuri Merzhevsky, cellist Kristina Forester and actor Nyls Frykdahl, who does a masterly job reading the English translations of the Russian intertitles.

Full slate

While "My Grandmother" has been taking up the bulk of Custer's time in recent weeks, it's hardly her only project. As her reputation has spread through her work with bands like Trance Mission and Eighty Mile Beach, Custer has become one of the region's most versatile musical talents.

With the support of a McKnight Composer Residency Grant, Custer recently presented her astounding chamber orchestra work for 10 experimental instruments, "Vinculum Symphony Live," in Minneapolis.

Drawing on everything from jazz and Afro-Caribbean music to American folk, blues and contemporary classical music, Custer masterfully crafts music to complement and enhance a

tremendous array of artistic endeavors. Her latest album, "The Maverick Strain and Other Stories," features violinist Jenny Scheinman, guitarist Will Bernard and Tin Hat Trio playing her scores for the Joe Goode Performance Group, an innovative ensemble that blends dance, vocals and spoken word — and a group with whom she's collaborated for more than a decade.

"I was just thinking about this last night, it seems like I'm always composing for something," Custer says. "I either have a dance or a film or a theater piece. I love the inspiration I get from the collaborative process. I've been lucky, most of my collaborations have been a joy."

Not all of her writing takes place in the context of collaboration. For instance, the Eighty Mile Beach piece "Red Helicopters," which was featured recently in a PBS documentary on 9/11, came to her while sitting at her piano, gazing out of her studio window.

"Some red helicopters went by, and I just started singing about them," she says.

Lucky for the rest of us Custer finds her gift so easy to share.