

## Brainwashed - Caterina Barbieri, "Ecstatic Computation"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 05 May 2019 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 05 May 2019 17:22

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This Italian synth visionary made quite a spectacular impression with 2017's *Patterns of Consciousness*

and now makes her Editions Mego debut with its proper follow-up. To some degree, Barbieri picks up exactly where she left off, as

*Ecstatic Computation*

shares its predecessor's masterfully executed conceptual conceit: using subtle shifts in obsessively repeating patterns to achieve a trancelike and hallucinatory effect. Given both that objective and Barbieri's singular compositional rigor,

*Ecstatic Computation*

bears little resemblance at all to the work of other synth artists, but it also sounds quite different from the sprawling and sometimes overwhelming

*Patterns of Consciousness*

as well. While it is hard to pick a favorite between the two albums, this one is definitely the more accessible, as Barbieri has distilled her vision into a much more concise and focused presentation. This album is also quite a bit more varied and unpredictable, as Barbieri occasionally allows the machine-like precision of these pieces to careen off the rails and unleash a glorious and vivid shower of sparks.

### [Editions Mego](#)

Anyone in search of one single piece that perfectly captures all that is unique and wonderful about Barbieri's vision would be well-served by heading straight for *Ecstatic Computation's* opening stunner "Fantas." The piece begins by slowly billowing up through a static-ravaged fog streaked with howling, corroded snatches of melody, then coheres into a propulsively tight, dense, and pulsing arpeggio theme. It is an eerily beautifully and tense motif on a purely musical level, yet I am still more stuck by how sleek and futuristic it all sounds. Curiously, however, that central theme dissolves around the halfway point to reveal a disorientingly blurred and woozy interlude that sounds like out-of-phase tape loops of an organ mass. Initially, Barbieri's choice to derail that impressive initial momentum seems like a quite a perplexing one, but the original theme slowly fades back into focus to ride out the piece's final minutes...except that it is not quite as straightforward as that. Instead of fading away or just ending, the central theme is instead deconstructed, slowed, and stretched until it is destroyed in a visceral flurry of eruptions that feels like a dangerously close fireworks display. From start to finish, "Fantas" is a

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tour de force performance that vividly illustrates where Barbieri is at this stage of her career. Most other synth artists are content with coming up with a killer patch and shaping it into a composition—with Barbieri, that seems like it is merely the starting point. It is very easy to picture her room strewn with obsessive diagrams, notes, and drawings as she wrestles to find a way to transform each new piece into something mesmerizing and surprising rather than merely good.

Following the virtuosic latticework of that initial statement of intent, Barbieri allows herself to get a bit loose and experimental for next few pieces. While "Spine of Desire" is merely a brief and pleasant interlude, "Closest Approach to Your Orbit" is yet another intricate pattern of subtly shifting and transforming arpeggios. For the most part, it is a more understated work than "Fantas," which enables the tumbling and occasionally squirming patterns to be a bit more hypnotic as there is no prominent melodic figure to steal the focus. There are some unusual dynamic and textural curveballs to be found as well, as the piece opens sounding vaguely like a marimba and closes sounding like a harpsichord, while everything in between is characteristically burbling and futuristic. Aside from that, there is yet another climactic eruption of reverberating fireworks. The following "Arrows of Time," on the other hand, is quite a radical detour, as Barbieri replaces her synth with a ghostly layered chorale of her own vocals over some sparse chords. It is quite a lovely piece and one that is far outside Barbieri's usual approach, yet it still feels strange and haunting enough that it would not seem out of place in a space-themed Kubrick or Tarkovsky film. The album is rounded out by two final pieces that return to the rough template of "Fantas" with some ingenious and distinctive twists. The better of the two is the twinkling and majestic "Pinnacles of You," which becomes increasingly frayed and disorienting as notes begin to sizzle and unpredictably lag and linger. The slower and simpler "Bow of Perception" is initially less impressive, but gradually becomes appealingly erratic and unstable as individual notes start to break free of their pattern to squeal and squirm. Also, the final moments sound like a vividly kinetic laser battle at an unhinged robot dance party.

I am hard-pressed to find any flaws at all with this album, as the only real caveat is that it unavoidably feels less substantial than its massive and wildly ambitious predecessor. That is fine by me, as I am just as happy with a short, filler-free, and oft-brilliant array of new pieces as I would be with another grand statement on par with *Patterns*. Every single piece on *Ecstatic Computation*

is an inspired one, particularly "Fantas" and "Pinnacles of You." I suppose that arguably makes this Barbieri's "singles album," but it is a remarkably thoughtful, coherent, and thematically consistent one. I am hard-pressed to think of any other artists that embody the balance of surgical exactitude and artistic vision as beautifully as Barbieri, as this album feels like the work of a hyper-intelligent android that has discovered human emotions and feels them quite intensely. While I am generally loathe to describe any artist's work as "essential," it seems reasonable to state that any collection of contemporary synth albums that does not include either this one or

*Patterns of Consciousness*

has quite a glaring hole in it. In the span of only a few years, Barbieri has established herself as one of the select few synthesizer artists who sets new standards and redefines what is possible with each new release.

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### *Ecstatic Computation*

is an excellent illustration of why she has earned that stature.

Samples can be found [here](#) .