

With Her Synthesizer, She Mesmerizes

By LAURA SINAGRA

If the British art-pop singer-songwriter Imogen Heap's goal was to reach a generation of maudlin, tech-savvy twentysomethings, she could hardly have done better than lending her voice to the final sequences of the film "Garden State" and television's "O.C." The songs, "Let Go," a burbling drum-and-bass track by her two-person band Frou Frou, and "Hide and Seek," the ghostly *pièce de résistance* of her self-produced album "Speak for Yourself" (Megaphonic), suggest a kind of lovesick cyborg alienation, an almost disembodied, distinctly modern malaise.

But for those who have been introduced to Ms. Heap this way, Wednesday's show at Avalon probably contained some stylistic surprises. Having started her career as a piano-pounding songwriter in the *Tori Amos* vein, Ms. Heap has been moving away from the alt-rock drama of her 1998 debut, "I Megaphone" (Almo Sounds), toward more machine-tooled abstraction and infectiously paranoid poetics, spurred on by her Frou Frou partner, Guy Sigsworth, the Bjork and Madonna producer. From the moment the lanky Ms. Heap appeared on the converted church's stage, outfitted in vintage finery — a sleeveless sequined black top, fingerless lace gloves, a full floral patterned skirt, pink crinolines and rhinestone pumps, her hair half swept up into a feather-sprouting touse — it was clear that the goal was not cybernetic austerity.

Ms. Heap seemed intent on approachability, and at times her refined chattiness seemed incongruous with her latest material's exquisite sonic detachment. The opening grand piano version of her ethereal "Just for Now" turned the album track's compressed "Get me out of here" refrain from what sounds in the recording like the cry of a trapped video game character into a more standard lover's lament. "Let Go" suffered a similar demystification when rendered on the piano.

But when Ms. Heap left the acoustic world behind for her synthesizer bank, strung as it was with plastic flowers and Christmas lights, she was mesmerizing. Despite serious technical glitches that plagued her throughout the show (the audience got to know her technician by name), songs like the acrobatic "Loose Ends" and "Headlock," the latter rounded out by the cello of her opener, Zoe Keating, allowed her to dis-



Richard Termine for The New York Times

The singer-songwriter Imogen Heap and her decorated synthesizer.

Imogen Heap

Avalon

pense with shtick and enjoy the play of her ominously breathy, intermittently percussive voice against her lush soundscapes.

As a lyricist, Ms. Heap shrewdly adopts the language of institutionalized paranoia. Her found-sound atmospherics and processed beats add a spooky quality to twitchy lyrics like the mysterious command from "Clear the Area": "You find your way back down, and I'll keep the area clear," or the chilling romantic entreaty from "The Walk": "Freeze/Make it forever." Her ability to mix mundanity and panic, as in the club-rocking "Have You Got It in You?" with its propulsive line "It's been one of those days / Safety first; don't

Setting a goal of approachability, not cybernetic austerity.

push me," would make Laurie Anderson proud.

And after a few false starts, Ms. Heap delivered a rendition of "Hide and Seek" that could have made a robot weep. The hushed weirdness of the a cappella aria, sung through a modulating harmonizer, made her sound as she does on the record, like a disembodied boy band. Filling the room to its arched ceiling, she delivered a hushed requiem for "trains and sewing machines," merging with the very electronic devices that made them industrial age antiques.