NEW YORK— "Some say our empire is passing, as all empires do," Laurie Anderson authoritatively rumbled onstage at the American Academy in Rome's second annual "Cabaret" fundraiser. "Ah, America. Another day, another dollar, another day, in America." As the curator and honoree of the evening, which was held at a former Lower East Side synagogue now occupied by the Angel Orensanz Foundation, Anderson was speaking in the voice of her alter ego, Fenway Bergamot — a dour historian whose deep, melancholic tenor is achieved through her signature "audio-drag" filter. Playing songs from her recent album, "Homeland," the steely downtown doyenne wielded a heavily synthed violin, deftly weaving in improvised material based on her time in Rome with the academy for a rapt audience.

The ten minutes of musically reverberant political commentary was the high point of the multimedia performance-art evening, directed by Jay Scheib, that entertained an energetic crowd that munched deli sandwich halves from Katz's and sipped wine and Pernod. Onstage the program revolved at a leisurely clip over the course of the night, with a screening of artistic video shorts by past and present American Academy fellowship recipients (curated by artist Laurie Simmons, who, like Anderson, is an Academy trustee), a reading of a Virgil-inspired poem about Rome by Rosanna Warren, and a dance from choreographer Molissa Fenley, among others. The contemporary classical composer Nico Muhly played emphatic piano, and told the audience he was particularly elated to perform for Anderson because she was one of the two icons he...
Almost all of the performers, including Anderson, have been fellows or residents at the American Academy in Rome for the Arts, a program that Anderson calls "un-institutional" and "collaborative." (The deadline for the 2011 fellowship applications has been extended to November 15, for those interested.) In recent years, under the newly appointed Andrew Heiskell Arts Director, poet Karl Kirchwey, the Academy has worked to diversify its engagement with the arts, striving in particular to strengthen its ties to literature. For example, Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott has been named a resident at the Academy, and is writing a play and exploring the composition of his pieces with visual projections and musical scores. "The Academy is very interested in these types of art events that explore connection between the disciplines," Kirchwey said.

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During the "Cabaret," some of these cross-disciplinary performances — though interesting in concept — fell flat. Singer Lisa Bielawa presented a meandering cycle of songs based on Roland Barthes' "A Lover's Discourse," though in her hands the writer's sentiments came off as stale and cliché. A big band led by David Sanford, who gained a new appreciation for opera during his time in Rome, delivered a plangently strident sound that did no favors to either musical genre.

The venue, however, could not have been more beautiful or mood-appropriate. Ethereal greens and blues dappled the Gothic high-vaulted ceilings of the onetime place of worship. Candles twinkled in lofty chandeliers and a soft blue light filled the building's clerestory, creating an illusion of twilight within the space. "It is blue-green, like an artist's world," Anderson cooed to ARTINFO. "It makes me feel like I'm in Rome."