



MIMI CHAKAROVA

# PREPARED PIANIST

SYLVIE COURVOISIER brings her own personal blend of Europe and America to the jazz piano trio

By Ted Panken

**AT** 8:01 p.m. sharp on September 30 at Brooklyn's Roulette Intermedia, Sylvie Courvoisier launched her first COVID-era public concert for six masked, socially distanced witnesses in the balcony and a global livestream audience of thousands. Over the next 80 minutes, pianist Courvoisier, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer Kenny Wollesen—operating with minimal rehearsal—performed one Courvoisier piece from the trio's 2018 CD *D'Agala*, then nine from the 2020 followup *Free Hoops* (Intakt), moving seamlessly in and out of written and improvised moments with breathe-as-one cohesion, impeccable execution, and creative mojo that belied their long separation.

Absent a world-upending pandemic, the trio soon thereafter would have flown to Europe for an October tour. But that trip was long since erased from Courvoisier's calendar, following 17 canceled European trio concerts in mid-March and early April, summer engagements performing John Zorn's *Bagatelles*, and five performances in May and June with the transformative

flamenco dancer Israel Galván of a program titled *La Consagración de la Primavera*, for which Courvoisier and Cory Smythe play two-piano arrangements of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, her own *Spectro*, and the co-composed *Conspiracion*. But Courvoisier is nothing if not resilient after three decades in the trenches. On October 2 she intended to fly to Switzerland, her homeland, where (after quarantine) she'd booked a series of last-minute gigs with primarily Swiss musicians, including a four-day trio residency in Vevey with drummer Julian Sartorius.

A few weeks before Roulette, Courvoisier recalled a March 10 program with Galván and Smythe in France, where COVID cases were spiking. "It was a big theater, packed, more than a thousand people, a lot of them coughing," she said. Courvoisier and Smythe flew to Zurich, where the Taktlos Festival, which she was curating, began on March 12. She'd invited such New York friends and collaborators as Uri Caine; guitarist Mary Halvorson, her partner on the well-wrought 2017 duo CD *Crop Circles* (Relative Pitch); and saxophonist

Ingrid Laubrock and drummer Tom Rainey, who'd joined Courvoisier and violinist Mark Feldman on the collectively improvised 2019 release *TISM* (RogueArt).

Logistical chaos then ensued, as Courvoisier recounted: "Cory played solo. Mary flew back to New York from Geneva with the sextet, because Trump said he was closing the border. Uri canceled that same day. My trio was supposed to play on the last night. Drew was there, but Kenny called on the travel day to say he wasn't coming—Tom subbed for him. We did all the gigs through March 14, with half the audience, with separation, and a lot of hand sanitizer. Then we all went home."

**A PROMINENT VOICE ON** New York's speculative improv/creative music scene

performing a cohort of compositions that showcased her virtuosic, rhythmically intricate pianistic language, crystallizing elements refracted from 20th-century classical music and jazz, with much room for improvisation. In 2014, she finally addressed the trio function with Gress and Wollesen on *Double Windsor* (Tzadik).

"I've loved piano trio since my teens, and I've written my own music since I was little, but I was always scared to deal with the weight of the past of trio history," Courvoisier says. "To have your own voice in the piano trio is really hard."

"The piano trio is done to death, but Sylvie is breathing new life into it," says pianist Kris Davis, a Courvoisier admirer since the early '00s. "Her thing is linear in a Sylvie way. It can jump all over the place. It can be angular. It can


inside the piano or playing lines." Gress praises her technique, but "also her fearless free improvising and great instincts and modern language. I admire her restlessness, how hard she works towards developing and growing, and how open she is to allowing things to happen when we play her compositions."

Courvoisier analogized her mature approach to the aesthetic she's witnessed during her decade with Galván. "Israel teaches me that everything is possible. He's stealing from Nijinsky, from Pina Bausch, from the old traditional flamenco guys, from Prince, from Michael Jackson—taking ideas from everywhere, and doing his own language with that. It's like jazz. It's like what I do. I am taking from Messiaen and Sofia Gubaidulina, from Paul Bley and Cecil Taylor. I don't think I invent anything. I am just learning from what happened, and trying to do my own recipe with it."

**FOR COURVOISIER, THE NOTION** of music as serious play—a path to self-articulation—dates to childhood in Lausanne, when she played at home alongside her father Antoine Courvoisier, a travel agent and semi-professional musician. Père Courvoisier, who leads the traditional band After Shave, was a devotee of boogie-woogie and early bebop, as Sylvie references in the chugging locomotive bassline on "Imprint Double," which led off both *D'Agala* and the Roulette concert.

"When I was six, I decided I wanted to become a pianist," she says. "[My parents] noticed I was too involved in it, which they didn't like. My father told me I couldn't make money with it; I should keep it as a side dish. So they locked the piano until I did my homework, cleaned the house or whatever. It was really strict. But I am a very stubborn girl! I told myself, 'I will become a musician,' but I kept it quiet. I did my school and whatever they wanted—and when I was 17 I left the house."

By then, Courvoisier had found the core of her musical vision. "I played and sang a bit in my dad's band, and when I was 14 I took lessons with a friend of his, a bebop guy, who taught me some harmony and standards and played Monk songs with me," she says. During high school, she frequented a record store whose owner introduced



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since she emigrated from Switzerland in 1998, Courvoisier, 52, has led or co-led about 30 albums. In addition to the aforementioned, these include vertiginously precise duet and quartet recitals with Feldman; a luminous chamber trio with Feldman and cellist Erik Friedlander; structurally cogent tabula-rasa improvs with Evan Parker, Ned Rothenberg, Ikue Mori, Joelle Leandre, Ken Vandermark, and Nate Wooley; and 1990s presentations with French cellist Vincent Courtois, Swiss percussionist Lucas Niggli, and Swiss pianist Jacques Demierre. She played John Zorn's ensemble music on *Cobra-2002*, *Femina*, and *Dictée/Liber Novus*, and duetted with Feldman on Zorn's *Malphas: Book of Angels, Volume 3* and *Masada Anniversary Edition, Volume 4*.

In 2007, Courvoisier made her first solo album, *Signs and Epigrams* (Tzadik),

be atonal. It incorporates dynamics. She often cuts from one idea to a totally different one. What she does is speech-like, with disjunct phrases and then quick passages with everything intertwined right under the hand. It isn't necessarily melodic in the sense of what a layperson thinks of as melodic, but because she's so rhythmic she can pull it off."

"She's a really compelling classical pianist," says Smythe, who heard Courvoisier for the first time at a 2004 concert and was struck by the "newness of her extended language inside the piano, both percussively and with spontaneous preparations, tapes and things that she could add and subtract fluidly in the course of improvising."

Halvorson admires Courvoisier's "magnetism," the "strong energy, drive and momentum" she projects "whether she's playing something super-crazy



The trio, with Kenny Wollesen (L) and Drew Gress

her to Bley, Taylor, and Miles Davis, and heard a memorable solo concert by Misha Mengelberg at Lausanne's Onze Plus Festival.

"When you're that age, hearing these concerts is life-changing, a revelation," she says. "Misha was whistling hymns and playing totally free around it—I tried to imitate that when I was home the next day."

Once on her own, Courvoisier systematically began to study—private lessons with Demierre; day classes in composition, conducting, and piano at the Conservatoire de Lausanne; night classes in jazz at the Conservatoire de Montreux; two month-long sessions at Siena Summer Jazz Camp, where she befriended the peers who play on her 1994 album debut, *Sauvagerie Courtoise*. Around Lausanne, she played duo with saxophonist Daniel Bourquin, "who opened me

to the free scene—most of the bands there were playing straight-ahead." She subbed for her father at a cabaret for a month-and-a-half, five nights a week, playing "the worst music you can imagine with girls who were half-naked and comedians making bad jokes. It was useful for losing stage fright. You play the music every night the best you can play it, and try not to judge yourself."

It became increasingly clear that she needed distance to grow. "I was getting a lot of recognition, prizes, and I didn't want to become a local hero," Courvoisier says. "Also, especially in the French part of Switzerland, musicians tended not to hire you as a sideman, because they didn't want the attention for a woman. Teachers flirted, did really weird stuff. Switzerland only gave women the vote in 1974."

Courvoisier "liked the scene and the musicians" in Holland, and began spending quality time there. She began an association with barrel organist Pierre Charial and tubist Michel Godard, with whom she partnered on the late-'90s Enja albums *Ocre* and *Y2K*. "The score for the barrel organ is made of cardboard," she says. "Each hole in the cardboard corresponds to a note. I spent two months in Pierre's atelier in Paris experimenting—punching the holes, even doing graphic things on this cardboard. You can write super-virtuosic things."

A crossroads transpired in 1995, when the Baden-Baden Jazz Meeting invited Courvoisier to join a 12-person group that included Feldman, Courtois, drummers Mark Nauseef and Jim Black, pianist Joachim Kühn, tubist Marcus Rojas, and guitarist Marc Ducret. "Everyone brought two tunes,

At the Abrons Art Center in New York  
for Vision Festival 16, June 2011



and we recorded for a week,” she says. “I was the youngest and the only girl. The music was so avant-garde for me, and I loved it.”

Over the course of that week, Courvoisier and Feldman developed a friendship, and decided to form a duo. By the beginning of 1998, they were romantically involved, and she made up her mind to try New York. “I kept some of my bands in Europe, and I sublet my apartment in Lausanne for

three years until I was ready to settle,” she says. “Then I shipped my grand piano and all my furniture.”

**ENSCONCED IN BROOKLYN'S** Windsor Terrace neighborhood, Courvoisier flourished. “I wasn’t a weirdo anymore,” she says. “In Lausanne, everyone asked my real profession. In New York, it was normal to be a musician.” She studied jazz harmony with Garry Dial and technique with Edna Golandsky, who “gave me the

tools to solve problems at the piano. It’s all about sound—the weight of the forearm on each finger; how you rotate from one note to another; shaping large leaps. I’m conscious that my whole body follows each note in order to get the sound I want.

“I had a global concept, but often my tunes were too hard technically; I wasn’t playing them well until I met Mark. I wanted to play more difficult and contemporary music and be more precise. Mark encouraged me to find teachers,



and he showed me how to practice correctly, like a coach would work with an athlete. When you have a hard passage, how to work with different rhythmic concepts. How to play slow. How to visualize the music mentally before playing. I used to repeat the same song, often from the beginning. He showed me how to get through it systematically, working on small passages.”

Having already encountered various “downtown” luminaries in Europe,

Courvoisier met others on gigs with Feldman, then a ubiquitous presence in experimental jazz circles, including Zorn’s Bar Kokhba band. “John’s had a huge influence on me, perhaps more than I can express,” she says. “The jump-cut—going fast from one idea to another. I always used to try to develop one idea when I improvised.”

Through Zorn, she met Ikue Mori, her bandmate along with drummer Susie Ibarra in Mephista, which recorded two CDs during the ’00s. “Ikue invited me to play duo at the Vision Festival,” Courvoisier recalls. “I was lost. Then I realized that to match her sound, I needed to really put my body inside the piano, because that was how I could connect the most with her. I needed to use more preparation, using my finger, my nails,

become better at figuring out where everything lies. Sometimes we’ll rehearse all this written music, but when we’re actually performing it’s okay if it goes to another place. She follows the spirit of the music.”

During each of the trio’s twice-yearly tours of Europe between 2014 and 2019, Courvoisier augmented the repertoire with new pieces tailored to her partners. “When I have nine or 10 songs, it’s time to record a new album,” she says. “In parts of the tunes the form is very open; we play the head, even if it’s super-complicated, and then use an element from it. I like to combine both things.”

That Courvoisier is able to facilitate what Gress calls “the challenge of playing from both sides of your mind simultaneously” in her various projects

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different wood *objets*. I tried to sound more electric, less ‘big piano sound.’ I love to go into her world and improvise.”

Zorn had been the instigator of *Signs and Epigrams*. Then, Courvoisier says, “he pushed me for three years before I formed the trio.” She assembled 10 songs, then workshopped them with several combinations of upper-echelon New York bassists and drummers before deciding on Gress and Wollesen (who’d previously recorded together in the late ’90s in Gress’ Jagged Sky quartet with David Binney and Ben Monder) after a 2013 concert at the Stone. “I write very precise bass parts—when to arco, when to switch to pizzicato, a lot of dynamics. Drew is a rock, the foundation; even when we improvise, he’s always clarifying everything. Kenny is the magician of the band. I’ve told him something maybe once in seven years. He understands and feels it.”

“Sylvie is fearless,” Wollesen says. “Her music is difficult, but there’s a lot of elasticity, which made it easy for me to find my place and do my thing. We’ve

testifies not only to her command of musical logic but also the trust she engenders in her associates. “Sylvie is thoughtful and open and easy to work with,” Halvorson says. “She also isn’t a bullshitter. She says what she thinks, but in a caring way, so we’re able to have a positive and productive exchange, both musically and personally.” Smythe mentions Courvoisier’s “spontaneity and cultivation of joyful things,” adding, “I think that joy and spontaneity is palpable in her music, with maybe a little rebelliousness—or a lot of rebelliousness.”

Above all else, Courvoisier acknowledges, interpersonal connection is essential to her, as she suggests in the tonal portraits of “people I admire and who influence me musically on *D’Agala*,” and of “people in my personal life” on *Free Hoops*. “I like to play with people I am personally fond of—that’s number one,” she states. “All my tours got pushed to next year ... if I can travel. I don’t want to tour with people I don’t get along with.” **JT**