**SYLVIE COURVOISIER**

Pianist-composer Sylvie Courvoisier, a Brooklyn-based native of Switzerland and winner of Germany’s International Jazz Piano Prize in 2022, has earned renown for balancing two distinct worlds: the deep, richly detailed chamber music of her European roots and the grooving, hook-laden sounds of the avant-jazz scene in New York City, her home for over two decades. Few artists feel truly at ease in both concert halls and jazz clubs, playing improvised or composed music. But Courvoisier — “a pianist of equal parts audacity and poise,” according to *The New York Times* — is as compelling when performing Stravinsky’s epochal *Rite of Spring* in league with new-music pianist Cory Smythe as she is when improvising with her own acclaimed jazz trio, featuring bassist Drew Gress and drummer Kenny Wollesen. Then there are her ear-opening collaborations with such luminaries as John Zorn, Wadada Leo Smith, Evan Parker, Ikue Mori, Ned Rothenberg, Fred Frith, Andrew Cyrille, Mark Feldman, Christian Fennesz, Nate Wooley and Mary Halvorson. In music as in life, Courvoisier crosses borders with a creative spirit and a free mind; her music-making is as playful as it is intense, as steeped in tradition as it is questing and intrepid. In 2023, she was named Pianist of the Year in the international critics poll of Spanish jazz publication *El Intruso*.

Courvoisier’s newest ensemble — the atmospheric, shape-shifting Chimaera — released its eponymous debut album in October 2023 via the Swiss label Intakt Records. *Chimaera* features the pianist alongside the iconic Wadada Leo Smith on trumpet, Christian Fennesz on guitar/electronics, Nate Wooley on trumpet, Drew Gress on double-bass, and Kenny Wollesen on drums and vibraphone. Courvoisier has played variously in the Big Apple and beyond with Smith and Wooley, while Gress and Wollesen are the longtime partners in her aforementioned trio. Chimaera’s wildcard is Fennesz, an Austrian known for his ambient-textured work both solo and in collaboration with such figures as the late, great composer-pianist Ryuichi Sakamoto and avant-pop seeker David Sylvian. Reviewing *Chimaera*, UK magazine *Jazzwise* extolled the album’s “dream-like ambience and luminous textures,” while *All About Jazz* noted: “It’s not the musicians’ skill that most impresses, but rather their ability to cast a sustained spell for over 80 glorious minutes. A triumphant recording, and one of 2023’s highlights.” Chimaera has a flexible lineup on tour, with ace drummer Nasheet Waits on board for an expanded rhythm section. Whatever the subtle differences of instrumentation, the Chimaera project presents a reverie of sound unlike any Courvoisier has crafted before: spacious and shimmering, mysterious and mesmerizing.

Ever prolific, Courvoisier has another new ensemble. She will introduce her Poppy Seeds quartet to European listeners on a tour of the continent in November 2024, along with fresh book of music the pianist is writing especially for the band. Poppy Seeds also includes musicians new to Courvoisier’s work: Patricia Brennan on vibraphone and Dan Weiss on drums, in addition to bassist Thomas Morgan (who previously recorded with the pianist as part of her hit quartet co-led by violinist Mark Feldman). Courvoisier will also be touring Europe in spring 2024 as part of the collaborative trio New Openings, featuring reeds ace Ned Rothenberg (on clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone and shakuhachi) and Swiss drummer Julian Sartorius. New Openings released the album *Lockdown* in 2021 via the Clean Feed label, with *New York City Jazz Record* characterizing the trio’s music as brimming with “dramatic intensity.”

A going concern for more than a decade, Courvoisier’s trio with Gress and Wollesen has garnered glowing critical notices. Writing for National Public Radio affiliate WBGO-FM, Nate Chinen praised the “rare degree of intuitive insight” this group has achieved over the course of three albums, while *DownBeat* declared Courvoisier, Gress and Wollesen to be “one of the most exciting piano trios at work today.” In his liner notes to *Free Hoops* — the trio’s latest album, released via Intakt in fall 2020 — NPR critic Kevin Whitehead went into colorful detail about the range of atmosphere explored by the group: “This music harbors a misterioso, dreamlike quality… induced by a wistful ostinato or moonlit piano arpeggio, or by a quiet episode that underscores the depth of the trio’s sonic space, as when a slapped-strings piano bass cluster explodes into the void. They also do that good stuff we prize jazz for: the happy swinging, the coming together when they make complex material sing.”

Courvoisier has collaborated on a decade-long series of projects with Israel Galván, the Spanish dancer and choreographer. Their most recent work is *La Consagraciòn de la Primavera*, which combined a two-piano interpretation of Stravinsky’s original score for piano four-hands of *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring) with *Spectre d’un Songe*, Courvoisier’s original, complementary two-piano score. Courvoisier, alongside Cory Smythe, premiered the program with Galván in November 2019 at the Théâtre Vidy in Lausanne and January 2020 at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. More recently, the two pianists have been touring both works in music-only performances, having released an album of the scores via Pyroclastic Records in 2021. *The New York Times* highlighted the recording as “a real contribution” to the varied, century-long history of *Le Sacre* on disc, enthusing over the pair “working magic” with their interpretation. As for Courvoisier’s *Spectre d’un Songe*, the review described the music as “by turns intense and languorous… a key entry in Courvoisier’s growing composer-performer discography.”

Among Courvoisier’s other key duo partners is guitarist Mary Halvorson. In 2017, the pair released *Crop Circles* via Relative Pitch, with *DownBeat* setting up its four-star review of the album by describing them as “two of New York’s most distinctive improvisers,” going on to praise the music’s “deft, interactive intimacy.” The team released their second album, *Searching for the Disappeared Hour*, in 2021 via Pyroclastic. Adding to plaudits from *The New York Times* and other outlets, *All About Jazz* described the record as “a mixture of dark moods and brooding quiet, studded with gritty bits of noise and drama,” adding: “Courvoisier and Halvorson have a chemistry that brings out something new in both of them. The sounds they make here are familiar and alien at the same time… A beautiful session of music.”

Avant-garde impresario John Zorn dubbed Courvoisier “one of the most creative pianists in the downtown scene.” Courvoisier’s duo with violinist Mark Feldman toured Zorn’s *Bagatelles* far and wide; they also recorded two albums of Zorn’s music: *Malphas* (Tzadik, 2006) and *Masada Recital* (Tzadik, 2004). Courvoisier’s discography includes more duo albums with Feldman, including *Live at the Theatre Vidy-Lausanne* (Intakt, 2013), *Oblivia* (Tzadik, 2010) and *Music for Violin & Piano* (Avan, 1999). Courvoisier and Feldman also co-led a quartet that recorded three albums: *Birdies for Lulu* (Intakt, 2014, with bassist Scott Colley and drummer Billy Mintz), *Hotel du Nord* (Intakt, 2011, with Thomas Morgan and drummer Gerry Hemingway) and *To Fly To Steal* (Intakt, 2010, with Morgan and Hemingway). *The Guardian* described the quartet’s music-making as “composition and improvisation held in balance by maestros of the game.”

For the album *Lonelyville* (Intakt, 2007), Courvoisier recorded a suite she composed for a quintet with Feldman, Mori, cellist Vincent Courtois and drummer Gerald Cleaver. *All About Jazz* hailed the *Lonelyville* suite as “fantastic and far-reaching.” And in 2004, ECM released Courvoisier’s double-CD *Abaton*, which presented her compositions for a trio with Feldman and cellist Erik Friedlander on one disc and the trio’s group improvisations on the other. Courvoisier has been commissioned to write music for the theater, radio and concert hall, including for Theatre Vidy-Lausanne, Pro Helvetia and Germany’s Donaueschingen Musiktage Festival. She has been honored with such awards as United States Artist Fellow (2020), the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists (2018), the Swiss Music Prize (2018) and the SUISA Prize for Jazz (2017). She won the Grand Prix de la Fondation Vaudoise Pour la Culture (2010), as well as an award from the New York Foundation for the Arts (2013) and Switzerland’s Prix des Jeunes Créateurs (1996). She has also received commissions from The Shifting Foundation (2019) and Chamber Music America’s New Jazz Works (2016).

Born in Lausanne in 1968, Courvoisier studied classical music at the Conservatory of Lausanne and jazz at the Conservatory of Montreux. She has since toured the world from Europe and North America to South America, Asia and Australia. The pianist has worked in concert halls, jazz clubs and international festivals with such musicians as Yusef Lateef, Tony Oxley, Tim Berne, Joey Baron, Joëlle Léandre, Herb Robertson, Jacques Demierre, Vincent Courtois, Mark Dresser, Lotte Anker, Michel Godard, Tomasz Stanko and Butch Morris. NPR’s Kevin Whitehead has encapsulated Courvoisier’s art in an evocative way: “Some pianists approach the instrument like it’s a cathedral. Sylvie Courvoisier treats it like a playground.”

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