**SYLVIE COURVOISIER**

Pianist / Composer / Improviser / Bandleader

***“Some pianists approach the instrument like it’s a cathedral. Sylvie Courvoisier treats it like a playground.”***

— Kevin Whitehead, National Public Radio

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 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 more than 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 just 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. “Courvoisier keeps you on the edge of your seat because it feels like the piano cannot contain her,” proclaimed *JazzTimes*. “Her careening solos seem to overwhelm and overflow the keyboard and keep spilling.” 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 part of the group for an expanded rhythm section. Whatever the subtle differences in instrumentation, the Chimaera project presents a reverie of sound unlike any Courvoisier has crafted before: spacious and shimmering, mysterious and mesmerizing.

In composing the music for Chimaera — commissioned by the Sons d’hiver festival in Paris — Courvoisier was inspired by the Symbolist paintings of Odilon Redon (1840-1916), a French artist whose fantastical, hallucinatory work aimed to place “the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.” Redon’s otherworldly images marked him as a precursor to the Surrealists; moreover, he likened these enigmatic pictures to music, in that they evoked “the ambiguous realm of the undetermined.” The lucid-dream sounds of Courvoisier’s *Chimaera* album stay true to this impulse, floating and elusive like shadows on the ocean; in concert, the pianist’s band brings her compositions alive in the moment, expansive and subtly different from night to night — the melodic glint of trumpet, piano and vibraphone atop a rolling groove of rhythmic ambience, with Fennesz’s magic clouds of guitar enveloping the band.

Ever prolific, Courvoisier has yet another new group: Poppy Seeds. She will be introducing this 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 recorded with the pianist as part of her hit quartet co-led by violinist Mark Feldman). Courvoisier designed the band around a double-keyboard sound that she has grown to love. Notably, she recently created an evening-length program with fellow pianist Cory Smythe matching a dual-piano arrangement of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* and her own piece for two pianos, *Spectre d’un Songe*. “I love playing with any two keyboards, which I define to include the vibraphone for Poppy Seeds,” she explains. “I love the thickness of the paired sound, and the harmonic richness and attractive dissonance that can be achieved.”

**Sylvie Courvoisier Trio**

Courvoisier’s trio with Gress and Wollesen has been a going concern for a decade, garnering critical notices that are unfailingly positive. 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.”

*All About Jazz* called *Free Hoops* “an outstanding follow-up to 2018’s *D’Agala* (Intakt)… Pianist Courvoisier once again draws upon the rhythmically fluid tandem of bassist Drew Gress and drummer Kenny Wollesen for an album in constant motion and with subtle lyrical touches. The three musicians work together so sympathetically that it can be easy to forget just how challenging these compositions are, and how much coordinated artistry is required to bring them to life.”

That previous album, *D’Agala*, garnered a four-star review in *DownBeat*, while *JazzTimes* described the record as “a wonderland of piano-trio surrealism that is nonetheless grounded in rhythmic earthiness.” It was ranked as one of the best jazz albums of 2018 by *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, as well as *New York City Jazz Record*. Courvoisier’s first album with Gress and Wollesen, *Double Windsor* (Tzadik), was another hit with critics, being named one of the best albums of 2014 by both *Slate* and *New York City Jazz Record*; it also received the “CHOC” distinction from *Jazz Magazine* and *Jazzman* in France. *International Piano* magazine hailed *Double Windsor* as “a highly original recording, boldly juxtaposing the freely improvised and the through-composed, and crackling with energy. That ‘rhythmic feel’ is less about swing or groove than a non-stop, jump-cut dynamism that gives the tunes a real kick… Courvoisier’s trio drives its intricate interactions through every tricky twist and tumble in exhilarating fashion.”

Whitehead, in his notes to *D’Agala*, compared the venturesome interaction of this trio with the infectious music of a pioneering jazz figure from the 1950s: “There is something Herbie Nichols-like about the Courvoisier-Gress-Wollesen trio’s feel: collective music-making as light-on-its-feet fun; it’s genuine trio music in which bass and drums are full partners with piano.” Reflecting on the band, Courvoisier says: “For ages, John Zorn was asking me to do a piano-trio record for his label, but I always felt that the great history of the jazz piano trio was so intimidating — I really needed to find just the right musicians. In Drew and Kenny, I found the exactly right ones — both beautiful players and beautiful people, with wonderful imaginations. Drew has such a gorgeous sound and an individual rhythmic sensibility, while Kenny has a wonderful sense of groove and a huge dynamic range. This trio has a more rhythmic feel than some of my past music, though our shows can range pretty far, from through-composed material to full-on improvisation, from a real jazz vibe to very open and free. The three of us have been playing together since 2013. We have a special connection, one that only gets stronger and stronger.”

***The Rite of Spring* and More**

Another of Courvoisier’s more fruitful artistic relationships has been with Israel Galván, the Spanish dancer and choreographer. They created several projects together over a decade, including *La Curva*, *Arena* and the evening-length, improvisation-laced *Cast-a-Net*. The latter was produced in 2018 at Switzerland’s Théâtre du Jorat and Festival Les Jardins Musicaux, with Courvoisier’s music performed by the pianist with Evan Parker (saxophone), Mark Feldman (violin) and Ikue Mori (electronics). Courvoisier’s most recent collaboration with Galván was *La Consagraciòn de la Primavera*: a program that 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 as a duo, in music-only performances.

About the combination of *Le Sacre* and *Spectre*, Courvoisier says: “Stravinsky’s *La Sacre* really set the tone for the 20th century. It’s hard to believe that it was first performed in 1913 — the polytonality is so futuristic. Yet it’s also very melodic, as well as kind of jazzy in its way. I’ve always loved this masterpiece, of course, but I never imagined that I’d play it someday. With the two pianos, Cory and I can play faster and groovier, making it more percussive than an orchestral version. Cory is an amazing pianist, who nails this kind of music. As for my composition *Spectre d’un Songe*, it’s a five-movement, half-hour work, and while I don’t think you can hear Stravinsky in it literally, I do believe that you can smell *Le Sacre* in the music.”

In 2021, Courvoisier and Smythe released a duo album featuring the two works via Pyroclastic Records. *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,” concluding: “It’s not just a worthy follow-up to their Stravinsky interpretation, but also a key entry in Courvoisier’s growing composer-performer discography.”

**Solo, Duos, Trios, Quartets…**

None other than avant-garde impresario John Zorn dubbed Courvoisier “one of the most creative pianists in the downtown scene.” Zorn’s label Tzadik released her first solo recording, *Signs and Epigrams*, in 2007. *All Music Guide* described the album as “pointillistic… a compendium of extended keyboard effects… including plucked, brushed, scraped, and damped strings, along with cluster chords, elbow slams, blurred pedal effects, and harmonics… What makes *Signs and Epigrams* compelling for intrepid listeners is the density of Courvoisier’s constructions, the audacious ways she exploits her materials and the utter ferocity of her performances.” The pianist has collaborated with the photographer Mario Del Curto on *Lueurs d’ailleurs*, an evening-length event of solo piano plus visuals. *Pitchfork* remarked on her alone at the keyboard: “One of the coolest things about Courvoisier is her ability to craft (and improvise) music with so much harmonic tension while still seeming, well, harmonious.” About playing solo, she says: “The piano is like an orchestra. There is so much you can do at the instrument, and it’s natural for me to take full advantage of that.” Along with touring singly, Courvoisier will record a new solo album in 2024 for Intakt.

Among Courvoisier’s key duo partners is guitarist Mary Halvorson. The pianist says: “Combining guitar and piano isn’t the easiest thing, but we give each other space, naturally — and it’s wonderful working with Mary. First of all, we’re good friends. Having worked closely with a lot of men over the years, it’s fun to just hang with another woman in that way. Then there’s the fact that I love Mary’s playing, and there really is such a *playful* element to her approach. We complement each other well in that way, I think.”

In 2017, Courvoisier and Halvorson released the duo album *Crop Circles* via Relative Pitch. *Dusted* and *All About Jazz* gave the disc glowing reviews, as did several European publications. And *DownBeat* set up its four-star review of the album by describing the pair as “two of New York’s most distinctive improvisers,” going on to praise the music’s “deft, interactive intimacy” and the duo’s way of “coming together and then drifting apart with unspoken grace… always serving the cumulative sound but remaining very much themselves.” 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 both familiar and alien at the same time. This is a totally involving and, in its own warped way, beautiful session of music.”

For over two decades, Courvoisier’s key collaborative partner was violinist Mark Feldman, their seemingly telepathic duo concerts lauded on both sides of the Atlantic. *The New York Times* called them “dynamic, fearless performers,” while *The Guardian* said: “Even at their most heated, Courvoisier and Feldman always sound as if they’re weighing proportions, massaging nuances and drawing listeners in.” *Chamber Music America* magazine encapsulated the duo’s appeal in a vivid way: “Courvoisier and Feldman create personalized musical abstractions that — like a Giacometti sculpture or a Pollack painting — transport the listener to a space where the rules may not be apparent but the emotional response sure is.”

The Courvoisier-Feldman duo’s most recent studio album — *Time Gone Out*, released by Intakt in 2019 — included music made possible by a Chamber Music America New Jazz Work commission. *Time Gone Out* earned a rave in *JazzTimes*, with the review singling out Courvoisier’s pianism as “staggering… She draws on both low-end thunder and upper-register lyricism, often simultaneously.” *DownBeat* had a similar judgment, saying that along with its poetic intensity and sheer virtuosity, “there is such a playfulness to what they’re doing that it’s easy to be drawn into the music.” In recent years, the duo toured Zorn’s *Bagatelles* far and wide, and their discography also includes *Live at the Theatre Vidy-Lausanne* (Intakt, 2013), *Oblivia* (Tzadik, 2010) and *Music for Violin & Piano* (Avan, 1999), as well as two recordings of Zorn’s music: *Malphas* (Tzadik, 2006) and *Masada Recital* (Tzadik, 2004). About her years of working so closely with Feldman, Courvoisier says: “When I first met Mark, I didn’t know that a violin could do the things that he can do with it, mixing contemporary classical and jazz improvisation. I stopped even hearing that it was the violin, really — it’s him, his own voice. I learned so much from Mark over the years.”

Courvoisier and Feldman also co-led a quartet that toured the world and recorded three albums: *Birdies for Lulu* (Intakt, 2014, with bassist Scott Colley and drummer Billy Mintz), *Hotel du Nord* (Intakt, 2011, with bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Gerry Hemingway) and *To Fly To Steal* (Intakt, 2010, with Morgan and Hemingway). *The Guardian* described the band as “part contemporary-classical chamber group and part progressive jazz band… Composition and improvisation held in balance by maestros of the game.” Beyond their touring foursomes, Courvoisier and Feldman also recorded two fully improvised quartet albums: with saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock and drummer Tom Rainey on *TISM* (RogueArt, 2019), as well as with Evan Parker and Ikue Mori on *Miller’s Tale* (Intakt, 2016). And with reeds ace Ned Rothenberg, Courvoisier and Feldman recorded the fully improvised trio disc *In Cahoots* (Clean Feed, 2016).

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* saluted 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. *JazzTimes* appreciated the mix of “eloquent silences” and “exotic ornaments” in the composed music, as well as “real, gorgeous melody.” About the improvised disc, the review concluded: “It’s rare to hear modern classical music forged anew in the heat of improvisation, but that’s exactly what *Abaton* does.” Two early albums as a leader saw Courvoisier leading the ensemble Ocre, releasing the albums *Y2K* (Enja, 2000) and *Music for Barrel Organ, Piano, Tuba and Percussion* (Enja, 1997).

**Further Collaborations**

In 2021, Courvoisier released the album *Lockdown* via Clean Feed as part of the collective trio New Openings, also featuring Ned Rothenberg (playing clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone and shakuhachi) and Swiss drummer Julian Sartorius. *New York City Jazz Record* characterized the music of New Openings as brimming with “virtuosic execution and dramatic intensity.” The trio will tour Europe in spring 2024. Prior to that collaborative venture, Courvoisier joined a quartet including Nate Wooley, Tom Rainey and saxophonist Ken Vandermark; that collective recorded the 2018 album *Noise of Our Time* for Intakt, with Courvoisier contributing three compositions. Highlighting the special wit of the pianist’s writing, *JazzTimes* said: “This album’s capacity for surprise is immense.” Courvoisier says: “Playing with these guys is really good for me — they are such great improvisers. They have a loose approach to music that can be different from my meticulous nature. With them, I learn how to be freer, which I love.”

Courvoisier has also worked in Wooley’s Battles Pieces quartet alongside Ingrid Laubrock and vibraphonist Matt Moran, the group recording three adventurous albums together for Relative Pitch. And the pianist’s discography brims with more bold collaborations: *Either Or And*, a duo disc with Evan Parker (Relative Pitch, 2014); Erik Friedlander’s *Claws & Wings* with Ikue Mori (Skipstone, 2013); John Zorn’s *Dictée/Liber Novus* (Tzadik, 2010); Zorn’s *Femina* (Tzadik, 2009); *Every So Often*, a duo release with saxophonist Ellery Eskelin (Prime Source, 2008); and *As Soon As Possible*, featuring Eskelin and Vincent Courtois (CamJazz, 2008). Courvoisier recorded two albums as a member of the improvising trio collective Mephista with Ikue Mori and drummer Susie Ibarra: *Entomological Reflections* (Tzadik, 2004) and *Black Narcissus* (Tzadik, 2002). The pianist also featured on Zorn’s *Cobra* (Tzadik, 2002), and she recorded a duo-piano album with Jacques Demierre, *Deux Pianos* (Intakt, 2000).

Touring the world from North America and Europe to South America, Asia and Australia, Courvoisier has also worked in concert halls, jazz clubs and international festivals with such musicians as Wadada Leo Smith, Andrew Cyrille, Fred Frith, Yusef Lateef, Tony Oxley, Tim Berne, Joey Baron, Joëlle Léandre, Herb Robertson, Mark Dresser, Lotte Anker, Michel Godard, Tomasz Stanko and Butch Morris. The pianist has also recorded the music of such composers as Cecil Taylor, Earle Brown and Sacha Argov.

Courvoisier has been commissioned to write music for the theater, radio and concert hall. Her concert works include a Concerto for Electric Guitar and Chamber Orchestra, as well as *Balbutiements* for vocal quartet and soprano. She has written to commissions from the Theatre Vidy-Lausanne, Pro Helvetia and Germany’s Donaueschingen Musiktage Festival. Courvoisier 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).

**Then and Now**

Born in Lausanne in 1968, Courvoisier grew up in the countryside, studying classical music at the Conservatory of Lausanne and jazz at the Conservatory of Montreux. “My dad was an amateur jazz pianist, and I attended jazz summer camps in Siena, Italy, when I was young,” she recalls. “But I was a weirdo, playing my own compositions at auditions. Although it is so much better nowadays, there wasn’t such an inclusive jazz culture in Switzerland back then. That’s something I discovered in New York when I moved to Brooklyn in 1998. I immediately felt like I belonged. In the Switzerland of my youth, you weren’t really supposed to stand apart, but my idiosyncratic thing was totally normal in New York City, with a lot of kindred spirits around. I was collaborating with Mark Feldman and the players he knew. And being embraced by a creative, supportive genius like John Zorn and his downtown family of artists was incredible for me. I first saw John’s Naked City band at the jazz festival in Willisau, Switzerland, when I was a kid! He’s still inspiring me, always pushing me. I’ve always loved belonging to a community of like minds. Musicians in New York are polyvalent — playing different kinds of music in different bands with different people, becoming your own person artistically while constantly entering into the worlds of others, opening yourself up and growing.”

Speaking to *The New York Times* for its piece “Five Minutes That Will Make You Love 21st-Century Jazz,” the great trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith singled out the pianist: “Whenever I have played onstage with Sylvie Courvoisier, I’ve never felt handicapped or abandoned or like I had to look for a way to continue. It has always been a journey that has been mutual and creative. She has got courage, and you can see it when she’s at the piano: When she is inspired to go toward something, she doesn’t just go near it, she advances as if she’s going there to save creation. That’s the kind of courage that she has. And she finds every way to express music with that attitude.”

For her part, Courvoisier concludes: “I like challenges — I thrive on them, really. It’s the way to develop as a musician. But it’s also important not to take things so seriously. That’s one of the reasons I always adored Carla Bley. I love her compositions, obviously, but there’s also such a great sense of humor around her music. I love that, too, the mix of serious art and a sense of fun. As we see, life is short — too short not to enjoy what you’re doing, how you’re living.”

*— Bradley Bambarger*

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