Sylvie Courvoisier: *Free Hoops*

With every album—*Free Hoops* is its third—this glorious trio's *modus operandi* becomes more clear: Sylvie Courvoisier, Drew Gress and Kenny Wollesen play morphing music by turns intricately detailed and ambiguously wide open. The music she writes is rigorously organized and calls for ensemble precision, as a few thorny unison heads demonstrate. But the music also harbors a misterioso, dreamlike quality that may surface at any time, induced by a wistful ostinato or moonlit piano arpeggio stubbornly repeated, 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, and the flying apart when the players explore it on their own.

Like the trio's previous Intakt *D'Agala*, this is a set of dedications to people the composer is close to or admires: immediate family, longtime friends, influences. "Requiem D'un Songe" takes off from a slow ambiguously major-relative minor bass figure bandleader Claude Thornhill sometimes used as a musical signature in the 1940s (on, say, "Early Autumn" and "There's a Small Hotel"). Hence the dedication. But Sylvie knew that lick from a Thornhill album in her pianist dad's collection. "I heard that bassline so much in my childhood—and it was used so often, it's also part of our collective knowledge. But then I take it somewhere different."

"Just Twisted" is for her advocate John Zorn, who'd urged Sylvie to form a trio before she'd gotten to it: "He's always pushing me, even now." The Zorniness is in the theme's quick changeups, and in the leader's hammerheaded, full-speed ahead, no-compromises solo. Those shifts also make it a study in the range of Courvoisier keyboard attacks, from dreamscape feathering to jackhammer pile-driving. "Free Hoops" is for Sylvie's personal and frequent musical partner, violinist Mark Feldman. Her solo traffics in jabbing phrases one might picture Feldman playing. "That wasn't conscious," she says, "though we've been working together so long, we have built a similar esthetic. I was thinking of him more in the theme—the weird figures he plays." And that grand fanfare suggesting his ebullient moods.

"Galore" is for Kenny Wollesen, "and how much I love his almost uncomfortably slow grooves." The frame for the drummer's artistry here is a drunk-walking unison line for bass and pianist's left hand, playing dotted rhythms in alternating bars of four and five. Drew is adept at shifting quickly between plucking and bowing, and "Galore" echoes Anthony Braxton's 1977 Composition 40A, where the bassist goes back and forth between pizzicato and seesaw arco. Elsewhere Kenny deploys some of his Wollesonics: instruments handmade from consumer castoffs, like the shaker he uses on "Highway 1" (for Sylvie's longtime friend and Swiss broadcast journalist Christine Matthey): a sort of wire bouquet with rattling scrap-plastic flowers.

"Birdies of Paradise" is for Drew Gress as avid ornithologist. He'd shared videos of birds of paradise with his bandmates while on tour, so Sylvie concocted a simulated (if convincing) birdcall for him to fly on—him, and the composer too. The piano's crinkly highest notes are remarkably good for voicing birdcalls, and Courvoisier gravitates to the keyboard's top notes more than most pianists. (Top and bottom, she clarifies: "I love the whole piano." That includes its insides; her hands often dart between keyboard and the interior harp; she'll slide metal up a string like a blues guitarist, or make a single note sound honky-tonk out of tune.) Drew plucks

that birdcall, plump as a songbird's breast, then shows off his motile arco, hummingbird-light on its feet. As umpteen records make clear, Gress can do pretty much anything a modern bassist can. But few settings let him be creative in so many ways as this one.

Courvoisier's compositions build in variety and variation; on "Lulu Dance" (punctuated by those stratospheric high E's, as if her cat were kibitzing on the keys) piano and bass play in lockstep, but then bass will step out of unison, without giving you the feeling something's missing. Those departures and returns were scored in. But once the players have the tunes under their belts, they exercise spontaneous choices within the forms, radically varying density and dynamics in long or short arcs. Throughout, there are gradual transitions between collective improvisations and solos where you couldn't say just where one begins or ends. Also, moments when a musician appears to start a solo only to recede seconds later: a playful feint. But there are fine distinctions alongside the ambiguities: when bass and drums play together, we can recognize when it's a bass solo with drum accompaniment, or vice versa, rather than a duo of equals. Such distinctions are possible where the musicians are ever-attentive, making the music new from moment to moment.

–Kevin Whitehead / April 2020
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