

LINER NOTES

I first heard about pianist Sylvie Courvoisier in 1998 when a group of improvised music devotees were discussing the schedule at New York's avant-garde hub Tonic.

Downtown scene godmother Stephanie Stone said, in her musical way, "Of course, SYL-vie's playing."

A frisson of excitement shot through the group. "Oh wow, Sylvie Courvoisier," someone finally murmured. Whomever this was, the mere mention of her show electrified the cognoscenti.

I caught that performance, one of Sylvie's first gigs as a leader after moving to New York from her native Switzerland. In contrast to much free jazz blowing, Sylvie's piano experiments were carefully composed and deeply informed by contemporary classical music: Messiaen, Ligeti, Stravinsky, Gubaidulina. After just half an hour of listening, I put her in the category of Cecil Taylor and Paul Bley.

That 25 years and dozens of albums later Sylvie is still making music as brilliant as Chimaera reflects something even more exciting, to me: Sylvie's lifelong commitment to reaching into a great imaginary beyond for her art. She's a rare musician with access to alternate dimensions and the technique to bring back for listeners what she finds on the other side.

Putting the real at the service of the unreal is certainly what she's up to here. Chimaera was originally commissioned for the 2021 Sons d'Hiver Festival in Paris, and was inspired by the work of artist Odilon Redon, whose late 19th-century visual universe of symbolism, dreams, and fantasy feels kindred to Sylvie's early 21st-century musical one.

"I wanted something super lyrical, super poetic, and super fragile," Courvoisier explains. "In Redon's drawing and painting, I can imagine, see, and feel everything. Chimaera is a project that has more groove, where I stay a longer time with one musical idea. Much of the music is written, as always, but here I also allow myself to just vamp. That's why all the pieces are really long, because of their slow, dreamlike development. I call it my music for pot smokers, by which I mean it's really relaxing."

Sylvie's Chimaera involves some gifted veterans. Her longtime trio mates bassist Drew Gress and drummer Kenny Wollesen are joined by trumpeters Wadada Leo Smith and Nate Wooley. New to Sylvie's music and key to her Chimaera concept is Christian Fennesz, the electronic musician renowned for command of melody, chord changes, and musical emotion within his shimmering, swirling sound.

"We all had this complex music in front of us," Courvoisier says. "But Christian was not reading. So he was like an acrobat balancing on our fixed music, soaring through and beyond it with his open part."

Redon's artwork inspired both Sylvie's tune titles and compositions. "Le pavot rouge" or "Red Poppy" opens the album like spring's first blossom, vivid with bitonal color. Redon's 1888 lithograph

"Partout des prunelles flamboient" or "Everywhere Eyeballs Are Ablaze" took Sylvie somewhere else altogether: "It's a weird title. And it's a weird image. Christian goes in a lot of different directions here but basically, I wanted something more jazzy in reference to a groove but kind of open so that the piano trio can play out."

Redon's "La Chimère aux yeux verts, tournoie, aboie", or "The chimera with green eyes, screaming, turning" brought out the fabulist in Sylvie: "With the chimera, we can imagine a

beautiful lady with green eyes, but we can imagine also a witch or monster. It can also maybe sound like a remembrance of a story that a grandmother told you.”

Here, as always, Sylvie reaches beyond convention for fresh expression. Two titles, “Annão” and “La joubarbe aragnaineuse,” are Sylvie’s own inventions: “It’s funny because in English, French, Spanish, and Italian, I invent new words all the time, not even based on meaning but on what sounds good to me. Sort of like with my music.”

And Courvoisier, like Redon, passes the freedom of her art onto us, her audience. “My drawings inspire, and are not to be defined,” Redon once said. “They place us, as does music, in the ambiguous realm of the undetermined.”

To risk just a little direction: Listen to Chimaera as if it were a lucid dream. Because it is.

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