

## SYLVIE COURVOISIER

Pianist / Composer / 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 native of Switzerland, has earned just renown for balancing two distinct worlds: the deep, richly detailed chamber music of her European roots and the grooving, hook-laden sounds of the downtown 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 as compelling when performing Stravinsky’s iconic *Rite of Spring* in league with flamenco dancer-choreographer Israel Galván as she is when improvising with her own widely acclaimed jazz trio, featuring bassist Drew Gress and drummer Kenny Wollesen. Then there are her ear-opening collaborations with such avant-jazz luminaries as John Zorn, Wadada Leo Smith, Evan Parker, Ikue Mori, Ellery Eskelin, Susie Ibarra, Fred Frith, Andrew Cyrille, Mark Feldman, Ken Vandermark, 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. *JazzTimes* has said: “Courvoisier keeps you on the edge of your seat because it feels like the piano cannot contain her. Her careening solos seem to overwhelm and overflow the keyboard and keep spilling.”

### Sylvie Courvoisier Trio

In his liner notes to *Free Hoops* – Courvoisier’s third album with trio mates Gress and Wollesen, to be released by the Swiss label Intakt on Sept. 18, 2020 – NPR critic Kevin Whitehead goes 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.”

The Sylvie Courvoisier Trio’s previous album – *D’Agala* (Intakt) – garnered a four-star review in *DownBeat*, while *JazzTimes* declared the record to be “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” 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; a genuine trio music in which bass and drums are full partners with piano.” Reflecting on the band, Courvoisier says: “For ages, John Zorn had been 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 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 and have now made three albums together. We have a special connection, one that only gets stronger and stronger.”

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

Another of Courvoisier’s most fruitful artistic relationships is with Israel Galván, the Spanish dancer and choreographer. They have 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 with the pianist alongside Evan Parker (saxophone), Mark Feldman (violin) and Ikue Mori (electronics). Courvoisier’s latest collaboration with Galván is *La Consagración de la Primavera*: a program that combines a two-piano interpretation of the original score for piano four-hands of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring) with an original, complementary two-piano score by Courvoisier: *Spectro*. Courvoisier, alongside piano partner Corey 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, with further performances planned.

About the *La Consagración de la Primavera* program, Courvoisier says: “Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre* really set the tone for the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 always loved this masterpiece, of course, but I never imagined that I would play it someday. Israel was the impetus, as he was highly influenced by Nijinsky, the Russian dancer who choreographed the original *Le Sacre*. Israel inspired me to take on this great, very challenging music, to perform on two pianos Stravinsky’s original score for piano four-hands.”

Courvoisier adds: “Over the years and many performances together, Israel has become like a brother to me. He has dedicated his life to dance, with no fear – and that sort of commitment and inspiration is contagious. With him, everything is possible – even *Le Sacre* with once dancer and two pianos. With the two pianos, Corey and I can play faster and groovier, making it more percussive than an orchestral version. Corey is an amazing pianist, who really nails this kind of music. As for my composition on the program, *Spectro*, 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.”

### **Solo, Duos, Quartets**

Avant-garde impresario John Zorn has described Courvoisier as “one of the most creative pianists in the downtown scene.” Zorn’s label Tzadik released her first solo recording, *Signs and Epigrams*, in 2007. In its review, *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 also collaborated with the photographer Mario Del Curto on *Lueurs d’ailleurs*, an evening-length work of solo piano plus visuals. About Courvoisier’s solo music, *Pitchfork* has said: “One of the coolest things about Courvoisier is her ability to craft (and improvise) music with much harmonic tension while still seeming, well, harmonious.” For her part, the pianist says about playing solo: “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. I want to make a new solo album soon.”

Among Courvoisier’s key duo partners is guitarist Mary Halvorson. They released the album *Crop Circles* in 2017 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 Courvoisier and Halvorson 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.” Courvoisier and Halvorson plan to record a follow-up album in 2021 for Pyroclastic Records. 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 a ‘playful’ element to her approach. We complement each other well in that way, I think.”

For more than two decades, Courvoisier’s longest-running collaborative partner has been violinist Mark Feldman. Their seemingly telepathic duo concerts have been 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 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, featuring 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 reed player 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* 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. *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 2018, Courvoisier joined a collective quartet also featuring saxophonist Ken Vandermark, trumpeter Nate Wooley and drummer Tom Rainey. They recorded the 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 part 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 SUIISA 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."

Reflecting on life as an artist, Courvoisier adds: "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 adore 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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