

## SYLVIE COURVOISIER

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.”

Courvoisier’s third album with trio mates Gress and Wollesen is *Free Hoops*, released in September 2020 via the Swiss label Intakt. 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... Courvoisier’s trio drives its intricate interactions through every tricky twist and tumble in exhilarating fashion.”

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 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, with further performances planned.

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.

Avant-garde impresario John Zorn has described Courvoisier as “one of the most creative pianists in the downtown scene.” In recent years, 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 albums with Feldman, including *Live at the Theatre Vidy-Lausanne* (Intakt, 2013), *Oblivia* (Tzadik, 2010) and *Music for Violin & Piano* (Avan, 1999). Their most recent album – *Time Gone Out*, released by Intakt in 2019 – 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 further praise, saying that along with the

album's 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."

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." 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).

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).

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. 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 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. Courvoisier has further collaborated on record with the likes of Ken Vandermark, Nate Wooley, Ellery Eskelin and Jacques Demierre. She 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).

Kevin Whitehead of National Public Radio 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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