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Patricia Barber Finds a New Way Forward Between Jazz and Classical Music

Attending a reception welcoming her into the centuries-old American Academy of Arts & Sciences — in the 2019 class that includes Michelle Obama, jurist Merrick Garland and author Jonathan Franzen — Patricia Barber had no idea what to expect. “But everyone was so warm and welcoming,” she recalls. “This astrophysicist told me he loved my song ‘Redshift’ and had been a fan for years. It felt like I had finally looked up from working after 37 years and realized that people had been noticing.”

Listeners also likely noticed a six-year gap between the Chicago-based pianist/singer/songwriter’s previous album (*Smash*) and the April release of *Higher*(ArtistShare). It wasn’t because she’d decided to slack off. “I mean, I did take time out for the 2016 election, which I worked on very hard — and also the 2018 election,” says Barber, who continued to perform regularly during her recording hiatus. “But that was the only lag time. It just took me that long to write this music.”

The centerpiece of *Higher* is an eight-part song cycle entitled *Angels, Birds, and I ...*, covering love, beauty and loss but delving leagues beneath any surface clichés. The term “song cycle” doesn’t come up much in jazz, and “singer-songwriter” — widely seen as a pop and folk species — shows up even less. But Barber has spent more than half her career skewing convention or shunning it entirely; her lyrics boast tightly woven similes and eidetic imagery. Tapping deep interests in literature and poetry — as well as mentoring by Pulitzer Prize-winning classical composer Shulamit Ran — she stretches “jazz” boundaries to create a uniquely personal space.

Expanding those boundaries even further helps explain the time spent making *Higher*, which fea-



Photo: Jimmy & Dena Katz

tures her working trio plus guitar and saxophone. Barber set herself the lofty goal of writing art songs that could be credibly performed by both jazz and classical artists — songs that don’t so much fall between those camps, but seem to exist outside the campgrounds altogether. The poster child for this concept is “The Opera Song,” a comic jewel of a character study that appears twice on the album. A piece about an understudy soprano dreaming of the day she’ll ascend to become “the prima donna with the sterling C,” the tune is sung first by Barber and later by Katherine Werbiansky, a trained lyric soprano. (The album also contains three standards as a preview of her next disc, recorded at the same time as this one.)

Barber’s ambitions for *Higher* compelled her to move toward “an enriched harmonic language” that draws on classical examples — a move she describes as an “evolution,” allowing her to “break out of the more circumscribed harmonic system of jazz and the classic American Songbook. “It’s bigger,” she marvels. “It strikes me as big as the sky, big as all the possibilities themselves, while jazz is less than that. But it’s now wide open. I can choose from jazz, or classical. It’s all combined for me.” —Neil Tesser