

Patricia Barber at Monument-National (2019 Montreal International Jazz Festival)



Patricia Barber in Montreal

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BY PETER BACONON 1 JULY 2019
Patricia Barber

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Review by Sebastian Scotney)

Howard Reich, that great music writer from Patricia Barber's home city of Chicago once described her fine artist- ry in an elegant phrase:

“the liquidity of her vocals and the bracing elegance of her pianism”.

But, in a sense, those are just a couple of the very fine basic ingredients of her art as singer-songwriter and performer. What you get is much more, and that is particularly the case when it comes to her new album, *Higher*, released in May, and the tour to promote it, of which this Montreal concert was part; this one goes very deep.

The main work on the new album is what Barber describes as a cycle of eight songs called *Angels, Birds, and I...* This work has been at least five years in the making and the songs deal with big subjects. She told interviewer/reviewer Tyran Grillo: “Art song is its own world.

Even though you have these improvisational envelopes, it's distinct from jazz. The harmonies are much vaster and difficult to put into words. One moment it all sounds new to us, and another it sounds familiar. This album is my own particular way of mixing those two things.” Yes, art song most definitely: at one point when the cycle was half-complete, Renee Fleming performed with Barber. That story is told here.

In the songs from the cycle, Barber explores and teases out affinities between angels, birds and the singer herself. The title song of the album was the first to be written. The words are finely crafted, for example: “Until an air/Blows in like spring/You'll be young again/Raise your voice, take wing.”

These ideas, these processes certainly recall the French symbolist poetry and Stéphane Mallarmé in particular, because that was a movement which, in its search to bring poetry into the realm of pure music, turned back to the past, to nature and to myth. At a first hearing, *Surrender* was the song that I found the most affecting. It is about the process of creating beauty. Barber in her introduction to the song drew the analogy of surrendering to beauty

and lyricism “a melody line nimbly thread through your lips” (if I took the line down right). And it is indeed a song of great beauty. The over-riding impression of these songs on a first hearing is that there are treasures buried in them, and that they need and deserve real attention and more than one listen.

This seriousness and depth of intent means that the jazz standards and pop tunes that are juxtaposed with these songs have their role to provide contrast. It is almost as if there is a work/life or work/play balance to be struck in the live performance of them. So we had as opener a limpid Brubeck *In Your Own Sweet Way* and later a Sam Smith *Stay With Me* and towards the end Sinatra's *This Town* and a tantrically slow Doors' *Light My Fire*.

Barber was with highly supportive regular trio co-conspirators Patrick Mulcahy on bass and Jon Deitemyer on drums, both of whom perform at her regular Monday residency at the Green Mill on Broadway in Uptown Chicago, now the stuff of legend. Both are totally at ease with Barber's pacing and can instinctively follow her less-is-more tendencies.

The Montreal audience for Barber was wonderfully supportive throughout and was rewarded with two encores. Howard Reich wrote recently that “every syllable, every chord change, every whispering vocal turn sends a message, and if you dare to breathe, you may miss it”. Yes, the Montreal public seemed to get that completely, and they also responded enthusiastically to the promise from Barber that she would be using her “silver Sharpie”® to personalise CDs after the concert. That vision (albeit not without a typical hint of devilish malice and coaxing humour) created the necessary frisson – and a long merch queue.