

Elina Duni

Melancholic Joy

The first thing one notices is the primacy of Elina Duni's voice. It's a voice that's both relaxed and slightly pensive—relaxed with a deliberate delicacy for slower material, yet pensive for what lies beneath the surface of such calm, beautiful music. One is reminded of artists who say that it's the ballads, songs that unfold more gradually, that are the hardest to play.

Nursing a cold in the wake of a whirlwind tour of the States and Europe, Duni still manages to speak almost as if singing, her English flavored by an Albanian-cum-Swiss accent, her attention to the questions on a par with the way she approaches a song's lyrics. When asked about her remark regarding all improvised music being "a jazz state of mind," she says that there is no need to play anything "the same way twice."

"There is always a structure with the tune," she adds. "But what happens in the solo parts, in the introductions and in the outros, can change suddenly. One of us can play something in a different way and we will follow. We *feel* to bring new ideas, which means the arrangements are not stuck. Sometimes I might sing things a little bit differently; as time goes by and I listen to the CD, I don't sing in the same way. It has something to do with confidence, and the belief that we have known each other."

The CD in question is *Matanë Malit* (*Beyond The Mountain*) by the Elina Duni Quartet, recorded with pianist Colin Vallon, bassist Patrice Moret and drummer Norbert Pfammatter. It's Duni's first album for ECM, but her third overall, following two on the Meta label, *Baresha* (2008) and *Lume Lume* (2010).

The band's métier during its current tour has been to play music from the new CD alongside selections from the first two. "It's been wonderful, a great experience," Duni says about the tour, which attracted especially enthusiastic crowds in the Balkans. "People are hungry there for this kind of music, because there is none," she says. "Acoustic music, mixed with electronic sounds mixed with some folk elements. And poetry. And the people dance to this music."

Duni was born in Albania and by age 5 was singing on stage. By 1992, the 10-year-old was living in Switzerland, still her home today. Journeys through classical, blues and jazz standards led to studies at Bern's Hochschule der Künste, where she met future duo partner Vallon. She recalls a moment in 2004 when he asked her, "Why don't we do something different? Why should we play jazz standards like everybody? Why not play traditional folk songs and treat them like jazz standards?" Her response? "OK."

Duni refers to Vallon as "the heart" of the



quartet project. "Without his ideas, I wouldn't be here," she explains. "The sound of the quartet, what he brings, his sound, all his research, his arrangements. Everyone's important, but he is the soul of this band."

Duni sees the new album as an extension of the first two, which, in part, dealt with her childhood. But there are other subjects, too. "*Beyond The Mountain* goes beyond the folk songs," she says. "It has forbidden songs, like 'Erë Pranverore [Spring Breeze].' So, I get deep down into Albanian history. The music doesn't explode. It's less jazzy, but it's very intense. I feel the music has come to the point where I wanted it to, and it's the most personal one."

The aptly titled "Erë Pranverore" is distinctive, in part, because of its gaiety. Other songs, all of them from traditional sources, traffic more in the realm of the blues.

So, is there sadness inherent in this material? "It is sadness," Duni attests, but adds, "I think it is more melancholy. The Balkans are a place where the joy is melancholic, and where the melancholy can be joyful. In the Balkans, we have a way of singing our suffering—it's like a kind of therapy."

As for that "spring breeze," Duni explains that "Erë Pranverore" was originally sung by Albanian vocalist Vaçe Zela, a key influence. "Her voice is part of my childhood," she notes. "This is a pop song, composed in 1962. You could not perform it because it was too jazzy, and the lyrics were too sensual; it was against the 'good morality.' So, it was performed only once and then it was forbidden, prohibited."

For Duni, 2013 is a time for introspection and creativity. "I want to go on writing, and see what comes," she says. "To become more public. And to have time to let things mature."

—John Ephland

