

SAVINA YANNATOU & PRIMAVERA EN SALONICO

PRESS REVIEWS

Excerpts

Savina Yannatou ... and her band endeavor to unpretentiously weave all these strands together for a tapestry virtually [hyperbole alert!] unparalleled in modern music. Ms. Yannatou's vocal talents had the breadth of an unusually eclectic ethnomusicologist, the chops of Patty Waters, Diamanda Galas, Joan La Barbara, and (dare I say) Yoko Ono and - most importantly - the soul of someone who loves music in all (or at least most) of its myriad incarnations... ... Savina Yannatou & her band o' swells took to the stage of Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music and for the most part WOWED the capacity crowd. I only use the "for the most part" qualifier not because of any shortcomings on the part of the performers, but in some of their renditions of songs from many lands featured an unfettered, free-form, free jazz, free improvisational freak-out segment seemed to nonplus the predominantly "folkie" crowd. (I mean, with the right kind of eyes, one could practically see the "question marks" appear over the heads of many audience members.) I rather found these sections quite exhilarating myself, but then, I still listen to free jazz & old-school punk rock. Anyway, Ms. SY sang story-songs from various regions of Sicily, Greece, Spain, Palestine, & Macedonia (among others) with astonishing technique and poised, almost serene ease. She sang lyrics like an angel, like a demon, like a forest spirit, like the wind through the cracks of an old house, and she made "sounds," glottal yelps, clicks, and that old crowd-pleaser, chording - that vocal technique the throat-singers of Mongolia where they sing two different chords at the same time, producing a fural, scary tone. Her band Primavera en Salonico - with one exception, the same on her latest, very fine ECM disc *Sumiglia* - were all aces, a bunch of hepcats from the folk and the jazz worlds of Greece. Especially impressive was the percussionist, who was surrounded by all manner of unusual, mostly round objects that resonate when struck or stroked, an array one might see (literally) surrounding Art Ensemble of Chicagoans Dom Moye and Roscoe Mitchell. At the risk of sounding the starry-eyed fanboy, this performance was the definition of Transcendent. Miss the rarified musicology of Ms. Savina & her homies at your peril.

Mark Keresman, Chicago Jazz Review

The quiet storm - Greek singer Savina Yannatou defies boundaries and initial impressions.

...Back on stage, Yannatou's reserve slowly transformed, especially as she moved into rhythmic music from Bulgaria, emotionally intense tunes from Italy, Spain and Corsica and a gripping Palestinian song. Although her physical manner and between-song comments remained composed, her vocal style expanded dramatically. Her initial emphasis on cool-toned interpretations, enhanced by a sumptuous sound and a subtle vibrato, gradually transformed into a startlingly diverse repertoire of vocal techniques. In some numbers she employed "throat singing" ... For others, she flexed her sound to the point where she could produce a melodic line in octaves. In the concert's last few pieces, she produced bird calls, yelps, squeals and growls with an intensity reminiscent of the late avant-garde singer Cathy Berberian, as she led her four-piece ensemble through electrifyingly contemporary sounding segments. "I have always been

fascinated with the different colors of the voice, the different ways of singing," said Yannatou, opening up conversationally, similar to how she opened up musically on stage. "And that, I think, is what attracted me to the different [styles of] music of the Mediterranean. Singing them becomes like a game, playing with the sounds and the words of different languages." ...Yannatou finished the Schoenberg Hall concert with more wide-open improvisations, her vocal excursions enhanced by the heroic accordion playing of the group's music director, Kostas Vomvolos; the multilayered percussion work of Kostas Theodorou, the string bass of Michalis Siganidis and the nay flute of Haris Lambrakis. By this point it was fully apparent that Yannatou's quiet stage demeanor, like her calm, intimate conversational manner, represented only one facet of a complex personality. Rather than rely on superficial stagecraft, she employs her voice, her eyes and her inner intensity to mine a creative trove filled with emotional treasures. ... "If you choose to do this kind of work," concluded Yannatou, "you have to have a basic love of music. And for me it is always the expression of the music, the feeling within the music, that has to come first. So, I can only hope that what I do, what I sing, is experienced as passionate, even if I don't necessarily seem that way when I am on stage."

Don Heckman, LOS ANGELES TIMES

On her first recording under Manfred Eicher's auspices (ECM licensed her live *Terra Nostra* disc in 2003), Greek vocalist Savina Yannatou conducts a sweeping and stunning musical tour of the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Eastern Europe. She covers a daunting amount of cultural and historical territory... and sings the wide-ranging traditional repertoire in 12 different languages. But what's most impressive is the depth of emotion Yannatou conveys, regardless of borders or linguistic differences. Whether the scene is a Moldavian riverbank, an Armenian doorstep, or a Palestinian wedding, Yannatou cuts to the quick and seemingly expresses every nuance of feeling. ... and experienced as an avant-garde improviser (she was influenced by Diamanda Galas), Yannatou closely adheres to the melodies but takes dramatic liberties with vocal timbre, phrasing, and dynamics, occasionally venturing into riveting interludes of wordless vocalese, ethereal overdubs, and variations on throat singing. Led by arranger and multi-instrumentalist Kostas Vomvolos (accordion, qanun, and kalimba), the six-piece Primavera en Salonico band doesn't just accompany Yannatou; it creates interactive soundscapes by behaving more like an improvisory orchestra (not unlike the Art Ensemble of Chicago) of strings (tambour, oud, acoustic guitar, bass), flutes, and percussion.

By Derk Richardson, The Absolute Sound, USA

Le Monde de la musique, Choc du mois

Un registre étendu sans crispation, ni démonstration, une perfection du timbre qui n'exclut ni la décontraction, ni une relative liberté timbrale. La voix répond ainsi sans hiatus aux exigences du chant classique ou du chant populaire, de la candeur des ballades aux narquoiseries libertines du cabaret en passant par l'ivresse de la danse. ... Ses choix esthétiques sont incontestablement marqués par les mélismes de l'Orient, mais aussi par la liberté de pensée acquise par le chant contemporain depuis Berio et Cathy Berberian, et de façon plus permanente par la prise d'initiative du jazz. Une compétence qu'elle partage avec ses musiciens. ... La production de Manfred Eicher répond très pertinemment aux besoins de ce folklore intérieur pour s'épanouir.

Sumiglia both celebrates the differences between the traditions and the common ground they share. The musicians reveal a deep feeling for the melodies they explore, treat them with great respect, and when the music seems to demand it, follow their implications until increasingly free improvisation becomes an inevitability.

Global Rhythm

Dark-toned but ambrosial, highly disciplined yet seemingly bursting with a soul of pure flame, the rather staggering Athens-born singer Savina Yannatou is a virtuosic chameleon adept at an extensive range of vocal traditions (and languages) from the Mediterranean region – not just interpreting but leaping off from these old folk musics with a daring, exploratory technique and far-flung tonal scope that allows her to stamp it all with a brash intelligence and some might say punky attitude. There's not a thing dried-up or academic about her new takes on ancient songs... Yannatou really lets the blood out of these songs, brazenly improvising on them, as if called by some inner primal force, kneading and kneeding them, caressing them, smearing their borders and launching out something entirely new in the process.

John Payne, L.A. Weekly

Yannatou is emerging as one of the most inventive interpreters of traditional music from around the world. While most of her musical contemporaries in Greece and the Mediterranean have gone "Eurovision" (something of an "American Idol" equivalent), Yannatou has continued to make music her way, blending global folk history and jazz-like modern improvisation. ... In *Sumiglia*, Yannatou uses her now-signature range as theatre. She sounds richly feminine in bittersweet waves in an Armenian love ballad, almost masculine in the heaviness of the Corsican title track. She sighs and scats like Kate Bush in an interpretation of a Greek lullaby, sounding like a New Age fairy in a child's wildest dreams.

Joanna Kakissis, Star Ledger

Welche Souveränität, welchen Mut und welches Bekenntnis zur Verletzbarkeit durch die rückhaltlose Eröffnung eines eigenen Standpunkts schenkt diese wunderbare Sängerin ihrem Publikum. Gemeinsam mit der herausragend gut besetzten Formation Primavera en Salonico um den Multiinstrumentalisten Kostas Vomvolos setzt die Yannatou auf *Sumiglia* einer auf den ersten Blick sehr heterogenen Region ein überraschend geschlossenes musikalisches Denkmal: dem Mittelmeerraum und Osteuropa. Sie verfügt über ein großartiges Gespür für Identitäten, deren Kerne sie behutsam herauslöst und sich begegnen lässt. Das Ergebnis ist in höchstem Maße inspirierend. ... Savina Yannatou ist eine jener Künstlerinnen, von denen jeder ... eine Aufnahme im Regal stehen haben sollte – mindestens.

Volker Doberstein, Jazzpodium

Was die griechische Sängerin Savina Yannatou zusammen mit dem Ensemble Primavera en Salonico da macht, dürfte einmalig auf der Welt sein. *Sumiglia* versammelt vierzehn Songs aus dem Mittelmeer- und dem osteuropäischen Raum, von Spanien bis zur Ukraine, von Armenien bis Italien. Diese werden jedoch nicht einfach gespielt, sondern förmlich verdaut – eingesponnen in ein fragiles Gespinst. Immer wenn sich Raum bietet, ergreift das Sextett die Möglichkeit und verwandelt diese traditionellen Songs in etwas Neues. Das geschieht immer mit Einfühlungsvermögen und Respekt; und die unglaublich wandelbare Stimme von Savina Yannatou ist schlicht und einfach sensationell.

Rolf Thomas, Jazzthetik

Die griechische Sängerin zeigt einmal mehr, dass sie längst einen Platz in der ersten Liga der Weltmusik verdient hat. Mit grandioser Begleitung führt sie musikalische Ingredienzien aus Okzident und Orient zusammen.

Nick Joyce, Radiomagazin/Schweiz

GREEK CHAMELEON'S ECLECTIC JOURNEY

Savina Yannatou, Melbourne Concert Hall

... Yannatou's program offers a wide range of songs garnered mostly from that fascinating hotchpotch of Eastern and Western cultures, the Mediterranean. Her signature tune, for example, with which she begins and ends the concert, is called *lu Purtuni (The Door)*, from the old Greek towns of southern Italy. It is a curse against death, a simple folk song, delivered with droll humor.

Her concert reflects this eclectic cultural garnering. There are Greek songs from Cyprus sung in the Turkish style, all laconic sensuality, Spanish songs in which you can hear the Moorish sob in such lines as "Her beauty enslaved me", and a lilting lullaby of Bedouin-Israeli origin. You sense a political undercurrent of deliberately crossing cultural frontiers and rivalries. Her music and her style might be called Levantine Womad.

Yannatou's musicianship is extraordinary, yet her approach is restrained. She lets the music do the wooing. There is something medieval about a young woman with a tambourine, singing to drum and tambour accompaniment. Her approach is to begin with deceptive innocence and then let carnal, peasant earthiness emerge.

Later in the concert, the group's leader, Kostas Vomvolos, cut loose on a *quanun*, a kind of plucked zither, and Yannatou improvised a wordless song from the Caribbean which tested her incredible vocal range. Yannatou is, in fact, a chameleon; playful, sexy, and richly endowed with musical intelligence. She is an astonishing artist and I hope she sings for us again.

John Slavin, The Age, Melbourne, Australia, 2002

The Voice of 1001 Nights

...An incomparable concert. Savina sang like the angels. Like the nightingales. I have no words to describe it. I can only say that she sings exactly as she wants, without any technical or expressive limit. The dream voice. We must assume that the Greek singer has received a divine gift. ... (The songs) were executed with a marvelous group of instrumentalists, who are very

fond of improvisation and who showed the most innovative tendencies in their approach to traditional music...

Roberto Villareal, Diario de Burgos, Spain, 2000

Folk Songs from Paradise

Paradise – it can't be far from the Mediterranean area. One could sense this with body and soul during the concert of Savina Yannatou & Primavera en Salonico in the fully packed Peterskirche (in Heidelberg) ... A marvelously delicate voice, with specific, slightly nasal coloring, a velvet timbre, in which vibrates much of the Mediterranean: enormous yearning and sadness, but also a great beauty. ...Vital rhythms of a strong dance impulse were being performed by the group "Primavera en Salonico", melismatic melodies, which won a lot of buxom in the unisono of the instruments and in ostinate melodies. ...The musicians were just as capable within the folkloristic context, as in conveying the songs into the contemporary realm. The instrumental joy did at times ascend in polyphony and let go its energy in passages of free improvisation. ...They are just as capable in jazz, something one became aware of in many a modern interpretation of old traditional melodies. A completely jazzy groove was offered in the song "Missa Antilla" of the Caribbean.

Kö., Rhein-Neckar Zeitung, Heidelberg, Germany 1999

WOMAD - Reading

...Of some four dozen acts from the rest of the world, none was more rewarding or esoteric than the immaculately researched and performed repertoire of the Greek singer Savina Yannatou – Sephardic Jewish songs in old Spanish from Thessalonica. I'm sure I'll be back next year.

Phil Sweeney, The Independent, UK, 1996

... Yannatou delivers the emotion in each song as if it were her own. Her musicians swing like a jazz group, dance like a folk ensemble and have the soul of a blues band and this is a lovely record.

Duncan Heining, Jazzwise

Greek singer Savina Yannatou and her longstanding group, Primavera en Salonico, continue to mine music from a wealth of seemingly disparate cultures, proving that politics and religion may divide, but music unites. Avoiding the liner notes, what's perhaps most surprising about *Songs of An Other* is how the songs may feel as if they're aligned with one culture when, in fact, they come from another. It's all part of the boundary-breaking aesthetic that has defined Yannatou's group since they first came together in the mid-'90s. ... years of extensive touring has resulted in an avant world music where the interaction is at a far deeper level than ever before. It's also created the kind of implicit trust required to make *Songs of An Other* a far more improvisational affair—the most profoundly outré disc, in fact, of Yannatou's career. ...Yannatou possesses a rare capacity for warm nuance and extreme extended techniques; a breadth of expressiveness that positions her alongside Norwegian vocal innovators Maja Ratkje and Sidsel Endresen, albeit

in a completely different context. ... As intense as some of *Songs of An Other* can be, there are moments of haunting, ethereal beauty. Armenia's "Sassuni Oror" is near ambient in nature, whereas the Serbian "Smilj Smiljana" possesses a quiet majesty; melancholy, yet strangely optimistic.

John Kellman, All About Jazz, 2008