

Risser's Prepared Piano Work Defies Categorization

On her arresting and deeply original solo album *Des Pas Sur La Neige* (Clean Feed) pianist and improviser Eve Risser mystifies the listener with an arsenal of techniques and tools that transform her instrument into a kaleidoscopic sound machine, producing unexpected tones and timbres. Paris-based Risser, 32, has followed a circuitous path to her current practice, where composition and improvisation, jazz and new music, and other dualities exist in thrilling flux.

She spent five years playing pop-flavored jazz arrangements in France's Orchestre National de Jazz under the leadership of Daniel Yvinec and carries on in a variety of diverse projects, such as the art-song group New Songs with Scandinavian collaborators like Sofia Jernberg, Kim Myhr, and David Stackenäs, or the equally compelling duo Donkey Monkey with Japanese percussionist Yuko Oshima. But in the last few years it's been her experimentation with prepared piano that has turned the most heads, a discipline that's reached a new apotheosis on her solo debut.

Risser, who grew up in Colmar, France, began conservatory training on piano as a child. When she was 11 she encountered graphic notation for the first time and it set her imagination free. But those desires were quashed by her instructor, who situated that sort of interpretational freedom within a larger, rigorous practice of study.

Her family insisted she learn another concert instrument at school: She chose the flute, but she didn't want to abandon the piano. As a teenager she became enamored of contemporary classical music, attracted by the usual timbres—an element that would eventually reside at the forefront of her piano work. After finishing school in her early 20s she decided to end her flute studies and concentrate exclusively on the piano. She loved jazz pianists like Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Paul Bley, Cecil Taylor and Thelonious Monk, but felt she lacked the technique to play in that broad tradition.

"When I stopped the flute, I felt so limited in my improvisations with timbres that I started to explore the inside of the piano to be able to imitate trumpets, percussions and saxophones," she said. "I realized that building stuff with my hands for the piano was super fun. All of a sudden the objects in my piano became the personification of my sounds."

Risser participates in a variety of partnerships

with other stylistically slippery improvisers—including saxophonist Jean-Luc Guionnet and clarinetist

Eve Risser with a glass ball that she places inside her piano to create new sounds



SYLVAIN GRIPOUX

Joris Rühl and bassist Pascal Niggenkemper—but it was her trio with bassist Benjamin Duboc and drummer Edward Perraud that attracted international attention, thanks to its 2012 album *En Corps* (Dark Tree). On that album, her prepared piano work exerted a dazzling force within knotty, turbulent yet propulsive free improvisation.

On *Des Pas Sur La Neige*, Risser uses a tool kit full of devices, including a guitar e-bow to produce sustained long tones. She generates sounds that are alternately percussive, droning, ringing, buzzing and tuneful: symphonies of color and texture that flow with an inexorable compositional logic.

Risser admits to forging hybrids: "At first I was convinced that I was just in too many things that I liked, but lately I've thought that could be who I was: a nose from there, an eye from there, et cetera...Sometimes it's beautiful, sometimes it's ugly. It's me."