“Marrakech Is Yellow, Orange, Pink...” **Bára Gísladóttir** melds experience, memory, place, and music theory on her innovative debut LP

By John Rogers – Photo by Art Bicnick

In a dimly lit, pin-drop quiet Mengi, young composer and musician Bára Gísladóttir lies onstage on her back, behind her double bass. Barely visible, she starts to make sound—a breathy growling, that builds into a throaty roar, and then a howl. Bára battles with the strings a little, and then starts building again, making a guttural gurgle that builds into a scream. The audience is enthralled, some sitting in silence, whether stunned, hypnotised or giggling with bewilderment.

“I was hoping nobody would see me there, lying there behind the instrument,” Bára explains, later. ”I actually don’t know where I got this idea, it seems pretty strange. That piece is called “Rooftops of Prague,” so I guess this piece is what Prague inspired. It’s a bit of a satanic city. That architecture... and, the atmosphere is full of surprises. It’s romantic, but in a punk way—the kind of romantic that I like.”

Spank de bass

The performance was to celebrate the CD & vinyl release of her crowdfunded debut album, ‘Different Rooftops’, and featured live debuts for several of the works contained therein. Bára’s playing style changed dramatically from piece to piece—at one point, accompanied by groaning saxophone and with an intensely furrowed brow, she snapped the strings against the neck violently, as if punishing her bass. At another, she grappled the wide body as if trying to stop it from escaping, wrestling with the bulky instrument before bowing the strings emphatically as if sawing wood. It made for a nervy, disconcerting tableau of sound and a robustly physical performance.

In the most theatrical and visual piece, “Rooftops of Berlin,” Bára was wrapped in a long white cloth band, with four people standing around her in a diamond, tugging at the material to spin her around until she became hopelessly entwined. In the end, her attempts to play were thwarted as the material finally muted the strings.

“I like the challenge of extended playing techniques,” says Bára, “and the physical performance adds another element—whether I’m hiding behind the instrument, or fighting it, or trying to escape from it. What the audience expects shouldn’t always be what happens.”

Push the boundaries

The album was written during Bára’s MA course at the University of Copenhagen. It’s a devoutly experimental work that displays a restless curiosity about the potential of the instrument, and about composition itself. “My peers gave some mixed reviews,” says Bára. “Most of them thought the album was a bit too long, and maybe too deep into the same colours—this oily-textured mass. But that was kind of what I was going for. I like music to be a challenge, and I don’t feel that everything needs to always be accessible. It’s so important to push at the boundaries, not just in music, but in our life experiences in general. It sounds like such a cliché to say it! But it’s true.”

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This enthusiasm for exploration is a key part of Bára’s process. In fact, the album was inspired by travel—the sounds, sights, smells, sensations, and feelings she experienced whilst walking the streets or viewing the skylines of different cities.

“The work is based on cities that I went to between 2009 and 2015, and felt inspired by,” she explains. “In some of these pieces, like ‘Rooftops of Prague,’ I had this overview of the rooftops, the city, and the atmosphere of the place—then the meat on the bones is details, and things I’d see in the street. But then, in ‘Rooftops of Berlin,’ you never get close to anything. As the performance goes on, I get more and more stuck in the band. It doesn’t have a happy ending—I get stuck and can’t go any further.”

Marrakech was a very different experience. “I was there in the summer, during Ramadan, and there was a heat wave happening,” recalls Bára. “It was chaos. There were a lot of intense salesmen in the streets, but it was so hot they’d be lying in their stalls screaming after you to buy things. That piece is more about that intense experience of being there. But in all of the cities, I’d been up to the rooftops. I do love rooftops, both to look up and see, and to look down from.”

The sound of colour

Bára often talks in visual terms when describing her music, associating notes with colours and textures. In fact, painting is also a part of her writing process.

“I would come home from these places feeling inspired, and paint,” she says. “It was very freeing, because it’s not something I’ve ever trained in or taken seriously, so I can just experiment. When I was in Barcelona, I went to the Picasso museum, and saw some paintings of rooftops from his blue period—one flat and dark blue, and one lighter. I’m synaesthetic so I started imagining these tonal views. I’d experimented before with the connection between visual and audio arts, and decided to continue the idea, and make a system that would include both elements.”

By processing her memories into colours, Bára was also designing a musical palette that would come to form the basis of her compositions. ”To me, the note C is a yellow colour,” she explains. “And Marrakech is yellow, orange, pink... Berlin is blue and grey. What I did was to paint these thoughts of the cities, then look at what I had, and think “Okay, here I can use an A, that’s red,” and so on. It became a little set of notes to be used for development. The paintings and music are two things that reference each other.”

“I like numbers and systems,” she finishes. “but when you’re composing you can get a bit stuck in the details, and you can accidentally end up on a totally different branch. That’s when I can look back at the painting, and say, ‘Ah, yes, that was the thing.’ It guides me, and reminds where I started from, and where I’m trying to get to.”

And it’s an interesting point to arrive at, indeed. But Bára’s wanderlust, both musical and literal, is nowhere near sated yet. The album is a destination reached—and the first step in a longer voyage.