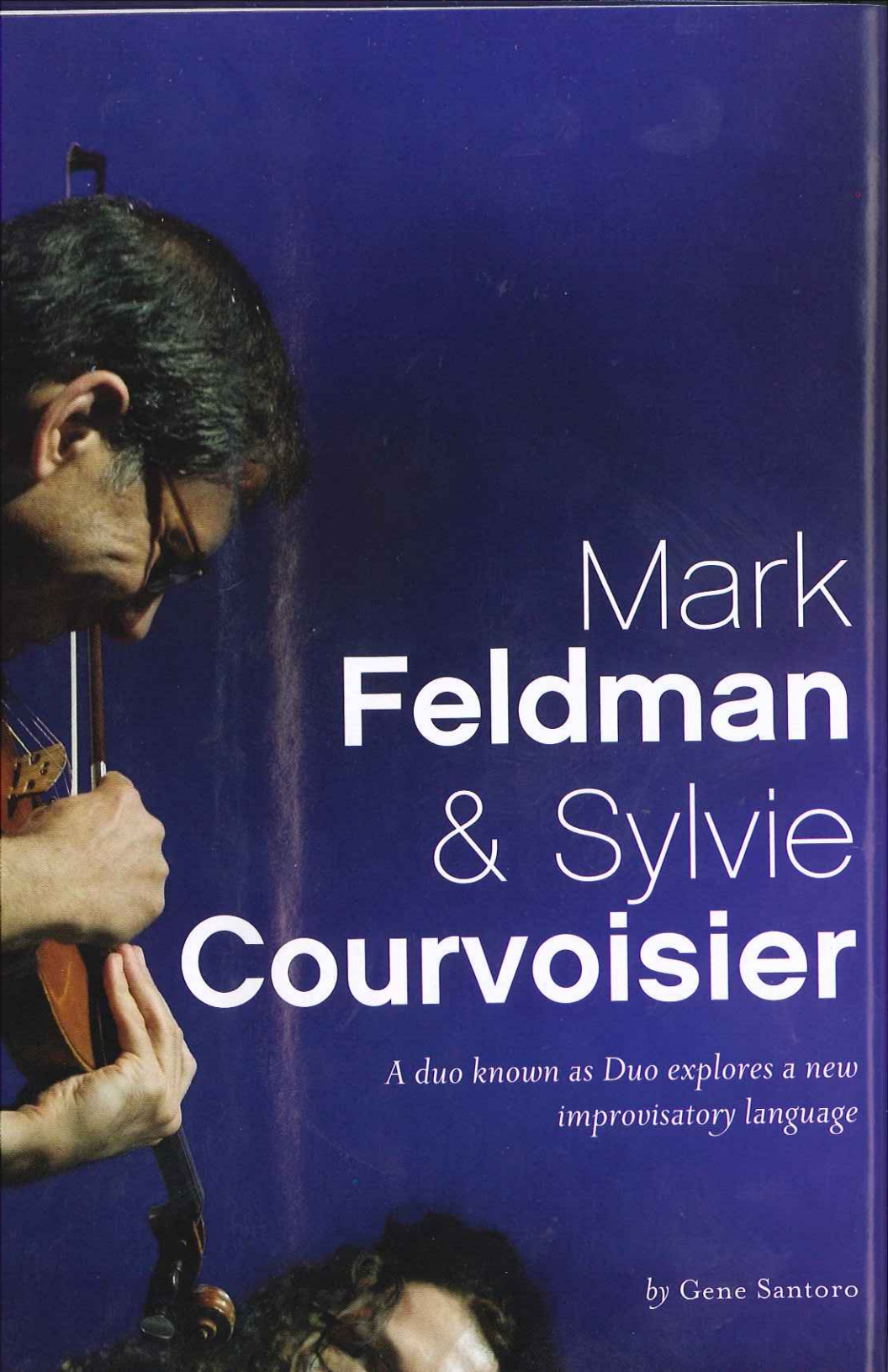

Mark **Feldman** & Sylvie **Courvoisier**

A duo known as Duo explores a new improvisatory language

by Gene Santoro

Over the last few decades, the improvisation-driven side of what we'll call American chamber music has taken wing. It's not mainstream jazz—it rides few underlying rhythmic or harmonic patterns. Because it's largely improvised, it's not straight classical (at least, not the postwar variety) or Gunther Schuller's Third Stream jazz, whose strict classical bent foregrounded composition. But whatever it's not, the small, vibrant area embraces a frequently fascinating cast of people and sounds.

Take violinist Mark Feldman and pianist Sylvie Courvoisier. Unnoted in most standard music references, singly and together these two have made names for themselves—Feldman in the 1980s downtown New York scenes that included the Knitting Factory, and winning the 2007 Alpert Award in the Arts; Courvoisier in Europe, then in the downsized descendant of that earlier NYC alternative zone a decade later. They've been performing as a duo called, well, Duo since 1997; offstage, they've been married since 2000.

Think fire and ice—onstage, at least. Feldman's virtuosic fiddling fans emotional flames. His techniques, adapted from myriad sources when he hasn't invented them, make his strings sing, scream, sob, implore, sting, yield, or slash. Courvoisier plays what seems a more cerebral role, though clearly passion drives her variegated keyboard attack, as well as her work with mallets, adhesive strips, and fingers on her piano strings. At her most inventive, she offers the gnarliness of Cecil Taylor with a post-Cagean gloss.

Together, the two create personalized musical abstractions that, at their sharpest, somehow—like a Giacometti sculpture or a Pollock painting, say—transport the listener to a space where the rules may not be apparent, but the emotional response to their seductive ebb and flow sure is.

As Taylor and Anthony Braxton, among others, have done for half a century, Feldman and Courvoisier are exploring what happens when improvisers deploy highly individual languages they've each developed within a sort of highbrow Dixieland context, where everyone reacts to whatever the others are doing in idiosyncratic, even (by some standards) eccentric fashion. This practice diverges from mainstream jazz's harmonic and other technical idioms—idioms increasingly shared, and sadly too often just cloned, thanks to increasingly standardized schooling.

The music on the duo's two new CDs is witness to what can result: kaleidoscopic textures and edgy sensibilities; tumultuous fervor and breathtaking timing; split-second coordination and improvisational lunges; and vague (at best) demarcations between written and ad-hoc materials. Seasoned, at its best, with welcome wit and humor, it delivers an uncanny combination of visceral intensity and intellectual rigor. Hear it for yourself on *Oblivia,* a Duo album, and *To Fly To Steal,* a quartet outing that adds bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Gerry Hemingway, a longtime Braxton cohort.

Courvoisier's "Messiaenesque" appears on both discs, and so suggests something about how these musicians do what they do with their highly personalized collective improvisation. The risk is unfruitful chaos and/or lapses into cliché. The reward is akin to flying.

Feldman explains, "We listen to a fair amount of Messiaen, and Sylvie studies him: she's written a book about his approach. For this piece, she took a couple of elements of his melodic thing—really basic—to give it the flavor of his music. It's not a quote from anything he wrote. That's why the title is what it is."

The two versions are distinct—and not just because of the number of instruments: "Even for quartet recordings, we do most of our rehearsing as a duo," says Feldman. "We want the other band members to react improvisationally to what we've developed over more time playing as a duo. Like in 'Messiaenesque': It's a pretty intricate head. We mastered it as a duo, then did it more spontaneously as a quartet. It's what I call a blast-off tune—it's short but has such a precise character that it throws you into a certain area of improvisation. Aside from that, I don't think about the difference between composition and improvisation much. To me, it's all part of the same ball of wax."

How Feldman and Courvoisier got to where they are is a tale worth rehearsing.

Born in Chicago in 1955, Feldman studied violin from age 9. By 18, he was a member of the Civic Symphony ("It was my version of college") and playing at night in bar bands doing mostly rockabilly and Texas Swing. That lively little circuit made him some contacts; one offered to help set him up as a Nashville studio cat.

At the time, the "countrypolitan" sound, pioneered by producer Owen Bradley and popularized by Chet Atkins, Ray Price, Patsy Cline, and dozens of hits, was king in Music City; its crossover "sweetness" required lush string sections. So the 25-year-old headed south. Driving around Music City soon after arriving, he spotted a "help wanted" sign outside the Nashville Symphony office, picked up an application, auditioned, and had another gig. Most days he was also logging in one or two studio sessions, performing on some 200 tracks with the likes of Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson, then joining the touring bands of old-line stalwarts like Price and Loretta Lynn.

In 1986, he had the itch to change scenes again. He'd studied with the remarkable Chicago jazz teacher Joe Daley, then with David Baker. A summer stint at the Banff Centre, then directed by Dave Holland, reopened him to improvised music's alluring creative (if not financial) possibilities: "It fired me up. I'd always had this gnawing thing about making my own music, creative music. And I was 30, so I was feeling it was time."

So he sold his house ("a little place fourteen miles from the Kentucky border"),

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quit his gigs, and headed to the Apple, where the "downtown" scene spearheaded by the likes of saxist-composer John Zorn was surfacing. Not knowing anyone, Feldman played bebop in street bands ("with a pick-up and a Pignose amp"), then got himself a steady dinner-theater gig ("eight shows a week"). After a year or so, he surfaced in a trio called Arcado, with bassist extraordinaire Mark Dresser and cellist Hank Robertson, at the Knitting Factory. That's where I first met him and heard his story—and got knocked out by his musicianship.

Over the years I heard him in a bunch of bands. One of my favorites was the John Abercrombie Quartet, partly because he and Abercrombie share a lyrical sensitivity laced with wit, humor, and sarcasm. But no matter what the situation—and they varied, often wildly—Feldman usually managed to mesh sophistication and rawness, without leaning on irony, and lure me into his sonic world like some Paganini-esque pied piper.

In the 1990s, Feldman decided to get back to his acoustic and classical roots, re-inspired by what he calls "the composer-performer-improviser tradition, which goes back to Bach, Beethoven, Paganini, Ysaÿe. That all disappeared from classical music before the Second World War. So since my 40s, I changed my whole sound and approach. I'm playing with a much more European-influenced sound. I realized I'd taken a detour from the acoustic tradition that I'd grown up with, which was great in many ways: I'd developed an improvisational world. But I wanted to bring that back into the acoustic world I'd lost."

So Feldman stopped playing through an amplifier a decade ago. The Alpert Award helped him buy his first-ever really good violin—one once owned by Jacques Thibaud. His transformation was complete.

He met Courvoisier in 1995, during his incremental transition. Born in Lausanne in 1968, she grew up with a jazz-pianist father. She studied composition, piano, and conducting at the Conservatoire de Lausanne, while pursuing jazz at the Conservatoire de Montreux, home of one of jazz's oldest and most prestigious festivals. She'd already made a reputation in Europe's lively clubs. A year later, she moved to Brooklyn, where the couple still lives, and began working her way through the outsider scenes. Among her bands: the cooperative all-woman trio called Mephista, with Ikue Mora wielding electronics and drum machines and kinetic Susie Ibarra on drums.

You'll have to listen to Duo's recent CDs to hear how intricate their personalized idioms can become—and what they can yield, in the right hands: dramatic intervallic leaps; sudden dissonant splashes; jagged, irregular rhythms that can stir turbulent eddies or calm to eerie stillness; and a joyous reveling in sheer sound, like—maybe especially like—the chalk-across-the-blackboard scrape of a partial harmonic being wrung from a violin.

Maybe that irrational exuberance is what draws listeners into the journey that the music's often vertiginous bends can unfold. But whatever it is, after evolving for half a century, improvising American chamber musicians have left a trail of enduring music. Add Feldman and Courvoisier to the list.

Gene Santoro is the author of several books on American music, including Myself When I am Real, *a biography of Charles Mingus (Oxford University Press, 2001), and* Highway 61 Revisited, *which examines the complex roots of American music (Oxford, 2004).*

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