



SARAH BUECHI FLYING LETTERS

Sarah Buechi Voice
Stefan Aeby Piano
André Pousaz Double Bass
Lionel Friedli Drums

All songs and lyrics by Sarah Buechi. Recorded by Andy Neresheimer, May 20 – 22, 2013, at Hardstudios Winterthur, for Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen. Mixed by Florian Pittet at Studio de la Fonderie, Fribourg, June 19, July 12, Dez 12, 2013. Mastered by Christoph Utzinger, Berne. Cover art: Conor O'Donnell. Graphic design: Jonas Schoder. Photos: Remo Ubezio. Liner notes: Christian Rentsch.

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It is hard to say where Sarah Buechi's music comes from – somewhere or another, precise origins unknown. Although there is much that somehow sounds familiar and creates associations, the next moment any certainties evaporate and we are no longer so sure; her music is neither jazz nor singersongwriter pop. No label fits. Nevertheless it has a clear, unique identity. The disparate elements and diverse musical content are drawn into various orbits by the gravitational pull of her strong personality, her distinctive voice, her particular approach to composition and the quality of her texts, often multilayered. And she has the nerve you need to follow your curiosity, trust your intuition, to travel without knowing the destination, or how the journey will change you.

Travelling, being on the move: merely a nice metaphor for some artists, it has a very existential significance for the Swiss singer Sarah Buechi. Through travelling and extended periods of study in other countries and cultures, she has not simply expanded her musical horizons; she has allowed herself to be fundamentally challenged, shaken up, interrogated. "Nothing abroad is more exotic than yourself," as Ernst Bloch said.

In 2005 and 2006, as a twenty-four-year-old student from the jazz department at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, she took a leap of faith and left for India. For a year she studied at the renowned Karnataka College of Percussion in Bangalore, a southern Indian city of a million inhabitants, returning for a further six months. It was a good school, particularly for singers; not only did the percussionist and mridangam-player T. A. S. Mani teach there, so did his wife, the singer R. A. Ramamani, known in Europe for her work with Charlie Mariano. It was intense, Sarah Buechi says today, her first extensive stay in a culture wholly unfamiliar to her, hard above all because she didn't automatically seek contact to other Swiss or Europeans. "I wanted that challenge, I wanted to expose myself to this culture – as far as it's possible for a European. And so I did not only learn very much about the culture, more about myself; how your world view and all your certainties become relative when you see that life still continues as normal, although you are surrounded by people who think and behave completely differently from you."

Discovering carnatic music, with its microtonal intervals, precise, sophisticated scales and artful flourishes, or konnakol, a virtuoso rhythmic language with long, intricately subdivided metres, meant radical self-discovery. "I had to learn all these scales and rhythms from scratch. This gave me the chance to rethink everything in western music I had previously taken for granted and then make conscious musical decisions for myself. Ramamani and T. A. S. Mani gave me a lot of support; after just a few months they began organising concert-, radio- and TV appearances for me."

Sarah Buechi was born in 1981 in the Lucerne hinterland and grew up in the Canton of Glarus, in a musical family: her mother was an organist and choir leader, her father worked as a composer, conductor and piano teacher. She learned the violin at an early age and, of course, the piano. As a teenager she played guitar in a rock band. "And we were always singing in our family" – long before she began classical singing lessons. However in the tiny alpine canton, probably home to more cows than humans, certainly to more mountains, there was little jazz to be heard. Alongside singer-songwriters, rock and pop bands, jazz musicians occasionally played at the Holenstein, one of the few local arts venues at the time.

The jazz vocals which interested her were less the ballads and standards from the *Great American Songbook*, less the classic singers such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan than the younger generation of largely European singers who



used their voices like instruments, played with the sound of their vocals and experimented, taking every possible liberty as they improvised. In the jazz department at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts she studied with musicians such as Lauren Newton and Susanne Abbuehl, the two most maverick singing teachers on the Swiss scene. Susanne Abbuehl, who had continually returned to North India to study herself, first introduced Sarah Buechi to Indian singing techniques and encouraged her to study for a year there. In 2007, two years after her first extensive stay in India, she completed her music degree in Lucerne. She began touring, with outfits such as Swiss drummer Lucas Niggli's band Zoom, the Swiss Indian Orchestra and THALi, the first group she formed herself, with whom she also recorded her first album *Vidya Mani* (Unit, 2010).

Travelling remained an important impulse for Sarah Buechi's musical development. In Paris she took lessons with Médéric Collignon whose unconventional approach to advanced singing technique left a great impression on her. At a workshop by the New York saxophonist Steve Coleman in Dublin, where she was now working as head of vocal department at the Newpark Music Centre, she discovered a rhythmic concept based on the simultaneous use and overlaying of various different extended metres, connecting with each other like the cogs of a clockwork mechanism. Coleman had discovered this 'cyclical thinking', a kind of rhythmic polyphony, in Ghana. Sarah Buechi needed to know more; she went to Ghana herself, where she studied for a month with the great balafon master Bernard Woma at the Dagara Music and Arts Center in the outskirts of Accra. "You can understand and learn this 'cyclical thinking' intellectually," Sarah Buechi says today, "but you cannot understand it properly unless you also experience the cultural context the music is embedded in, the interaction between the musicians and the dancers."

After this Sarah Buechi made several shorter and longer study trips to New York, studying mainly with Steve Coleman, as well as the singers Sheila Jordan and Jay Clayton, and working with many US musicians. "I also needed this time to clear my head after THALi, to empty it and make space for new songs."

Unlike *Vidya Mani*, its music discernably influenced by Indian melodics, rhythm and form, her new songs sound neither 'Indian' nor 'African'. The more intensely you listen to the music, however, the more clearly the traces of musical styles from these places emerge: the complex, interlocking metres and rhythms of cyclical African polyrhythms; the melismata, complex flourishes and slurs of Indian improvisation; the vocal techniques of Indian singing. Sarah Buechi has distilled these complex forms from their original, traditional contexts and translated them into the language of jazz and pop. Her songs manage without any kind of folkloric trimmings however.

Equally the music is far removed from conventional jazz, fusion or singersongwriter pop. Any firm song structures have liquefied, dissolving briefly when the emotions don't fit in the corset intended for them. Traditional jazz harmony gives way to a largely linear polyphony, consisting of a web of independent melodic and rhythmic lines; Buechi's lyrics have double – sometimes multiple – layers of meaning, in short: they do not leave you in peace.

Her musicians, the pianist Stefan Aeby, bassist André Pousaz and drummer Lionel Friedli, all shining stars of the young, creative Swiss scene, playacross and with these various stylistic idioms: here they set the interlocking clockwork of African polymetrics ticking with simple understatement, there they steer Buechi's dramatic, effusive voice through a musical switchback ride, here they sketch abstract sonic motifs behind a ballad, there they give a suggestion of rock – naturally with the elegance and ease appropriate to jazz. And occasionally they allow their virtuoso skills as outstanding jazz soloists to light up and shine. Thus their playing also avoids major reminders or debts. Music indeed, which comes from somewhere or another, with a strong, unique and clear personality.

Christian Rentsch · Translation: Steph Morris



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