

Lara Rosseel: the grace, majesty and shyness of the stag.

With her second album 'Hert' ('The Stag') on W.E.R.F Records, the 36-year-old bassist Lara Rosseel has established herself as a female bandleader and composer. She was already the silent force behind the bands of Zap Mama, Pierre Van Dormael, Chris Joris and Pierre Vaiana, before she went her own way and released her album 'De Grote Vrouw' ('The Tall Woman') in early 2020.

She was honoured as an emerging front woman of the Ghent jazz scene (Cultuurprijs Stad Gent 2021). In addition to her own jazz ensemble, she is also a committed bass player in the Room 13 Orchestra and a member of the team of singer Naïma Joris, the 2021 MIA nominee in the 'Doorbraak' ('Hope') category.

When we concluded this interview with Lara Rosseel at the beginning of 2022, she had just released the first song 'A l'Ouest' from her new album 'Hert'. The sound of 'Hert' can already be heard in the first concerts and will be experienced in the forthcoming months.

The choice of Lara Rosseel for International Women's Day 2022 is naturally linked to her remarkable personality as a woman musician and her charisma as a human being <sup>(1)</sup>. As a conductor, she operates in a predominantly male jazz world. In her first book "The Great Woman", she expresses the power of women and respect in the midst of exclusively male musicians: "It wasn't meant to be feminist at all, I had mostly male friends in the business and I thought it was quite normal to be surrounded by men rather than women..."

How do you assert yourself as a 'leading lady'?

Lara Rosseel: I have gathered around me male musicians with whom I click, both musically and in terms of friendship. The compositions are my own, so when we play and rehearse together, I know exactly what I want. It's important that the musicians all contribute, because after all, I invited them for what they are. During a concert I stand in the middle and indicate when something is going to change. That automatically makes me the female conductor.

After working in other bands, you decided to create your own projects. How did this desire come about?

L.R.: It's been there for a long time. "De Grote Vrouw" came out two years ago and my new project 'Hert' came out earlier this year. Creating myself was part of a process of evolution, as every musician can experience. I put it off because I thought there was always room for improvement and I wasn't completely satisfied yet. Finally, I decided to record my own music, which had been lying dormant in me for some time. I was able to count on friends who trusted me and supported me, but above all, I pushed myself to take the step.

You were classically trained, played cello and guitar, what was the trigger to choose jazz and double bass?

L.R.: When I played the song "Dangerous Liaison" by Bert Joris as a cellist in a collaboration between the symphony orchestra and the jazz big band of the Lemmens Institute (Luca School Of Arts-red), I was struck by the solo part of the double bass at the end. Then I was

won over by the double bass. I already wanted to play a more rhythmic instrument than the guitar, something that lends itself more to collective play and freer interpretation of written music. At first I challenged myself to learn the double bass on a friend's instrument. It was only afterwards that I mentioned it to my guitar teacher. She seemed to have noticed something, as I was less focused on my guitar studies that year. But I managed to pass the final exam for the baccalaureate with distinction. At the Lemmens Institute I started with the double bass in the jazz department. First with Jos Machtel and then with Nic Thys. Even before I started taking lessons with him - he was still living in New York - we once shared the stage at a double bill concert at the KVS. It was at the invitation of a mutual musician friend, the saxophonist Pierre Vaiana, who had started two bands. Nic Thys played double bass in one and I played in the other. Then he told me he was coming back to Belgium and that he would give me lessons. I was delighted.

How did you get your double bass?

L.R.: I got my first double bass from a friend who was a luthier and whom I had known since I was a little girl. At the time I was in a music workshop in Oostduinkerke. He repaired instruments and I asked him to look for a suitable instrument for me, so I decided on the double bass.

However, my current double bass is four years old. I took lessons for several years with Anders Jormin in Gothenburg. In Scandinavia there is a strong double bass tradition. At a concert in Denmark I asked a friend if I could play his double bass. It was so different that it drove me crazy. "If you ever sell it, I'm a candidate," I said. Two years later he called me and said his bass was for sale. I started playing the instrument again and my love at first sight was sealed. It is this instrument that I play in my latest project.

What are the influences that shape your style and identity?

L.R.: I have a deep love for everything related to groove and African music. I have travelled to Mali and also to Congo, countries that I was musically attracted to.

I was involved in the folk scene as a teenager and also played in a bluegrass band. When I lived with Robbe Kiekens, an oriental percussionist, my interest in percussion and ethnic sounds grew and expanded. But the one who influenced me the most was Pierre Van Dormael. He was the first to push me in this direction. After that, Chris Joris came to me, but Pierre, who unfortunately passed away too early, was the trigger for me.

Which musicians are your role models?

L.R.: The bassists Dave Holland, Mingus and also Paul Chambers, during my jazz training, I was completely immersed in the big names of traditional jazz. But I was more inspired by people who were close to me, like my mentors Nic Thys and Anders Jormin. Ruben Samana also caught my attention, playing bass with Jef Neve and Gabriel Rios... There are many others.

With "Hert", you have reduced your band from an octet to a quintet, what was your approach?

L.R.: This record is different from the first one. A lot has happened in the last year: I've moved, I'm not with Robbe anymore and I'm not living on a boat. I always try to create a complete story, thinking very consciously, from the first song, about what's going to happen next. I assume that when one listens to the record, it becomes a story. And people go on a visual and mental journey, musically carried away in the story.

I like to have a very spherical approach to music and usually a melody, a groove and a percussion line are created. I start with an idea, but the final result is something completely different. I write the melodies and themes. For the orchestration we try to find out together what works best for each song. Then I make some decisions, but everyone brings their own influence. I play more than half of the songs on this record on electric bass, it's looser and more mobile, the songs lend themselves well to it.

I use the double bass to create atmospheres, the groove is always there. On the new album 'Hert' there is also a double bass solo track, 'Memory', which was recorded without overdubs in one take, with a loop station.

The first song released, 'A l'Ouest', is entirely in the Afro style in which Angelo Moustapha, new on percussion and drums, is instrumental. He's a fantastic drummer, he comes from Benin.

My former trumpet player Jan Van Moer became a father and had less time. His priorities were elsewhere, so I had to find a replacement. I ended up with Sam Vloemans, which means a different approach. Jan is more in the vein of Ibrahim Maalouf. With Sam Vloemans it's very cool to go in the electronic direction.

Sep François remains on vibraphone and percussion.

Although I've known guitarist Vitja Pauwels for a long time and we've played together in a street band with which we've even performed in Italy and China, he's new to this quintet. So it all started before I was even part of the Naïma Joris team with him.

I called the record "Hert" because I recognize myself in the animal. A deer is graceful and grand, but as soon as someone gets close to it, it starts to hide and you can't find it anymore. It is also very gentle and peaceful. I feel very connected.

Do you want to send a message through your music?

L.R.: Not consciously. My message is that if you want to do something, do it. I didn't play double bass before, but I always did what I wanted to do at the time. At that time I could only dream of playing at Jazz Middelheim and Gent Jazz. Attending such events inspired me and pushed me further and further in the direction of my 'strong will'. I remember going to a Kommil Foo concert when I was a teenager and thinking, "I want to do that too!"

And now, some twenty years later, I am working with Raf Walschaerts and, through the Room 13 orchestra, with his brother Mich. I hope that everyone can use this as inspiration to do what they want.

You have been perfecting Shiatsu, what does this bring to your musical development?

L.R.: I trained as a shiatsu therapist for three years. I am not very active in this field at the moment. I know I have a very holistic approach. I can't play music without feeling my body or being mentally well. Body and mind go together for me. Thanks to shiatsu, I got to know myself even better.

How much do other projects like the one with Naïma Joris mean to you?

L.R.: A lot. Apart from my own projects, most of my attention goes to Naïma Joris' group. Naïma is a very interesting person, she takes you with her musically. When she started singing at one of the first gigs I played with her father, Chris Joris, I forgot to play because I was listening to her intensely. She really touches me, it just triggers me and we are also the same astrological sign. We have a lot in common, she is absolutely fantastic. And by the way, I love playing with singers.

There was a sociocultural project where I made music with Kapinga Gysel (Zita Swoon) and Isnelle Da Silveira (Les Ballets C de la B). This is also where the idea of a solo project matured.

I also play in an orchestra linked to the Room 13 recording studio. I played with Kapinga Gysel and in a project with Stijn Meuris about Stephen Hawking. With my experience of the cello, as the only double bass in the orchestra, I enjoy bowing as much as playing pizzicato.

You are a seeker in your music, where does the inspiration come from?

L.R.: Playing with singers and orchestras inspires me in my own research process. Most of the compositions are created while playing, then something draws me in. Working on it and finding solutions gives me concrete ideas. I am particularly interested in ethnic instruments. And I'm thinking of expanding the quintet or octet by adding more instruments. I'm looking for a sound. I'm fascinated by people who are totally at ease with their instrument, like the mandolinist Chris Thile from the Bluegrass scene. For a few years now I've also been playing a bit of violin, which has also been a starting point for compositions. Andrew Bird is a violinist who inspires me.

My strength is still the groove, also in small ensembles, as a soloist or in a duo, which gives me more space to profile myself. As a soloist I combine double bass and electric bass.

I would also like to work with film. I would like to develop a visual identity for my music and work with a fashion designer, for example. I would see it as a performance, elaborated from start to finish, not only in music but also in images.

And what is your ultimate dream?

L.R.: Sometimes Belgium seems a bit small, I would like to explore other cultures. I've never been to America. I feel a bit trapped by the pandemic. I want to meet people from all over the world. I want to see landscapes, approach the world in a different way. For me, there is something very connecting about world music. My ideas and dreams go in many different directions. It is my great desire to do this and I will do it!

Bernard Lefèvre

(Translation: Diane Cammaert)

- (1) Lara Rosseel was born in Veurne (Westhoek) under the sign of Virgo, which also determines her character: attentive, enterprising, modest, hard-working with a certain goal in mind, a perfectionist, honest and a bit secretive. She has high standards in all aspects of life.