

Léa Ciechelski, the double breath

She is part of the Supernatural Orchestra, takes part in Frédéric Maurin's youth Orchestre National de Jazz (ONJ) or Franck Tortiller's Jazztronicz, and plays in groups that she leads or in which she is actively involved. Léa Ciechelski, both flutist and saxophonist, equally and unequivocally, is one of the rising personalities of jazz in France. At ease in the interpretation of written pieces as well as in more open improvisation, her approach is inspired by a curiosity for all music and all experiences. Her imaginative playing is characterized by a well-defined grammar and a complete vocabulary. All these qualities prompted Citizen Jazz to ask her a few questions.

Could you introduce yourself ?

I am Léa Ciechelski, saxophonist, flutist, improviser and composer. I live and work mostly in Tours and Paris. I play and compose for the quintet Kaplaa, and the quartets Prospectus and Big Fish. I also play with a few other bands that I love, like Circé (Capsul Collectif, Arthur Delaleu) or Vaguent (Axel Gaudron).

We can hear you playing either the saxophone or the flute. Does your heart sway between the two?

My heart has always swayed between these two instruments: since I was very young, I couldn't bring myself to choose one over the other. Of course, I had my phases: when I was working with 20th century written music, I found more to my liking in the flute writings. But when I started listening to a lot of free jazz from the 60's, for example, I felt like focusing on my saxophone playing.

I really consider myself a saxophonist and flutist, or a flutist and saxophonist. But I am not a multi-instrumentalist (I can only play one piece on the clarinet, and I only play the piano to compose).

What are the different feelings between playing in a large collective with the Supernatural Orchestra and playing in a quartet with Prospectus or Kaplaa or even a trio with Cartoon Saloon?

I love small groups. I can blossom as an improviser and the dialogues with the instrumentalists I like are easy and the lines between written and improvised music are blurry and moving. The music can evolve very quickly, and no concert is the same. I'm free to express things that are perhaps more intimate and to build music that really reflects the different individualities of the band.

But I also often play in large ensembles (Supernatural Orchestra, Orchestre des Jeunes de l'Orchestre National de Jazz, Sputnik Collectif, Franck Tortiller & Jazztronicz Experience...) where I like to work and experiment with section sounds, timbres, and find musical and aesthetic paths as a collective.

Supernatural Orchestra is a bit of a special orchestra, since it is an ensemble of soloists-composers, and a lot of strong and different individualities are involved. I can find some of the sensations of small groups (freedom, blurring between written and improvised music, etc.), but with necessarily less space for expression since there are 18 of us!

I HAVE ALWAYS LIKED IMPROVISATION. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I USED TO MAKE UP SONGS WITH MY SISTERS

In Prospectus, you give more freedom to improvisation. How important is improvisation to you as a musician?

I think I've always loved improvisation. When I was younger, I used to make up songs with my sisters: one would play a riff, the other a melody and the other a counterpoint, even if it was more for fun than anything else. Then I started to improvise with some friends musicians, during long evenings, without much knowledge of the subject. At first, it was jazz inspired by American jazz from the 50's and 60's, because I listened to a lot of it (which is still the case but a little less). I also had a lot of "contemporary" music in my ears, and more "free" improv sessions became increasingly regular. I met many of my current playing partners this way.

Although in some of the music I play today, improvisation can be very codified (playing modes, pitches, defined scales, complex rhythms, and measures...), I am happy when I can give my own vision of a piece or a proposal. This view will sometimes be different, but always projected differently. This makes me feel very secure and alive because I am constantly evolving.

What about Steve Lacy (who is the person you pay tribute to in Prospectus)?

Ha! it's my colleague and friend Henri Peyrous (sopranist of Prospectus, and composer of about half of the pieces of the band) who is a big fan of Steve Lacy. He is the one who first made me listen to this music a lot.

Lacy's playing probably influenced and impressed me in the way he breaks up musical phrases with huge intervals, develops harmonic systems and patterns within the same phrase, sometimes moving away significantly from his partners or accompanists, without ever playing beside the point. The geometrical side of his playing also inspired me a lot. In Prospectus, a tribute is also paid to the alto player Steve Potts, who impressed me at the time by his free and incisive playing.

The Kaplaa quartet is a part, not the only one of course, of your activity as a composer. Is it a direction that you wish to pursue?

I had always liked to write melodies. I thought of Kaplaa as a band where I wanted to play cute and reassuring melodies. It's a side of my personality, let's say. And, even though my compositions have recently become more raw and instrumental, more repetitive and more suitable for "open" improvisation, I will also continue to write "rhymes" and songs. Because when I play the piano, I play very vertically (I play chords) and I sing melodies, with or without words, that I want to write if they stick in my head.

I HAVE A LOT OF MUSIC IN MY HEAD, BUT I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE SOME REAL TIME TO COMPOSE, A LITTLE BIT APART

What are the great female role models for you?

Musically, there are the great old ones: Mary Lou Williams, Billie Holiday, Jeanne Lee, Chris Connor...

And today, Sylvaine Hélyary whom I met a few years ago. I was motivated and touched by her ideas of writing and improvisation, her meticulous and inventive practice of the instrument, and also the way she defends an instrument which is still poorly represented in improvised music.

In a completely different style, I listened a lot to the young flutist Elena Pinderhugues. She is a beautiful role model in the development of a personal style of playing and phrasing on the instrument. I was also touched recently by the writing and playing of the German saxophonist Anna-Lena Schnabel, her freedom of playing, the research of timbres and ambiances in her compositions, and her great commitment when she plays (I was invited to stand in for her in Fred Maurin's ONJ, by the way). In the same orchestra, Susana Santos Silva or Catherine Delaunay are also for me references in terms of improvisation and musical mastery.

More broadly, there are Aurore Dupin, Suzanne Valadon, Mel Bonis, Nadia Boulanger or more recently Virginie Despentes, Raphaëlle Tchamitchian, Laélia Véron and many other inspiring beings.

What are your projects for the coming year?

I would love to start a saxophone, synthesizers and drums trio. I already have a lot of music in mind for that, but I'd like to take some real composition time, somewhere away, to move forward with the music for this group. I want to spend some time to be sure of my partners (I already have a little idea about the people I want to work with right now), to try things, to write new ones, to try them again, and then to play them in concert, and maybe to record them before the end of the year ?