



ANGELIKA NIESCIER

CROSS-POLLINATING CREATIVE FIRE

BY ARIELLA STOK

One realizes upon speaking with the Poland-born, Germany-based Angelika Niescier that she is more than any one of the multi-hyphenate roles appended to her name—alto saxophonist, composer, bandleader, curator and programmer. Through her unyielding commitment to artistic exploration, she has become a lodestar, bringing together new combinations of musicians and audiences alike to instigate cross-pollinations in creative music. Following a period of formal study, Niescier established her first quartet, *Sublim*, in 2000, as a vehicle for her original compositions. The ensemble garnered critical acclaim, leading to the release of three well-received albums. Since that time, she has released a steady stream of records, including her most recent five albums (all on Intakt), always broadening her focus by playing with new collaborators both in her native Europe and the UK, while demonstrating a special aesthetic kinship with NYC improvisers, such as trumpeters Ralph Alessi and Jonathan Finlayson, bassists Chris Tordini and Thomas Morgan, and drummers Tyshawn Sorey and Gerald Cleaver.

On her most recent release, *Beyond Dragons*, her trio with cellist Tomeka Reid and drummer Savannah Harris interlocks across seven Niescier originals, which often incorporate elements of avant garde and contemporary classical music. The leader's approach to composition underscores her *modus operandi* to lift up her fellow musicians and facilitate opportunities for exchanges of musical ideas. "I always write specifically for the people I'm playing with," says Niescier. It's an empathetic approach to composing and leading a band that is deeply felt by the musicians with whom she plays. "Angelika is both rigorous and fun, and super open to the ideas and concepts that everyone brings to the music. She is one of the most clear and decisive composers, so every phrase has a purpose," extolls Harris, describing the *Beyond Dragons* trio as "...one of the only places where I get to fully let it out. I felt like Angelika picked the perfect balance of styles and personalities in collaborating with Tomeka and I. We all have kind of a punk/DIY ethos and approach to what can otherwise be a kind of glossy industry, and I think it comes through in the music." Although for Niescier, it's in the actual performance when the music truly takes shape and comes to life. On stage, she is known for "her fire and intensity," as described by Brooklyn-based trumpeter Alessi, who played on *NYC Five*, the saxophonist's recording from over a decade ago, which is co-led with fellow Cologne composer, pianist Florian Weber.

"Composing for me, it's a lot of crying and being really devastated because the world is bad," Niescier admits. "I'm definitely a live musician. I really love to play music with other people on stage." As an example, she describes the process of writing "A Dance, to Never End" (from *Beyond Dragons*) and how it transformed between the page and in performance. The composition takes its

origin in a Beethoven string quartet, which she modified using the Fibonacci sequence to model the rhythm, adding pitch inversions. When she heard how it sounded when performed with Reid and Harris, she was surprised how it took "kind of a heavy concept but the groove was so light, that it felt like a dance," leading her to dedicate the song to choreographer, Pina Bausch. New York-based bassist, Tordini recorded with Niescier on three of her Intakt releases within a three-year timespan (between 2015-18): *NYC Five*, *Berlin Concert* (also with Sorey, and recorded live at the 2017 Berlin Jazz Festival where she received the prestigious Deutscher Jazzpreis) and *NYC Trio*. Says Tordini, "She's a dream to work with. She puts her band members' happiness and comfort level above most other things. Once she puts a band together, she has a very good idea of how people play and what they will bring to it." Niescier says she seeks sincerity, earnestness and energy when choosing collaborators. "I think I always feel when people are playing almost without an ego and really give everything to the music. And that's what really sets me on fire and what I hope to achieve, too."

Her attraction to the music scene of New York City has led her to found and serve as artistic director of WinterJazz Köln, a one-day festival which she calls a "little sister" to New York City's annual Winter Jazzfest. She wondered, "maybe we should do something like that in Cologne." Although by contrast with NYC's Winter Jazzfest, a main pillar for Niescier's festival was to make it free of charge so that it could be accessible to as wide an audience as possible. What started as a grass roots event has now in its 14th year become more professionalized, although as Niescier says, "I try to keep it a little punky." As a woman leading the way in jazz, she considers herself a potential role model to a new generation: "In my case, just burning the stage down sometimes does inspire people to pick it up." As for the process of creating safe spaces in the professional jazz world for women, Niescier says, "I think we've done enough to show or to talk about it, and now it's the men's turn to do something. We need allies." Harris says of playing drums with Niescier and Reid, "The beauty of playing with other women, has more to do with how women naturally function and operate than the representation aspect— although that's also important."

In addition to touring in the U.S. this month with Reid and Harris, Niescier will be spending plenty of time stateside via a professorial appointment at Dartmouth College, NH, nominated by Reid (who is also in residence). Undoubtedly, she will use that time to connect and make music with collaborators both new and old. "Playing this music live is such a tremendous privilege. I can just be happy because I love the sound and just give it my all, literally playing for my life, as the greats did."

For more info visit angelika-niescier.de. Niescier's *Beyond Dragons Trio* is at *The Jazz Gallery* Mar. 12. See *Calendar*.

Recommended Listening:

- Angelika Niescier & André Nendza – *Holzlinienspiel* (Crecyle Music, 1999)
- Angelika Niescier – *Sublim III* (Enja, 2008)
- Angelika Niescier, Thomas Morgan, Tyshawn Sorey – *Quite Simply* (Enja, 2010)
- Angelika Niescier, Christopher Tordini, Tyshawn Sorey – *The Berlin Concert* (Intakt, 2017)
- Angelika Niescier/Alexander Hawkins – *Soul in Plain Sight* (Intakt, 2020)
- Angelika Niescier, Tomeka Reid, Savannah Harris – *Beyond Dragons* (Intakt, 2023)

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Tokyo Trio's 3rd album *Dream a Dream* available
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