



SOFIA JERNBERG

SUM OF SOUNDS & EXPRESSIONS

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

“One Pitch: Birds for Distortion and Mouth Synthesizers” begins with a loud, pitched wail. At least, it feels loud. On a 2016 recording from the Resonant Bodies Festival at Roulette in Brooklyn, the first time Sofia Jernberg performed her vocal tour de force in New York, her voice leaps feet from the speakers. The song hits hard in fragments. In short order, it’s interrupted by throaty sounds, breaks through again, submerges again. After several minutes, bird sounds take over, then alternate with a sort of whispered cooing. Slowly, the cooing and the birdsong converge in a way that seems impossible for a single performer. Over 17 minutes, Jernberg moves through whistling and lip trills, throat singing, melismatic runs and polyphonic overtones. This month it will be heard for only the second time in New York when she performs at the Park Avenue Armory at the invitation of pianist and Artists Studio curator Jason Moran. (The 2016 performance can be heard on the *Resonant Bodies* compilation released in 2021 by New Focus Recordings.) It’s a piece in constant flux. “The title is the same always, but the content changes,” according to Jernberg. And, like its author, it’s a hard piece to pin down.

Jernberg was born in Ethiopia, adopted by a Swedish diplomat, and grew up between Sweden and Vietnam. She studied jazz and composition but has appeared on concert stages in Arnold Schönberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* and Salvatore Sciarrino’s *Lohengrin*. She has premiered works by Chaya Czernowin and Anna Thorvaldsdóttir and appeared in the Matthew Barney film *Union of the North*. She’s also worked extensively with saxophonist and bandleader Mats Gustafsson (in his Fire! Orchestra and The End) and as a part of the Trondheim Jazz Orchestra. More recently, her voice has been a defining part of Cory Smythe’s *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, Nick Dunston’s *Colla Voce* and Christopher Trapani’s *Noise Uprising*. She’s heard more intimately on *Musho*, an album of duets with pianist Alexander Hawkins. This year, she plans to release her first unaccompanied solo album, a project she’s been working on for the last eight years. “There are no words, mainly sounds, extended techniques,” she says. “That’s where I’ve tried to work, to be able to sing for a long time without taking a long break and make continuous sounds to try to camouflage breath.”

Jernberg grew up hearing a lot of sounds, linguistic and musical. She was very young when she was adopted, but her Swiss-born adoptive mother kept Ethiopian music and culture alive in the home and a job transfer also took them to Vietnam. Jernberg cites vocal techniques she heard there as an early influence. “We always visited local concerts wherever we were, in Southeast Asia or in Ethiopia,” she says. “I was always very fascinated with music in general. I didn’t have any popular culture and in the ‘90s, in an embassy environment, we didn’t have access to any radio or TV.” She relates that the only

sounds she heard were the surrounding sounds and concerts, and adds, “I visited with traditional music, no commercial music. Only in Bangkok, maybe. But I wasn’t very interested when I heard it.”

Jernberg almost steps into instruments within the usual range of the voice, be it Stan Maris’ accordion when she joins in with the Belgian band Ocean Eddie (as heard on last year’s *Gyorgy at the Spacebar*) or with Tomeka Reid’s cello. Reid has become a close compatriot in recent years, the two playing both in duet and in ensembles. The cellist joined her in a show produced by Issue Project Room in January and will be her duo partner at the Armory this month. The two first met in Chicago in 2013, when Jernberg was there with the Swedish progressive jazz group Seval, and solidified their connection during a European tour in a trio with flutist Nicole Mitchell. “We hit it off and have been in contact ever since,” Reid says. “We’ve played as a duo and also started a trio with electric bassist Farida Amadou. Sofia has an incredible instrument and is super inventive. I enjoy playing with her because she challenges me and is never predictable, so it feels very fresh. I also love the conversations that we have together about life and music. She’s got a great spirit.”

Jernberg can make her way into song form while improvising, but more often works in the role of instrumentalist. In concert she can be so quiet, at times, or so deep within the group sound that she’s barely heard. “It has to do with an interest I have in blending in the sound and being an extension of the cello sound, just being a shadow where the instruments are,” she says. “I’ve worked a lot with that and with making similar sounds so you can’t really tell whether I’m singing or not.” She explains that the process can be too much with constant singing, so it becomes necessary to take a break in order for the music to really breathe. “When you’re silent,” she adds, “you are also playing.”

Jernberg may cover a lot of territory—from 20th and 21st century concert music to improvised meetings and her own compositions, but she’s not overly concerned about where the borders fall. “There’s overlap in all music genres, I feel,” Jernberg says. “It’s just a difference in the culture around it and maybe the culture of communicating the music, the social musical structure, things like that. But the essence is similar.” She explains that perhaps the goal can be different depending on what function the music has, and allows that if she does “the same thing, I get bored.” Jernberg has a very Western side, but also a part of her reflects the global south as well as a specific rhythmic side: “I just need to move freely in between them,” she states firmly. “And the sum of all these expressions makes my person.”

For more info visit [instagram.com/sofiajernberg](https://www.instagram.com/sofiajernberg). Jernberg is at Park Avenue Armory May 20. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Lene Grenager/Sofia Jernberg — *Crochet* (Olof Bright, 2008-9)
- The New Songs (David Stackenas, Kim Myhr, Eve Risser, Sofia Jernberg) — *A nest at the junction of paths* (Umlaut, 2011)
- Fire! Orchestra — *Enter* (Rune Grammofon, 2014)
- The End — *Aalt Är Intet* (RareNoise, 2019)
- Alexander Hawkins/Sofia Jernberg — *Musho* (Intakt, 2023)
- Ocean Eddie + Sofia Jernberg — *Gyorgy at the Space Bar* (Tinke Label, 2023)



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