

Patricia Barber Expands the Palette

August, 2019



Photo: Jimmy & Dena Katz

For four decades, Chicago pianist Patricia Barber has been quietly, but steadily, creating her own unique brand of music.

Higher, the bandleader's first new recording in six years, merges jazz harmonies and rhythms with classical art song and erudite poetry, and features "Angels, Birds And I ..."—an ambitious song cycle—alongside a few jazz standards.

"I was so gratified by the reaction to this record. I have gotten personal letters from composers, conductors and musicians all over the world, and I do think it gives jazz a larger harmonic palette," Barber said recently.

The eight songs comprised by "Angels, Birds And I ..." are individual stories told in first person about life, death, love, loss and desire. Some are introspective, and others are whimsical and expressed through Barber's diverse harmonic and rhythmic ideas. Before the album's release, though, several of the songs were performed during a 2015 tour by opera singer Renée Fleming—who would stop in to hear Barber

perform in Chicago when she was in town: "Renée had an enormous influence on this song cycle," Barber said. "I met her in the middle of it and she gave me confidence and inspiration to continue."

Barber, who spent some of her formative years in Nebraska, began learning piano at the age of 5 from her father, a jazz saxophonist who performed with Glenn Miller's orchestra; her mother was a jazz and blues singer. Later, while studying classical music and psychology at the University of Iowa, Barber came to realize that jazz truly was the music that made her the happiest. So, she returned to Chicago and began gigging at piano bars, slowly working her way up the ladder. And for the past 25 years, Barber's held down a steady Monday-night gig at local venue The Green Mill. "It gives me a place to try out my compositions and to rework them," Barber explained, while discussing Higher. "The regulars have heard all these songs—from their nascent form to polished and ready to record."

In addition to releasing Higher, the pianist, 63, recently was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the visual and performing arts category, an acknowledgment of her sprawling body of work. But, Barber said, she didn't have any idea that she'd been nominated, and when she opened the congratulatory letter from the academy, she was shocked: "Oh my God," she recalled saying. "So, somebody's been listening."

Barber said she felt affirmed at a Chicago reception for academy members, where the composer mingled with scholars, astrophysicists and artists who welcomed her into the fold. "It was the first time in 37 years I actually looked up," she said. "I really had my head down for a long time—I was working so hard. I am so honored that these people know my music."

But for Barber, hard work driven by a passion to express herself musically always has kept her moving forward, confirming a long-held belief: "If you keep at it, if you have talent, then something's going to develop." —Lily O'Brien