



Review / Myra Melford among leading female jazz musicians at Freyjufest, Reykjavik



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FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 2023

Top American avant-garde pianist Myra Melford is among a stellar cast of leading Icelandic and European musicians at this unique jazz in Reykjavik



Myra Melford - photo by Tim Dickeson

One of the main aims of this event was to address the gender imbalance in jazz. In planning the festival artistic director and organiser Sunna Gunnlaugs managed to arrange the perfect balance of nine men and nine women.

In Norse mythology the goddess Freya is a symbol of creativity and fertility hence Gunnlaugs named the festival after her. The venue for the festival was the award winning Harpa Concert and Conference centre, a magnificent building on the waterfront in Reykjavik. Constructed on the outside from glass blocks it gives the impression of a building made of ice. At night it is illuminated in blue giving it even more 'wow' factor.

The opening concert featured **Broken Cycle**, a trio featuring the excellent German alto-saxophonist Angelika Niescier, Icelandic guitarist Hilmar Jensson and American drummer Scott McLemore. Niescier is a forceful player - her solos hard and angular contrasting really well with the slightly more rounded guitar of Jensson while McLemore controlled the pace and kept the music flowing beautifully.



Broken Cycle

For a complete change of pace the second set of the first half featured Belgian bassist **Anneleen Boehme** who had impressed when I saw her with the band LABtrio at Jazzhead a few years ago.

She played a wide range of songs including a great version of Joni Mitchell's 'River' the standard 'Skylark' and a beautiful self-penned lullaby for her daughter 'Madeleine'. Boehme at times using minimal loops to lay down a backing and then improvising over the top to great effect.



Anneleen Boehme

The last set of the first session featured Icelandic electric bassist **Ingibjörg Turchi** and her quartet. Turchi writes cinematic music with almost separate movements - the tunes building gradually with gentle soothing passages before a storm hits hard with a wall of sound and then like the Icelandic weather outside gradually calming down to the end. Drummer Magnús Trygvason Eliassen was excellent - driving the band in the heavy passages and colouring delicately in the quiet ones.

After a welcome break for dinner we returned for the **Anna Gréta Trio**. Anna Gréta Siguroardóttir is an Icelandic born singer-songwriter who played here with Johan Tengholm on bass and Konrad Agnas on drums. Gréta has a distinctive gentle voice and writes soulful contemporary songs evoking the landscape of her homeland. Her playing is deft with great technique and a silky touch on the keys. Her ACT album 'Nightjar in the Northern Sky' is excellent and well worth searching out.



Anna Gréta

The second solo set of the day was from **Myra Melford**. Melford is a very intense player who plays hunched low over the piano. She started with a straight-ahead piece, 'Be Melting Snow' exploring different phrasing around a central theme very appropriate for the location. She then progressed to an Andrew Hill piece 'Images of Time' - more avant-garde with aggressive hammering using the outside of her hand and forearm. In total contrast she played the beautiful and soulful 'Red Beach' - the calm after the storm. She ended with 'Park Mechanic' a jaunty piece with loads of energy and improvisation.

Gunnlaugs had set a time limit on each performance of around 40 minutes - in each set there were no fillers and at the end of each show you really wanted to hear just a 'bit more'. When Melford ended, I reflected on what she had played - it really was just perfect and everything she did was on point and to the point.



Myra Melford

The last concert was a special commission for the festival put together by Swiss soprano saxophonist **Sarah Chaksad**. The band featured some of the players that had already played plus others specifically selected for the show. The line-up was Sarah Chaksad (Soprano Sax), Angelika Niescier (Alto Sax), Benedikt Reising (Baritone Sax), Hildegunn Øiseth (Trumpet, Goat Horn) Sigrún Kristbjörg Jónsdóttir (Trombone), Sunna Gunnlaugs (Piano) Anneleen Boehme (Double Bass) and Scott McLemore (Drums).

The music was written and arranged by Chaksad except for one tune by the Norwegian trumpeter Hildegunn Øiseth. With a few weeks for reading the music plus two short rehearsals before the festival the players had relatively little time to prepare. The concert was a real triumph.



Sarah Chaksad

Chaksad's writing and arranging is first class and the enthusiasm shown by the band was very evident. 'Song of a Lark' and the emotional 'Tears' written about Chaksad's fathers' homeland of Iran was very emotional. Chaksad has played a lot with Hildegunn Øiseth and the tune echoes of the Norwegian tune 'Time is Coming' was stunning. A real tour-de-force, the tune echoes Norwegian folk music and Øiseth plays this on the goat horn - an instrument that sends shivers down your spine in this beautiful lament. The set had two pieces 'Circle' and 'Waterfall' that gave Angelika Niescier a further chance to show what a brilliant alto-saxophonist she is.

In her aim to promote gender equality at her festival Gunnlaugs triumphed. This was an excellent day of music all round - well planned and brilliantly executed. The music played was full of excitement, joy and surprises and I'm sure that the Norse goddess Freya would thoroughly approve.

