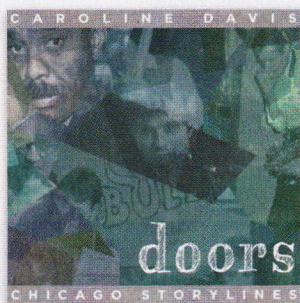


JAZZ



CAROLINE DAVIS
Doors: Chicago Storylines

Caroline Davis, alto saxophone, voice; Russ Johnson, trumpet; Mike Allemana, guitar; four others; voices of Chicago musicians
Ears & Eyes 15-039 (CD). 2015. Caroline Davis, prod.; Vijay Tellis-Nayak, eng. DDD. TT: 64:10

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

If you are a talented alto saxophonist and composer who spent eight transformative years in Chicago and recently relocated to New York, how do you devise a meaningful tribute to your old town? Caroline Davis came up with a bold, risky concept. She recorded the spoken words of 13 Chicago musicians, including Von Freeman, Ed Petersen, and Art Davis. They reminisce about the Chicago scene: hangs like the Green Mill and the Bop Shop; great, unsung players like Lin Halliday. Their fond, funny, poignant memories mostly come from the 1980s and '90s, an era that Davis describes as "golden" and "virtually uncharted." Davis uses these oral histories as inspiration for a set of compositions, and weaves them into her music.

Mixing spoken word and jazz usually doesn't work. Davis's project succeeds because, as each speaker finishes, her band comes in burning. In one of the verbal interludes, the musicians try to define "the Chicago sound." They come up with "very blues based . . . not real busy . . . just kind of grooving." Davis, trumpeter Russ Johnson, and guitarist Mike Allemana are Chicago-affiliated players who exemplify these qualities. "Lincoln Land" starts with a melody in long, yearning trumpet and saxophone calls, then relentlessly intensifies. In "Chicago Sound?," Davis plays an edgy, free testimonial to the Gene Ammons Chicago school. She and Johnson are "blues based" but also aflame with fresh ideas. Allemana is an under-the-radar badass.

Davis's montage is a sincere offering that neither music nor words alone could create.—**Thomas Conrad**



BENOÎT DELBECQ
Ink

Benoît Delbecq, piano; Miles Perkin, bass; Emile Diayenda, drums, percussion
Clean Feed CF340 (CD). 2015. Benoît Delbecq, prod.; Etienne Bultingaire, eng. DDD.
TT: 48:47

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Benoît Delbecq rises to new textural heights with prepared piano in a trio setting on *Ink*, a follow-up to his captivating *The Sixth Jump* (2010). "Le Ruisseau," the leadoff track, memorializes Delbecq's longtime bassist Jean-Jacques Avenel and introduces us to Avenel's successor, Miles Perkin.

The surreal beauty of Delbecq's elaborate system, involving carefully placed objects that buzz and ping as he strikes the keys, is one of a kind. With Brazzaville-born drummer Emile Diayenda, Delbecq becomes a second percussionist. At times he'll prepare left-hand keys only, leaving the right-hand register to sing out in angular post-tonal lines and knotted harmonies. More subtly, he'll prepare a note here, another there, allowing muted-string sonorities to emerge as if by chance. In "L'Esprythme" he creates shimmering resonances that defy obvious explanation—thankfully, they were captured in pristine detail at Studio de Meudon, near Paris.

"Nombre" and "Figures" emphasize the "natural" piano sound, prompting rubato abstraction and bristling interplay with strong traces of jazz-piano trio heritage, but also 20th-century classical music.

As pianist Fred Hersch observes in his liner notes, "Ronchamp" first appeared on *Fun House* (2012), by Delbecq and Hersch's Double Trio. There it began sparsely with no drums, building to a peak with full band, then dying down again. On *Ink* it's a split-screen affair: out-of-tempo sections alternate with outbreaks of bright swing, saying much about how this trio summons sound and engages the ears.—**David R. Adler**



AMINA FIGAROVA
Blue Whisper

Amina Figarova, piano; Bart Platteau, flutes; 11 others
In+Out IOR CD 77128-2 (CD). 2015. Amina Figarova, Frank Kleinschmidt, prods.; Max Ross, eng. DDD.
TT: 63:04

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Today, jazz innovators come from everywhere. Amina Figarova grew up in Azerbaijan, started a career as a concert pianist in places like Moscow, converted to jazz while studying in the Netherlands, and now lives in Harlem.

Her 13 albums to date are a unique body of work, a seductive synthesis of elegance and soul. She has usually performed in sextets with excellent European players, including her husband, flutist Bart Platteau. On *Blue Whisper*, long-term associates like tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas are still showcased. Platteau is still front and center, providing Figarova's ensemble with its signature airy brightness. But she has now recruited strong Americans as band members and guests. Saxophonist Wayne Escoffery, bassist Luques Curtis, trumpeter Alex Pope Norris, and guitarist Anthony Wilson diversify the colors and textures of Figarova's complex music and deepen its urgencies.

Her compositions are impeccable, detailed, complete forms. Most often they embody her faith and romanticism, as in "Moonrise" (where Ernie Hammes on flugelhorn is softly fervent) and "Hewa" (where Mommaas and Sara Elizabeth Charles, singing in Swahili, are pure spirit). But she can also deal with the darkest subject matter and issue powerful social commentary. In "Hear My Voice," an eight-year-old girl protests the gunfire and mindless cruelty of the world she was born into.

One reason Figarova albums sustain such high quality is that players respond to the musical environments she creates with their best, most concentrated work.—**Thomas Conrad**