

A close-up portrait of Joanna Duda, a Polish jazz pianist and composer. She has light-colored dreadlocks and is wearing a black collared shirt. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

Polish jazz pianist, composer and electronics experimentalist **Joanna Duda** discovered her *métier* via a random computer malfunction. Now set to play the EFG London Jazz Festival this month with her forward-thinking trio, **Jane Cornwell** peers into the matrix of Duda's musical mind to discover more

Joanna Duda was in her mid-teens, tinkering with MP3s on the family computer in Gdansk, Poland, when she found herself at the intersection of two songs that, by accident, were running simultaneously. It was a sound so complex and free that it stopped her in her tracks, and sent her brain into overdrive.

"All the rules I knew about music were erased," says Duda, 38, now a multi award-winning pianist, composer, producer and interdisciplinary artist. "The sound was completely new, a whole spectrum of itself. I felt light-headed. I had butterflies in my stomach. Then it suddenly vanished."

This was the early 2000s, and Windows: "I'd accidentally used a keyboard shortcut and closed both applications," she says, sitting in the home studio from which she livestreamed on electronic instruments at the start of the pandemic. "There was too much music in the library and I couldn't repeat it."

"I've often wondered why this moment was so special," she continues. "A magic configuration? Something about cheating the brain?"

She shrugs, her trademark dreadlocks akimbo. "I've been searching for the feeling ever since."

THE ACCIDENTAL ANARCHIST

The daughter of musicians, Duda had experienced the acoustic equivalent of the above epiphany when a child at music school, practicing piano in a row of students. A Scarlatti Sonata to her right and a Bach Suite to her left merged inside her head with a charmed, all-embracing dissonance: "I was listening in a sleepy trance but it stuck in my mind."

While she would study classical piano at Gdansk's Academy of Music, playing Chopin and Scriabin precisely, distinctly, as expected, taking pills to calm her exam nerves, it was music making in the margins – music that was often improvised – that appealed the most.

Duda went on to study jazz in Warsaw. "In jazz I discovered that it doesn't matter if I make mistakes because it's only me who is aware of them," says Duda, whose long-time membership (as pianist and composer) of the hugely popular Wojtek Mazolewski Quintet, one of the most influential jazz groups to come out of Poland in recent decades, affords space for her experimental, own-name projects. "Jazz gave me confidence to build something very unique," she adds.

Duda's 2013 debut, cockily titled *The Best Of*, showcased the diversity she says is both a blessing and a curse. Piano pieces included a pretty Ravel track and a crazed effects-laden remix of Chopin's 'Polonaise A'. There were quirky melodies played on Wurlitzer, and tracks from her numerous bands – the duo J=J (abstract sounds generated with analogue synthesisers) among them.

Some tracks were compositions commissioned by Gdansk's Amareya Theatre, the groundbreaking butoh/physical dance company for which Duda is in-house videographer and composer, and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw. It was Amareya that gave her license to develop an electronic music language with samples and [software program] Ableton Live, to layer sounds in pursuit of that feeling of synthesis.

Duda is one of very few female jazz instrumentalists in Poland ("When I was studying there were only female singers but it is changing"). Nonetheless, she ultimately defies categorisation, variously working with installation artists, in a drum'n'bass live act, playing contemporary classical tunes by American minimalist composer Julius Eastman, creating IDM (or 'Intelligent Dance Music') under the moniker NightWarrior (sic) and composing soundtracks for films including Netflix's feminist-minded *Erotica 2020*.

A common denominator is her compositional process, which begins with samples collected on a digital recorder. "If I'm bored while I'm creating then I know it's not working."

Her 2019 solo album *Keen* was celebrated for its spacious, unsettling and often beautiful mix of analogue and digital techniques, for the use of piano, prepared sounds and sequencers to create enveloping rhythmic structures.

"People say my music is very romantic," she says when asked if there's a Polish aspect to her sound. "I mean, pianists in Poland are educated in a cult of Chopin, and events such as the International Chopin Piano Competition, which I dreamed of winning as a child, tends to overshadow all the competitions in the world. Chopin is deeply rooted in my musical consciousness.

"He was the first Polish composer to achieve great things in music. In his day he was known and appreciated mainly for his ability to improvise. Understanding his thought processes helped

me get inside his work and discover something new, something that changed the reality around me and opened possibilities.

"I really love Slavic composers like Prokofiev too," Duda continues. "Their romanticism feels connected to something that has passed, a sense of longing that I aim for. But I'm always looking for new ways of artistic expression."

She formed the Joanna Duda Trio in 2017 with long-time collaborator, drummer Michal Bryndal (her bandmate in 2009 disco outfit AuAuA) and double bassist Maksymilian Mucha, sideman for American trumpeter Christian Scott Atunde Adjuah. The Trio's debut album *Fumitsuke* ("Japanese for 'stepping snake'"), out this month, pits acoustic instruments with electronic sounds and self-made samples. There's live footage online from Wrocław's Jazztopad 2020. The Trio will be playing the album this month at the EFG London Jazz Festival.

"The band concept is to sound like one organism, creating narration using layers, improvising in a way that focuses on moving, irregular motifs as little independent beings and melding them into a piece searching for collective consciousness," says Duda, who plays piano, computer, and the portable OP-1 synthesiser made by Swedish electronics company Teenage Engineering.

"The OP-1 is small but it's as important as all the instruments.

This trio format allows me to do so much more than I was doing with my solo material. I can use piano in a more classical sense. I can include some funny elements. I can still involve electronics."

Standout tracks on *Fumitsuke* include the title track, which meanders cleverly around one line, and 'Grasshopper', a summery musing on Duda's nickname ("It's jazzy, with something a bit shiny in the middle where I improvise") and 'Louis', a paean to polymathic Los Angeles multi-instrumentalist and funster Louis Cole.

"Louis Cole is a big inspiration for me and the trio," says Duda, who in 2015 toured Europe with Cole's Ninja Tune label mates, Polish nu-jazz DJs Skalpel. "I also love his stupid videos. Appropriately enough we have made a stupid video dedicated to him as well."

Duda's fine-tuned sense of fun infuses her aesthetic, lending a kind of joyful positivity to certain elements of her music, and investing her visuals with a hipster's irreverence. Here she is, live streaming alongside a supine tortoiseshell cat. There, posing behind mirror glasses in a stable next to a gigantic bay stallion. Her forthcoming collaboration in the Hague with Berlin-based Dutch hornsman/composer Morris Kiliphius involves an ensemble of baroque musicians. Its title? *Wake The Dead*.

After which, she tells me, she is off to Mombasa, Kenya for three months, chartering a flight from Warsaw with a group of friends all similarly determined to escape the harsh Eastern European winter and holing up in a kayak school by a lake. She'll be taking her keyboards, computers and beat machines and creating a soundtrack for a new movie about Polish jazz musicians in wartime Germany.

She'll also be chilling – a lot.

"It will be good to rest my brain," she says, flashing another of her winning smiles.

Joanna Duda Trio plays The Sanctuary, Greenleaf Road, Walthamstow E17, on 17 November as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival

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