

Straight from the Harp

As a young teenager in 1980s Ukraine, **Alina Bzhezhinska** loved nothing more than compiling her favourite music onto cassettes, before she discovered jazz, the sonic riches of the harp and the music of Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane. For her much-anticipated second album, *Reflections*, the harpist has revived this curatorial approach and drawn together her own personal universe of sounds. **Jane Cornwell** tunes in...

Alina Bzhezhinska has always loved a mixtape. As a young teenager growing up in Lviv, western Ukraine, in the 1980s, she'd make her own: a classical piece by Pierre Boulez, say; Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, cherry-picked from her parents' vinyl collection; The Beatles. Metallica; Vangelis, soundtracking *Blade Runner*. Anything, really, that took her fancy.

"So many different sounds and influences," says Bzhezhinska, sitting in her North London living room flanked by her vintage Lyon & Healy practice pedal harp – the same 90-year-old model played by Dorothy Ashby, an all-time hero – and a Celtic harp that she bought when living in Scotland. Her black electro-acoustic pedal harp, on which she records and plays live, is downstairs by the front door, positioned for a speedy getaway.

"I'm constantly pulling together strands of music I love," she continues. "What I did as a kid on cassette I now do on platforms like Spotify. Tunes for dancing or meditating, for when I am happy or sad. Free-spirited tunes, all of them, filled with courage, innovation and beauty. When I thought about creating this new album I decided to take the same approach."

Bzhezhinska's hugely anticipated sophomore album *Reflections* draws, then, from various sources. Most notably, from Ashby and Alice Coltrane, the artists she calls "the two major pillars of jazz harp." Other legends are accounted for: John Coltrane is represented by the ever-powerful 'Alabama' and Duke Ellington by 'African Flower' ('Petite Fleur Africaine'), a dialogue between harp and sax. Mongo Santamaria's 'Afro Blue' is here, with its lyrics – gorgeously sung by London-based vocalist Vimala Rowe – by Oscar Brown Jr. So too, are a clutch of originals by Bzhezhinska, and one (the flowing, Ashby-inspired 'Sans End') by her bassist Michele Montoli.

Rooted in a mixtape's anything-goes aesthetic, but given an arc, a narrative, by deft sequencing, *Reflections* is a work that progresses the artist's blend of jazz and classical harp and layered electronics, folding in the contributions of British jazz stars, including trumpeter Jay Phelps, sax supremo Tony Kofi, double bassist Julie Walkington and the core members of Bzhezhinska's HipHarpCollective, more of which in a moment. It's a recording in which, while buoyed by the collective, the harp unequivocally leads; an album that takes in trad jazz, spiritual jazz and free jazz, hip hop, trip hop and rap, which firmly positions Bzhezhinska as a jazz musician with a unique vision.

"My debut album (2018's *Inspiration*) was much more traditional, with its jazz quartet line up of bass, drums, saxophone and a harp," says Bzhezhinska (an earlier recording, 2005's *Harp Recital*, is pre-jazz, pre-memory). "I went deep into the music of the Coltranes, and included my own compositions inspired by this amazing couple. But I was still searching for my own

language, for a new sound, a new territory. My goal is to make music that no one expects from the harpist."

This time around it is American jazz harpist Ashby, she of 1958's *Hip Harp*, 1968's *Afro-Harping* and 1970's *The Rubaiyat of Dorothy Ashby*, from whom Bzhezhinska takes major cues. Ashby and her fellow Detroit Cass Technical College *alma mater* Alice Coltrane, five years Dorothy's junior, are her go-tos, as they are for any jazz harpist worth their strings.

"Until you immerse yourself in the style, techniques and ideas of these two women you cannot call yourself a jazz harpist. Only then you can go in any direction you want: minimalist, electronics, traditional jazz. But we have to really know, the source."

Classically-trained under Dr Carrol McLaughlin at the

// Alice Coltrane said the piano was like a sunrise and the harp was like a sunset //