

## **Maria Schneider Interview Conducted by Stuart Nicholson on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2001**

Q: I used to go quite often to Visiones when I was in New York in the late 1990s, saw some really great performances, JoAnne Brackeen for one stands out and of course your band, which I saw several times. I liked the vibe there, so I was sorry to hear it closed — when was that, three years ago? — but I've not heard you found another regular performance space after it went under?

MS: After that club closed, we haven't had a regular gig in New York. It's kind of been by my choice, there've been other clubs who have offered, but I sort of felt that after that it was good not to be performing every week and hearing my same old music, because sometimes when you hear your old things again and again every week you are confronted with your old habits and it's hard to find a new way, so I kind of took a little space there. We still perform — we went to Europe several times, we also went to Brazil, which was a kind of life changing experience, we play — not on a regular basis — sometimes we'll play a whole week in a club in New York like the Jazz Standard and also at Birdland, we play on and off at Birdland, so it is actually a good thing, I think, for me...

Q: Right. You said getting out of old habits, clearly the new album is different to the previous two

MS: Yes, it's a little bit different, I'm not sure how, other people hear it as 'being different' but it's a little hard for me to judge, a little bit because I'm too close to my music to say.

Q: Maybe it's a little less declamatory?

MS: Yes, it's softer hued, I'm a little tired of being bludgeoned just standing in front of a big band, sometimes I feel I'm being bludgeoned by all that sound, I had the feeling I wanted to write lighter textures. The other thing that really changed [my thinking] — I gotten this call a couple of years ago to be part of this big dance commission in the United States where they commissioned five jazz composers to team up with five different modern dance companies and we each did a commission

project together and they put me together with a dance group called Palabolus, which I don't know if you know them? They've performed overseas a lot, and the way we worked is we went in a dance studio and I brought in a few ideas that I played on piano and they moved and improvised to my ideas and the choreographers would watch them work and when they saw things they liked they would tell them to develop that, as they heard me they would move and as I saw them move I would react to it and start playing things, and I recorded everything I played and I developed this piece out of it and it was nice because it got me out of thinking – how do I describe this? – I stopped thinking as music as music and more music as movement and motion and something visual, and the music I wrote as a result it sounded different to my old things, so I think that influence went into the music on the rest of this album

Q: As I hear it, this freer flowing aspect of your writing that emerges on this album seems strongly linked to melodic development supported by less dense harmonies — longer, legato melodies and a less implicit pulse

MS: For me, you can think of music in terms of melody, harmony and rhythm and all these musical elements. But for me what is more, for me music is not really those things, to me music is more texture and lightness or weight or gravity or momentum or resistance and when you see somebody dance you get in touch with all things. Of course, it's filtered through the elements of music which are harmony and melody but for me its nice to come up with my melodies and my harmony and my rhythms thinking of these other things — which are emotional and visual and are just purely facets of musical composition but something deeper which is what music is. Its always been that, when I was a child I played music as a means to get lost in the expression of it when you go to school you become so ultra aware of doing things right and learning things about music and sometimes you forget about the deeper elements of music which is something deeper than just sound

Q: That's interesting — so you're responding to specific programmatic influences in a way

MS: Right. I think a lot of my music is programmatic, it always was, the textures change and also my own labelling of myself as a 'jazz composer' — I'm less and less I am concerned with that — not that I was ever ultra concerned with it — with that label of 'jazz' and I think that one of the things about this album is that maybe it sounds less like 'typical jazz' than my other records, not that my other records were really typical jazz either, I'm not even sure what that means, but you might notice that I took the word jazz of the title of my orchestra, this album is just as Maria Schneider Orchestra

Q: Yes, I noticed that — by labelling something you automatically limit it, of course, or our perception what it can be

MS: Yes, the term is limiting depending whose using it, for some people it's a very limiting term, some people have really a very open view of what jazz is, they consider it music that includes improvisation, music that has some sort of cross fertilization of cultures in it, if you look it in a more open way and say OK it is jazz because certainly if you put my music in front of a lot of classical musicians that had no experience playing jazz it wouldn't come through, it has to be played by jazz musicians, but the jazz musicians also have to be really familiar with classical music too because it includes that, so its bits of both

Q: Are you happy with that, do you see yourself moving away from jazz or are you happy with the grey areas

MS: I think I like the grey areas its hard to say where my music is going to go, I hope to do more collaborations with musicians form other areas, maybe some Brazilian musicians, musicians who are open minded, and to just mix what I do and be influenced by what they do. I hope that by the end of my life when I look back that my music has developed in all sorts of new places that I could never have predicted, that's kind of my wish. Sometimes people say, "What do you see yourself doing next year?' and its very difficult to say — I don't even like to take commissions too far in

advance because I like to keep myself open for something that might come along that I couldn't predict!

Q: I noticed you said in your conversation 'more open minded' but my impression just lately is a lot of clubs in New York seem retro in the sense of hard bop/post bop thing

MS: I'm not sure what the scene is in New York because so much of the time I'm travelling and most of the people that I talk to and do music with they are people who are open and see music as being music. There is a scene in New York which is very kind of 'retro' which would probably be mostly led by the Lincoln Center scene but I don't have much contact with that, my world is a little bit different than that and certainly there is the Knitting Factory crowd, there is so much variety in this town and there is so many kinds of different players so its difficult to say what the scene is like in New York, but the thing I love about New York there are so many people here, there is people for everybody musically here

Q: There are still references to Gil Evans in what I read about you, who wasn't really 'a composer' as you are, does that irk you

MS: I never really felt it hung around my neck, even when people ask me, when I talk to somebody they have haven't heard my music and they aren't so familiar with the world of jazz or what I might be doing and they'll ask me what my music is like and I have to describe it with something musical that they might be familiar with, and sometimes I even use Gil's name myself because most people are familiar with the fact that Gil's music was jazz and was lighter textured more orientated to woodwinds and mutes and those kinds of sounds and it includes an improvisatory voice – usually what I am talking to them about is Miles Davis's collaborations. Somehow its classical but it's jazz that's softly hued and its very emotional because sometimes to me jazz, a lot of jazz is more of a romping stomping party atmosphere, doesn't necessarily have that soft emotional thing behind it so its an association that I just think is convenient for people who write about music, but you're

absolutely right that Gil's music was primarily orchestrational, albeit highly original, his voice is so original, my music is very through composed. I write these extended pieces which Gil didn't really do and that aspect of my writing is maybe influenced by [Bob] Brookmeyer yet different to that – its kind of my own area I've created there, but it certainly is influenced by Gil

Q: You don't say listen to what I'm doing

MS: No, because I know that it doesn't sound like Gil Evans. I guess I would feel like slitting my throat if I sounded like Gil Evans and couldn't break out of that to find my own voice, somebody say something a long time ago and think they're right, somebody wrote a very nice review about my music and I was talking to somebody who was a reviewer, a critic, and I said listen to this review somebody wrote and he said, 'Maria,' he said, 'Be careful if you believe or let yourself go into the good reviews you have to believe and let yourself go into the bad reviews too.' So somebody calling me a clone of Gil Evans or using Gil Evans to describe my music it isn't a bad review but its somebody's words and I tend to stay clear to much of what I see written about me, I try and stay within my own thoughts of myself, otherwise you can really loose it

Q: There was a time most of your commissions came from outside America but now I see most are coming from inside America

MS: Let me see, I'm trying to think, if that's true. I guess you'd say there has been a little bit more, because after the second album the Monterey Festival gave me a commission and then the dance thing and this year I'm doing one for a university, so, yeah there are more coming from the States and this year and also there is a Symphony that is going to commission me to write for them, which is a classical symphony

Q: That's a challenge

MS: Oh yeah! I'm a little nervous about that, excited because certainly its going to be a new challenge which means new things will come out of me because of it, but its always a little scary when you don't know what that is

Q: Do you see that as a new direction, adopting a classical direction in your music or is it just coincidence

MS: I think its just, well maybe they hear that, they probably hear that in my music I write very texturally and somehow it might translate into symphony, we'll see if it does. I'm certainly not looking at now becoming a 'classical composer' because I don't really make a distinction between those things, so far I have had this reliance on musicians that have an ear for improvisation, there have always been some improvised elements in my music, even though it's also highly composed. With a classical orchestra its not really like that, everything is written and composed but I want my music to feel somehow it is 'improvised' so I have to figure out how to do that, its going to be a challenge, we'll see what I come up with

Q: Is your sole means of support jazz, or do you do commercial writing as well

MS: No, I don't do any commercial writing. Actually I was really bad at that, trying to write in different styles and things like that, I was never any good at that, but I work quite a lot because there's jazz orchestras all over the world and I think part of the reason I am still writing for a big band instrumentation but trying to sound like something else by using lots of woodwinds and mutes, part of the reason I'm still writing for that basically what looks like a big band is because there are so many of them all over the world and its afforded me to make a living, I bring my music and I go and I work with them. For instance next month I working with Tommy Smith's group in Scotland, and I just came back yesterday I got back from working with a group out in California, a school group, and I'm very busy with that, if the instrumentation of my music was viola, bandenjon, and harmonica I would work for one or two concerts but I couldn't make my living, but it's a bit of a

struggle because now I'm starting to hear other things and while I'm quite sure I'll keep my band going I'd like to kind of stretch out and try some different instrumentation, because I feel like with the big band I've really stretched the rubber band texturally as far as I can do, its difficult to write for all that brass and all those instruments and make it sound like something that's light an airy

Q: Can we quickly go through the album, beginning with 'Hang Gliding'

MS: Well, I had gone to Brazil with my orchestra and my last day in Brazil a friend invited me to go hang gliding, first of all Brazil was such a powerful experience for me because in Brazil, music in Brazil is just part of life, its not something they do on the side, its really the sustenance of life is making music, everybody does it, and being around that all the incredible rhythms, the beauty of Rio and the warmth of the people when finally this friend asked me if I wanted to go hang gliding I was so excited to do this most drastic thing, just jumping off a cliff over Rio with my body hanging there just floating over Rio and absorbing this beauty and joy so I did it! It was so intense the feeling of the wind, all the different aspects of the wind, when your way up in the clouds sometimes we'd be on top of these thermals – I went in tandem with a Brazilian boy – and you'd just bop up there, so light and the first solo captures that feeling of hesitation of movement sometimes everything stops and you don't even breathe your just caught in that frozen motion, and later when you pull the bar down and you just start creating resistance with the wind with the hang glider we were swooping over cliffs and over the forests and over roads and along sky scrapers and so the second solo captures that intensity and the excitement over Rio, and the rhythms capture something of that Brazilian flavour and finally we landed on the beach so it's a very programmatic piece that describes this whole hang gliding experience

Q: 'Nocturne,' compositionally what were your objectives there?

MS: Well, I wanted, it's a melancholy piece that actually is inspired by my mother because I grew up in the mid-West in a very small town and it's a very bleak setting, its very flat, we lived outside

of town there was a huge flax plant, the company that my father worked for, next to my house, so it was just looking out to this emptiness and this factory and my mother used to play piano and she loved to play Chopin, and she would play a lot of Chopin nocturnes and just very sad music and I could feel the melancholy feeling in her in her spirit through her playing these nocturnes and so that piece I just captured that feeling of sitting there it was a kind of this empty, aching feeling with this beauty inside of it with my mother playing piano, and just looking out at this bleak scene, so that's why the piano on there is soft and loose over the top, and I think that's one of the most extraordinary solos on the album, Frank Kimborough, we barely played that piece I wanted to capture the orchestra in almost sight reading that piece, they played it through a couple of times, but I wanted that feeling of hesitation that they're just discovering each note as they play it, so Frank Kimborough on piano, he improvised that part that sounds like the most beautiful counterpoint, I thought he did a great job – could you hold just one second, I'll be right back (interrupt)

MS: That was him, he's gonna come in 15 minutes.

Q: Don't let me hold you up, there's one final question and that is, woman in a man's world, a woman in jazz, a cliché but now with jazz education I see more girls coming through. You've made it so what would you say to encourage them?

MS: Yes, there aren't very many of us, it's funny I was with this school and the band was half women, which I couldn't believe it, so yes, it's kind of changing, that whole scene is changing as more women come up, but it's funny for me I never, I came up through school and all the people were confronted with in school on the jazz programme were men, and I never really noticed it, I didn't really think about this, I remember when my first album came out and then I started getting interviewed and people started asking me "What's it like to be a woman with a band?" or I'd be working with my band and some women would come up to me and say 'Oh my gosh, it's so incredible to see a woman doing this,' but when you're making music yourself you're just looking

out through your two eyes and looking out with your two ears I don't see myself as a woman in those moments, I just see myself as a person creating music, or collaborating with other musicians and so I was never really seeing 'myself.' Now that I sometimes see videos of myself conducting my band its really a shock, I say to myself 'Oh my God, you're such a *girl!*' But when I'm inside myself I don't feel that way, I feel, not that I don't feel like a woman, not that I feel neuter, but in a way I do. And I'm sure my music somehow has a female perspective that comes through it, I'm sure there's something in it that's female, but I think that part of the reason is when I grew up my first piano teacher who was wonderful stride player great classical player, she was a woman, she was the only superbly talented musician in my home town, and so I saw that the greatest musician growing up was a woman, also one of my mother's best friends who was an artist, a wonderful artist, was a woman, my sisters, I have two sisters, but one of them is an artist, now she's an architect and an artist, she grew up with this woman as her mentor, and my other sister was a writer and I think because I grew up in such a remote and a small town and these women were my mentors, and I took dance and my dance teacher was a women in my own mind I saw that women were the artists of the world, the creative voices of the world, and when I went to college it was no longer that way I didn't really even notice! I have kind of gone through this whole thing it's very naive, not really noticing that and I understand that its not like that for a lot of women because I have met many women in this music and when I meet them as a friend they're just another person, they're a woman and a friend or whatever, but sometimes some women I notice when they get in a musical situation with a lot men, I suddenly sense that they feel they're at battle, that they have to put up some kind of guard to protect themselves and when I see that I think 'Wow, somehow I didn't have some experience they must have had.'

Q: You're glad you avoided that one

MS: I am glad I avoided it, because it's a non issue for me

Q: I think you said Bob Brookmeyer said you should bring the feminine side of your writing out, what does that mean?

MS: I'm not sure what that meant. Well, I can tell you a little bit, I took this lesson with him one time, I was writing something for the Woody Herman band and I was also going to be writing something for the Mel Lewis band, they're both very kind of, its macho music in a way — I mean its big band music in a 'traditional' kind of way, it's more like I was talking about before, more big band-y, its not softly hued and expressive like Gil Evans' music is and I was going to write for them and I was concerned my music somehow was too feminine for the band and I wanted Bob to help me get some testosterone in my music! And we talked about it a little, and he said what's beautiful in your music is you, and you're a woman. And we've been all looking at and listening to enough music from men all these years, it's such a breath of fresh air that your music is going to carry something in it that is bound to be feminine and some people would argue that there is truth to that some people would want to say that music is music whether its men or women, but I'm not sure what that is! But he helped me work on my rhythmic element in the music, to try to create gestures, just to understand more about intensity of rhythm and things that made my music just a little bit more powerful — it's a touchy thing to talk about because some people are so sensitive to what's female and what's male in music but for me I'm not sensitive to it, I think there is a difference. One of the drummers, one of the best drummers I worked with was Terri Lyn Carrington and she plays strong with such power and she so musical at the same time. When I worked with her, she played my music and everything I described to her was in extra-musical terms. I would say to her, 'I want a little bit more momentum that leads to a certain point that feels you're going off a cliff, and just gliding,' and I would say things like that and she immediately could take those things and transform it into what she played, into her technique and it would happen. There are some men that can do that, but there are some men that look completely baffled when I say something like that, and they just want to know, 'Where do you want me to start sub-dividing? Where do you want it to be louder? and where do I create a crescendo,' you know? Its literally true and with her it

was the easiest time has describing my music in my own way and she immediately turned it into whatever tools she had as a drummer to make that happen...

Q: That's an interesting story, I know you're expecting a guest so I'll let you go now

MS: No really, is there anything you wanted to know about those pieces?

Q: There is indeed — I think 'Allegresse,' if we could explore that one

MS: Well, first of all that word in French means joy, and I think that the music on this album is — except for the dance piece which is a little bit intense and serious and sad than the other pieces — in general, I wanted the album to depict joy and lightness because in making this album I recovered some joy in my compositional process after years of school, I started to put so much pressure on myself that I didn't enjoy composing that much but in making this album, I don't know, I re-discovered the joy of writing, and lightening up and writing what I wanted to write and not worrying about what people thought about it. That piece is a little bit influenced by the music on [the Miles Davis album] *Filles de Kilimanjaro*. I think that musically that piece of all the pieces on that record is the most derivative of something else, and there's really beautiful solos — Ingrid Jensen and Rich Perry play nice on that

Q: It's the high spot of the album for me

MS: Oh really, 'Allegresse'? Everyone has their favourites on that album, for some people its 'Hang Gliding,' my father, his favourite is 'Dissolution,' which I couldn't understand he's not a musician, I figured he's would have liked something, I don't know, something more than that so I don't know, it's funny...

Q: Well, thanks Maria for your time (wind up)

