

B a b e l



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Composer and vocalist
Marcela Lucatelli
writes scores for the
limits of bodies and voice.
By Philip Clark

Marcela Lucatelli moved to Copenhagen from her native Brazil 15 years ago, and it was Denmark that became the place where she felt able to knit together a musical language that embraced both her work as a composer and as a vocal improviser. Released during 2017, her album *PHEW! The Last Guide For A Western Obituary* revealed her vocal splendours in all their glory. Lessons about extended vocal techniques from the likes of Phil Minton, Maggie Nicols and Jaap Blonk duly learnt, Lucatelli sounds like none of them as she shrieks and roars and squeaks and squeals in tongues over Marcio Gibson's drums and Marcos Campello's guitar. But listening to one of her fully notated scores, such as *The Golden Days*, written for DR VokalEnsemblet in 2018, you realise how deftly and skilfully she can coerce conventional notation into exhibiting equivalent freedoms.

In March, Lucatelli will be standing in front of a full symphony orchestra for the first time when The DR Symphonic Orchestra gives the premiere performance of her *GGBW* in a joint concert with New York's Bang On A Can All Stars. We talk over the phone just after the Christmas holiday, while Lucatelli is still in Rio de Janeiro, and I wonder how deeply her Brazilian identity continues to inform her work after all those years in Denmark? "I consider myself an international person," she tells me. "I feel privileged to relate both to the meeting of European, African and Native American cultures in Brazil – and to have had the freedom to have more formal studies in Denmark."

Classical music was not part of Lucatelli's life growing up in Brazil, and instead she gorged on all types of popular music, including bossa nova and religious African-American music. "Brazil is a promiscuous country musically and that has stayed within me, even after all those years away," she

explains. "My interest in going to Denmark was really as a contrast to this mixed Brazilian culture. I was interested in the social system there: as a lower class Brazilian person I wanted to see, anthropologically, how that could work."

When Lucatelli arrived in Copenhagen, she found herself singing a range of new and standard classical repertoire. "But I wasn't interested in the repertoire itself particularly, more in the relationship between singing and my body. Classical singers often say you can feel the vibrations through your body, which gives you a high, and I've always had this strong connection to transcendent experiences."

Composing and improvising, she says, became her way to move forward as a musician. "I didn't come to vocal improvisation through the scene, getting to know what was out there. I was trying to find an expression that both physically and somatically proposed a definite kind of experience. When I improvise I'm really interested in the context... I'm interested in where I'm doing this, with whom I'm doing it, in what country, who is in the audience, in what kind of room – are people sitting or standing? – what kind of clothes am I wearing, and then what can I do vocally and with my body to shape this experience."

Lucatelli tells me that she has had amazing experiences with improvisors – "but it's clear we should only do this once" – but with other improvisors, like Marcio Gibson and Marcos Campello, the relationship is obviously longer term. Given her sensitivity to the circumstances of a performance, I wonder how it works when, writing a piece like *The Golden Days* or her new piece for orchestra, she needs to formalise the music into a score which is then handed over to unknown musicians? "I would say I compose human relationships," she replies.

"In a sense making my album *PHEW! The Last Guide For A Western Obituary* was similar to composing for a classical group in that I always approach the task asking, who are these people? What are they interested in? What would they like to do? But also, how can I challenge their will, making it an exciting experience for them, me and the audience.

"*PHEW!* was recorded without any preparation," she continues, "and, at the end of the session, I knew I had an album. But – and here's the difference – working with a traditional classical ensemble it is extremely difficult to get the open space to do this kind of preparation work. With the choir I had a session with them while I was composing, and I had a lot of input from them, and the music developed through this interesting social interaction. In the end I have to deliver a super-fixed score, but the exciting thing is to gather as much information as possible about these people so that I can make the music come alive."

Lucatelli has been played regularly by entirely simpatico ensembles like Bastard Assignments, Apartment House and Mocrep, but working with a symphony orchestra more accustomed to playing Mahler and Beethoven opens up a whole other set of challenges, I suggest. "I say the piece is for orchestra and performer," she explains. "I will be the one doing the vocals. I'll be wearing a costume and the piece also involves lighting design, so there will be lots of surprises. Orchestras are very bureaucratic and closed in many ways, but for me this was a seductive challenge. My pieces are very relational and open, and embrace all sorts of singularities, but writing for orchestra you can't take into account who will be first violin or sitting next to the first trumpet. It could be anybody at any time – which for me is as challenging as it gets." □ marcelalucatelli.co