

Athina Kontou

*Tzivaeri*

For some time now, the name Athina Kontou has symbolized a deep understanding of how music can captivate us. So far, the bassist with the earthy tone has been heard in different contexts, for example, alongside saxophonist Luise Volkmann or pianist Johannes Bigge. With her debut album *Tzivaeri*, the German-Greek now sets her own accents and presents pieces she has adapted from Greek musical culture.

The title track of the album is a very well-known folk song from the Dodecanese, which, like so many traditional Greek songs, is about emigration – a theme that permeates recent Greek history. It is a lament in which a mother, who sent her child away so that he could have a better life, speaks to him and mourns her loss. “Tzivaeri mou” means “my precious” in the local Greek language, a dialect that has been influenced by many cultures.

It is an important personal concern for Athina Kontou to combine her experiences as an improvising musician in a jazz-influenced environment with her Greek roots. Greek-influenced jazz is much less common in this country than, for example, fusions of jazz with Latin American and Arabic music or Balkan sounds. The bassist, who lives in Cologne, has all the more leeway to find individual hinges for her album, connections that elude common formulas. Although jazz and Greek music may seem quite far apart at first glance, Athina Kontou has grown organically into both traditions. *“Improvisation is an important part of traditional Greek music,”* she tells us, *“and that applies to urban music like Rebetiko as well as folk songs and dances, especially in long intros from the bouzouki or clarinet. The intro to ‘Harmandali’ on the record, for example, is played in a very traditional way.”*

To prepare for *Tzivaeri*, Athina Kontou embarked on a long journey. She did not only confront her family roots on an artistic level, but did so by questioning her identity in a persona manner. Through this process, she gained a sovereignty that provided her with an original angle to access her own artistic exploration. From the security of her own self-discovery, she gave the project “Mother” increasingly clear contours. Each answer resulted in a new question. And the process continues to this day.

To realize her ideas, Kontou needed musical companions willing to deal with this kind of music, or put differently, to engage unconditionally with her journey. Athina Kontou’s art of storytelling was far too strong for her to have left her companions with notes that they simply had to play. Instead, she assumed they would intensely grapple with the material and its background. On *Tzivaeri*, this intensity translates immediately into a collective sonic experience that needs no explanation at all. The poignant emotional and formal beauty of the songs speaks for itself.

The basic formation of the album is the jazz quartet “Mother” with her longtime musical partner Luise Volkmann on soprano and alto saxophone, pianist Lucas Leidinger and drummer Dominik Mahnig. Here, the bass permanently penetrates the earth’s crust, the saxophone escapes into the stratosphere, while piano and drums hold heaven and earth together. This way, the melodies become physically tangible, transforming into movement, imagination and memory. The imagery of the interpretations in each song is again so amazing that one would

like to pin them on the wall as postcards. Some of the tracks feature guests: the oud and bouzouki player Epaminondas Ladas, as well as Koray Berat Sari on the lavta. *“Greek music cannot do without stringed instruments. I felt the desire to play with a jazz quartet. The soprano saxophone seemed to me to be the ideal bridge between the clarinet, which is often found in traditional music, and the signature sound of jazz. The minimal preparation of the piano should evoke the typical string sounds of Greek music. However, with the two guests on string instruments, we merge into a solid unit without breaks.”*

For all her involvement with her roots, working on *Tzivaeri* was also a voyage of discovery for Athina Kontou. The songs on the album contain, without exception, components of Greek musical culture. Some are traditional songs, while others are popular songs by contemporary composers, including Nikos Xydakis. However, when delving deeper into the sources, the bassist found that some songs have Armenian or Turkish roots. *“At first, the repertoire was mainly songs that meant something to me, that have been with me since childhood. But then during my research I found out that, for example, Armenian folk songs are included, which enjoy great popularity in Greece since they have been interpreted with Greek lyrics. And the Turkish dance 'Harmandali' is also played in Greece.”*

The songs on *Tzivaeri* not only have a captivating effect, seeming to suspend the uniqueness of space and the irreversibility of time. Athina Kontou also impressively demonstrates on her debut record how arbitrary and superfluous geographical, cultural or traditional demarcation lines are. Her music is a great invitation to all who simply want to listen and marvel without reservation.