

# ANAT COHEN

*Stephanie Reeve hears from the clarinetist Anat Cohen about her passion for Brazilian choro music and a new album of 'chamber jazz'*



It is 11pm on a Tuesday evening towards the end of July, and I am at my computer logging into a live performance being broadcast from Brazil. The two performers are Anat Cohen on clarinet and Marcello Gonçalves on seven-string guitar. They sit on stools in a small studio with their instruments and a couple of microphones. The concert is on Zoom, and other audience members are visible. The host asks where we are from; North and South America, Europe and Asia are all represented. We mute ourselves and listen to a wonderfully intimate performance by Anat and Marcello including some tracks from their *Outra Coisa* album, some new material they have been working on and some well-known choro tunes. I am quickly drawn in, losing the sense that this is an unreal way to hear a performance. Cohen's chat and her relaxed humour are as I remember them from a live gig several years ago.

As well as performing all over the world, Cohen has released numerous albums as a bandleader or

collaborator, earning Grammy nominations along the way. Cohen's first album, *Place & Time* from 2005, is a wonderful mix of styles, and the latest, *Triple Helix*, is an astonishing, mature work with collaborations of the highest order and virtuoso technique.

I had the opportunity to speak to Cohen a few weeks earlier about her life as a clarinettist, and about choro, the music of Brazil. Like many musicians, she has gone from fast-paced jet-setting to being at home with few bookings. She splits her time between New York and Rio, cities that have both been seriously affected by quarantine.

'I'm realising I'm not so good on my own,' says Cohen. 'I get my inspiration from interaction, so when I get together with a musician, or a few other people, I go with something that feels a certain way, and then, ah! I want to achieve that emotional aspect.'

The past 20 or so years have seen Cohen travel all over the world: 'I'm definitely grateful. There's nothing I love more than being on stage playing my music.'

But the enforced break is an opportunity to reflect and re-focus. 'You shut yourself down but there's chaos outside, which has left me restless and worried. Focus has shifted and I know a lot of people say they are having a hard time concentrating.'

Cohen has been practising the bass clarinet during lockdown. 'I thought, I'm a clarinet player. I can play the bass clarinet. But it's almost nothing to do with the clarinet! Then I decided it was closer to the saxophone, but no – it's not the saxophone but it's also not the clarinet.'

## Choro

We move onto talking about choro, and I am gently corrected on my pronunciation: 'It's shhh... shorrow.' I mention that I'd found the melodies so suited to the clarinet that I used it as a way into jazz. Cohen correctly guesses I am more of a classical player, adding quickly that 'classical' is too global a term. In defending myself I refer to improvisation, but I immediately concede that Mozart improvised.

'And Bach improvised too, you know,' says Cohen. 'Everybody improvised until other people wanted to preserve it so accurately that they wrote it down and

didn't allow you to deviate from the written music, and then people lost that skill.'

And the Brazilian feel of choro? 'It's fast and uplifting because the rhythm is so rich and moving, and it makes me miss something that I've never even lived

because I don't have family in Brazil. I don't even have Brazilian roots, but they have a word called *saudade* [longing, or nostalgia]. I fell in love with all of that. I felt like I wanted to figure out how to do that.

'When I moved to New York I started to play with my friend Pedro from Sao Paulo who lived in New York. We had a band called the Choro Ensemble, and we were the only band in New York playing choro. I learned this music by playing it, not by hearing it live, because nobody else was playing this music in New York.'

Cohen first visited Brazil at the end of 2000 when there had been a revival of choro. Staying with a friend, the saxophonist Daniela Spielmann, Cohen bought a two-month return ticket, much to the surprise of her friends.

'I said to them, I feel I need to do this – New York will wait. My life was never the same because I fell in love with the choro, with the culture, with the way it's played; with the way people share the music, the way people respect each other, the way people converse in the music; the way this music is so full of details and so complex yet it's played around a table with beers. People just drink and hang and talk, but once they start playing the melody, when the song starts, everything elevates to one of the highest skills possible. Super virtuosic, super emotional and knowledgeable – and then the song ends and yeah! beers! hang!

'The best way to play choro is in this circle, the *rhoda*,' she adds. 'There can be just a few people or many, of any age and ability.' ➡

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PHOTO: SHERVIN LAINEZ

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Of her initial visit, Cohen recalls the atmosphere of a carefree time. 'Rio was really prosperous and the country was doing well. There were a lot of places to hear and play music. You could go to a bar, sit around a table and just play all night. Basically, all of these elements of Brazil – the people, the culture, the music, the clarinet, the *rhoda*. It's so many things that made me fall in love with choro.'

Cohen took her experiences of Rio back to New York. 'Maybe I just caught Rio in a really great time. I know the world 20 years ago seemed a little bit more optimistic than it does today. I came back to New York from this trip and said to Pedro, we have to do this choro! It needs to be this feeling of community that I never felt before. We need to create this. I want people to know.'

'We played every week in a French bistro in the East Village called Joules. Of the jazz musicians, I can count on one hand the people that had the guts to come and sit in with us, because when you are a jazz musician you want to hear the chord changes and play a solo. But to come and play choro and *not* play a solo, and instead just play the melody – there's no point. Then, if you are a classical musician, you're too afraid because there is something to lose. Only a few brave people actually came in and played with us, but the choro ensemble became a real weekly gathering of people. We became a band, I became a clarinet player and in 2004 we played at Carnegie Hall with the Rio Pops. That was a significant moment for choro. Now it's much more common, and other people are doing it.'

Much of Cohen's own feelings and attitudes towards choro are echoed in the 2005 film called *Brasileirinho*. Cohen recommends watching it: 'Marcello Gonçalves was the musical director. It captures Rio and the choro form.' The film has a relaxed documentary feel, following instrumentalists and singers in the lead-up to a concert on National Day of Choro. This is on 23 April, the birthday of the composer Pixinguinha, who was one of the leading exponents of Brazilian music. The musicians interviewed express their feelings about their playing, training and experiences, and we hear music played in all settings – in concert, at a *rhoda* or just on the bus! The joy of being involved in the culture shines through all of those featured.

PHOTO: GABRIELE LUGLI



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## Triple Helix

Cohen's latest release, however, is not choro but a collaboration with the composer and musical director Oded Lev-Ari and the Anat Cohen Tentet. The album includes three original works by Cohen, three arrangements by Lev-Ari, and the title track 'Triple Helix', a concerto.

In assessing what is a concerto, Cohen and I again compare jazz and classical perceptions. In the classical sense, the soloist is the virtuosic player accompanied by an orchestra, who are there to accompany and keep to the script. But in the 'concertos' of, say, Artie Shaw and Stravinsky, everyone is equal within the band, so the mutual respect offers a higher degree of music-making than you would expect for a soloist performing Mozart or Weber. We conclude that 'chamber jazz' might be a good expression!

Cohen considers the concept of writing for a soloist. 'If you don't know the band and what their professional skills are, and you just know the function of the instrument, then you just write for the instrument.' In this case, Lev-Ari had several years to get to know the band. The tentet was originally formed in 2016, in preparation for a concert to mark 100 years since the first official jazz clarinet of the original Dixieland band.

Cohen has known long-time friend and collaborator Lev-Ari since high school. 'We started to think about who I am, and all the music that I like to play, and we said, let's make a band. We decided to find the most flexible large ensemble that could travel and feature all the things I wanted to play.'

## That has to be in your personality – asking no permission

Cohen then lists just some of her musical interests. 'Benny Goodman, some hard rock, James Brown and then some Jimmy Hendrix! It's not the instrument – the instrument is just the tool, and the music comes from within us.'

The line-up of the tentet is unique. Guitar, bass and drums are there as might be expected, but the pianist Vitor Gonçalves also plays the accordion, while percussionist James Shipp also does vibraphone. Cello, baritone sax, trumpet and trombone make up the rest.

As well as musicianship, personalities are very important to Cohen. 'I didn't want to commit to anything unless I saw the chemistry between the people. I didn't know everybody in the band. On the first morning I brought some coffee and bagels and everybody arrived and they just chatted. It was an amazing chemistry. They are brilliant individuals as people and as musicians, and all are great personalities. Moving forward, we had the experience of recording the first album and doing some shows.'

Dates in Europe and the US followed, including a concert in the Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall, and they commissioned Lev-Ari to write the concerto with the cooperation of the Chicago Symphony. 'Oded knows me very well, what I like and what I do, and he also really got to know the tentet and each person individually. He really personalised it, and I think that's also why the concerto has so much space for the orchestra to speak. The idea was that we premiered that concerto at Carnegie Hall and we had a few days of rehearsal to play there, and we went into the studio and were nominated for a Grammy. So that was really awesome.' In reflecting on the current times, she adds, 'I miss the tentet.'

I finish by bringing in the name of a player I know Cohen has worked with – another passionate individual who has a unique energy when playing: the Cuban clarinetist, saxophonist and composer Paquito D'Rivera. 'I love him. I love his spirit. You can be mistaken when people are being funny that they are not serious about their craft, and Paquito is one of the living examples of somebody that doesn't make it heavy – but he is heavy, you know. He is such a champion, the way he plays the clarinet. He's one of my main inspirations for why I wanted to pick up the instrument.'

'He's somebody who can play classical music, Brazilian music and Afro-Cuban music,' Cohen continues. 'He finds the perfect combination and musicians. He never stops, and he always records. He comes from the classical world and yet has the freedom and the nerve and the guts to explore anything. He's one of the people asking no permission. That has to be in your personality – asking no permission.' ■

