

Sarah Chaksad

Together

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For over ten years, Sarah Chaksad has been attracting attention in the European jazz scene with large and larger bands. The Swiss composer and alto and soprano saxophonist has been celebrated internationally for her productions and concerts. "The concert was a triumph. Chaksad's writing and arranging is first class, and the band's enthusiasm was evident," wrote Jazzwise in January 2023 about a concert in Iceland. "Sarah Chaksad's compositions masterfully juggle insistent motifs, subdued sounds, and meticulous layering," said Jazz Thing in 2019, and Jazzpodium singled out her "clever compositional tricks with consistent thematic development, multiple motifs cross-referenced within the works, and finely arranged, through-composed backgrounds for improvisation." The Weltwoche noted Chaksad's "individual and subtle musical style" and was reminded of George Gruntz and Mathias Rüegg, while Rondo praised her "differentiated, developed, carefully considered scores which play virtuosically with the sound colors of her band."

From 2012 until the corona lockdowns, Chaksad was mostly on the road with her Orchestra, a group she recorded two albums with. "During the pandemic, I wrote many new pieces that cried out for a new lineup," she says, explaining the impulse for the establishment of her Large Ensemble in 2022. "I see this band as a logical development. It can realize my ideas about detailed musical colors, and at the same time, I have the chance to write more open forms and leave more space for improvisation." With one person per instrument and thirteen musicians in all, the Large Ensemble is substantially more flexible than Chaksad's previous Orchestra. "I'm fascinated by how this band can take just a few chords, like in the first part of *Lost*, and create something spontaneous."

The ensemble's perfect balance between composed and improvised parts also comes, of course, from the high quality of Chaksad's carefully chosen musicians. While developing the repertoire, she had their individual playing styles and creative approaches in mind. "I already have a history with most of the members of the band. Many come from my musical environment in Basel, and some were already in the Orchestra. They are all strong personalities who have their own improvisational presence, and they come from a wide range of international backgrounds, which I really appreciate." Along with Basel, Berlin is one primary place these musicians come from. Others live in Paris and Trondheim or have Brazilian, Iranian, and even Japanese-Polish roots. A further part of the band's real diversity is that it includes musicians of a wide range of ages.

One premiere is Chaksad's collaboration with Julia Hülsmann, whose piano style is as striking as Paco Andrea's on valve trombone and Catherine Delaunay's on basset horn (Delaunay is a member of the Orchestre National du Jazz in France). There's also Fabian Willmann's distinctive tenor-saxophone sound and Yumi Ito's nimble and bell-like melismas, with her virtuosic leaps across multiple octaves. On trumpet, Hildegunn Øiseth (who has played with Marilyn Mazur's Shamanism and the Trondheim Jazz Orchestra, among others) has a poetic and atmospheric tone. In the background, Eva Klesse's drumming is essential to the ensemble, as is the flute-playing of Christoph Bösch, who comes more from contemporary classical music than from jazz.

Many of the compositions on *Together* were written in an emotionally difficult period for Chaksad. "At the beginning of 2020, my father died, and my connection to Iran, his native country, was suddenly broken. To explore my roots, I began to study traditional Persian music more deeply than I ever had before." Her father played the drum called the tombak; her Swiss mother is a classical musician. "Melodies and sounds from Iran were just part of my childhood; listening to that music went without saying, just like serving Iranian dishes for meals. Yet for a long time I was so focused on jazz that I wasn't really aware of the richness of Persian music."

Chaksad has come to realize how much her latest works have been inspired by largely unconscious experiences in her family. "Normally, I start with bass lines and melodies, and I often add the rest pretty intuitively. I didn't set out to have almost all the compositions on *Together* be in unusual meters." The spectrum ranges from 5/8 on the title track to other pieces whose meters run from 6 and 9 to 12, with *Imagine Peace* even in 13/8. Even more directly than the distinct rhythms, some of the melody lines, as in *Hope*, clearly recall Persian traditions. The bridge between continents comes through most clearly in Misagh Jooalee's magnificent solo on the kamancheh, a Middle Eastern violin. His wonderful playing gives additional depth to Chaksad's musical and tonal imagination. Together, they create an unusual and utterly intense mood.

Chaksad's multivalent compositions reflect both personal experiences and current events. In the album's opener, *Circle*, a continually repeating chord progression traces the circles that life makes, which are sometimes even amusing. "My parents met when they were both students in Berlin; today, I'm playing with musicians from Berlin and have recorded my album there." Both contemplative interiority and clamor are reflected in the first part of *Lost*; later, a soothing melody calms and balances the work's emotions. *Louana* steadily and humorously explores a child's volatile and often somewhat aimless movements. Playful, contrasting motifs intertwine, sometimes vibrant and sometimes brief and repetitive.

Before the recording sessions in March 2023 at the legendary Hansa Studio in Berlin, the Large Ensemble played four concerts to plumb the depths of their repertoire and explore its potential for improvisation. Of course, the pieces began to change. Chaksad appreciated the flexibility of her band, as every studio take of every title developed its own character. All this raises expectations for the concerts planned in Switzerland, Germany, and other countries beginning in February 2024.

Chaksad sees her exciting new album as a plea for solidarity across national and political boundaries. *Together* combines a large band's dynamics, depth, and rich musical colors with impressive, individual solos. Refined rhythms, sheer joy in playing, and several influences rarely heard in jazz create intellectually and emotionally engaging music of a kind that one does not hear every day.