

The Nikolett Pankovits Sextet & The River Voices infuse the haunting traditional songs of Hungary with the improvisational imperative of jazz and buoyant grooves of Latin America on *River*, an album inspired by Pankovits' unprecedented 2019 production at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall

The Old and New Worlds don't just collide on *River*, the arrestingly beautiful new album by Budapest-reared, New York-based vocalist **Nikolett Pankovits**. Obliterating borders, epochs, and stereotypes, she brings together some of the finest practitioners of traditional Hungarian music with a jazz ensemble steeped in Latin American rhythms, delivering an intoxicating body of songs rooted in ancient traditions and as fresh as tomorrow's dawn. A brilliant follow up to Pankovits' acclaimed 2016 debut album *Magia*, which was also produced by Juancho Herrera, *River* was released on May 20, 2020.

Possessing a sumptuous voice that's pure, lithe, warm and alive to countless shades of loss, longing, ache, and regret, Pankovits has assembled a sextet that reflects the central role of Latin American musicians on the New York jazz scene. She premiered the music on *River* at an unprecedented May 2019 concert at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall featuring her band with Colombian-born Juancho Herrera on guitar, Venezuelan trumpeter Alejandro Berti, Swiss pianist Manu Koch, Venezuelan bassist Bam Rodriguez, and Argentine drummer Franco Pinna.

The event incorporated a Hungarian folk trio (violinist Levente Székely, violist Áron Székely, and bassist Branislav Brinarsky) and The River Voices, a female vocal octet assembled by Pankovits featuring some of the East Coast's finest Hungarian singers, including Laura Angyal, Réka Bányai, Kinga Cserjési, Kata Harsáczki, Ildikó Nagy, Artemisz Polonyi, and Boglárka Goldea-Raksányi. With the exception of Josh Deutsch taking over the trumpet chair, the album features the same stellar cast of artists interpreting a singular body of material drawn from Hungarian folk music's five major regions.

In much the same way that the Danube River connects distinct communities, *River* explores a border-crossing repertoire of traditional melodies newly imagined. On the opening track, the melancholic Transylvanian melody "Tele van a sötét égbolt ragyogó csillaggal" (The dark

firmament is filled with shining stars), a droning bowed bass accompanies Pankovits' sorrowful vocals, before actor Adam Boncz recites a Hungarian poem by Transylvanian poet Sándor Kányádi translated into English by Paul Sohar. The album's online liner notes include all the lyrics in Hungarian and English, an essential part of Pankovits' goal in making the songs accessible "so everyone can get involved with this amazing music," she says. "We're bringing together jazz singers and folk singers, different regions and styles, jazz, folk, and classical, fusing together in different layers."

The constantly shifting moods and cadences are consistently riveting. Herrera's setting for "Ideki a csenderbe" (Away out here in the bush) is a spritely groove that emphasizes the sing-song nature of the child's chant, delivered with brio by The River Voices. On Aquiles Báez's delicate arrangement of "A fényes nap immár elnyugodott" (The bright sun has settled down). Josh Deutsch's muted trumpet caresses Pankovits's quietly beseeching vocals.

"Ha megunom aranyos életemet" (If I grow tired of my good life someday) features Pankovits and Boglárka Raksányi on a lover's teasing song full of allusions to the delights and sorrows found in a garden. There's even a song by The River Voices in both English and Hungarian, a maiden's boasts of her initiation into courtship, "Oh, My Dear God."

The album ends with Pankovits and The River Voices offering a brief, almost a cappella ode to renewal and rebirth with "Tavaszz, tavasz, szép zöld tavasz" (Springtime, springtime, lovely lush spring) featuring special guest vocalist Mária Petrás, who joins the ensemble on the material from her homeland, Moldavia. Even in the midst of life the song reminds us of mortality's inevitable shadows, concluding, "Only orphans are lamenting/They are not singing."

The cumulative impression is a portrait of a people and the music and aesthetic that has sustained them through history's vicissitudes. In the words of the renowned Hungarian ethnographer Bertalan Andrásfalvy, the music "was something that protected people during times of emotional turmoil and this something was within everyone's reach. It was art, poetry, song and music. Such works were born to dissipate stress, give expression to sorrow, pour grief into words, and, also, to announce joy, happiness, love."