

# PYROCLASTIC RECORDS

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Pianists Sylvie Courvoisier and Cory Smythe interpret and reimagine Stravinsky's landmark *The Rite of Spring* on their breathtaking new album**

***The Rite of Spring – Spectre d'un songe*, due out May 19, 2023 via Pyroclastic Records, features a stunning version of the iconic composition paired with Courvoisier's newly composed improvisation-rich response, "Spectre d'un songe"**

*"Courvoisier keeps you on the edge of your seat because it feels like the piano cannot contain her. Her careening solos seem to overwhelm and overflow the keyboard and keep spilling."*

– Thomas Conrad, [JazzTimes](#)

*"A growing number of musicians have mastered both notated and improvised music, but few have done it with more skill, insight, and sensitivity than pianist Cory Smythe."* – Peter Margasak, [Chicago Reader](#)

With ***The Rite of Spring – Spectre d'un songe***, two of contemporary music's most vital and innovative pianists – **Sylvie Courvoisier** and **Cory Smythe** – interpret and converse with one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's landmark compositions. On this breathtaking new recording, due out **May 19, 2023** from **Pyroclastic Records**, Courvoisier and Smythe perform Igor Stravinsky's striking two-piano rendition of his iconic *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), followed by a bold new Courvoisier composition that draws inspiration from Stravinsky as a launchpad for investigatory improvisation.

Courvoisier is best known as a jazz musician and improviser, though the rich complexity and intricate structures of classical music are deeply imbedded in her approach to the piano. As Ned Rothenberg writes in his liner notes for the album, "the music of Messiaen, Bach, Ligeti and Stravinsky lie deep in her musical memory bank alongside Monk, Mengelberg, Bley and Taylor." The two traditions complement one another throughout Courvoisier's work, so it comes as no surprise that she both brings a captivating sense of urgent spontaneity to *The Rite of Spring*, but also creates an ingenious dialogue with the classic work in her own composition.

*"The Rite of Spring* is a piece I've loved for as long as I can remember," Courvoisier says. "It's not an easy piece. This project was an incredible challenge."

*The Rite of Spring – Spectre d'un songe* was born of a gesture. Courvoisier toured for a decade with the renowned Flamenco dancer and choreographer Israel Galván, performing his piece *La Curva*. At one moment in that piece, Galván flung his arms over his head in a pose that reminded the pianist of Vaslav Nijinsky, the legendary dancer who choreographed *Le Sacre du printemps* for its notorious 1913 premiere with the Ballets Russes in Paris. From then on, Courvoisier would often quote *The Rite of Spring* at that point in the performance. The interjections sparked Galván's interest and inspired a new dance project set to the full piece.

Courvoisier began work on a solo arrangement of *The Rite of Spring*, taking liberties with the original in the spirit of jazz interpretation. The Stravinsky family, however, would allow piano performances of *The Rite* only in the composer's version for two pianos or four hands. With this new direction in mind, she sought out a fellow pianist who could not only master the rigors of Stravinsky's arrangement but also engage with Courvoisier and *The Rite* through her new composition, "Spectre d'un songe." Saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock suggested Cory Smythe, who proved to be the perfect partner. Smythe is equally

immersed in the classical and improvised music worlds, having worked with a range of genre-defying composers including Laubrock, Anthony Braxton, Vijay Iyer, and Tyshawn Sorey, and won a Grammy Award for his collaboration with classical violinist Hilary Hahn.

“Cory is much more classically trained than I am,” Courvoisier says. “He was a great help to me in shaping the dynamics and the phrasing. He’s very detail-oriented about piano techniques, which was fantastic. We’ve become really close friends through this process.”

“I’d admired Sylvie’s playing from afar for a long time,” Smythe adds. “It was exciting when she reached out to me about this project. Getting to be immersed in her sound has been revelatory for me. Obviously what she does as an improviser and composer is extraordinary – bold, strange, immense – and she has a kind of dynamism across a wide range of sonic possibilities at the piano that I strive for in my own playing. Trying to invent alongside her has been challenging in the best possible way for me. And the same’s been true in the Stravinsky. Even though that’s calling on a kind of pianism that could perhaps be a bit more in my wheelhouse than hers, I often find what she does with it so compelling and instructive.”

The pair gave a series of performances in Europe with Galván’s choreography, always following *The Rite* with Courvoisier’s “Spectre d’un songe.” The piece is an impressionistic response to Stravinsky, elaborating on specific moods or ideas to provide a structure for venturesome improvisation. The 30-minute performance captured here is compelling and beautiful, refracting hints and elements from *The Rite* through a starkly modern prism.

“I was always struck by how thoroughly and instantly Sylvie’s playing would transform,” Smythe says. “Her music cleverly picks up little threads from Stravinsky and weaves them into unusual costumes – without pinning any obvious quotes to the lapels.”

For Courvoisier, the experience has imbued her own singular musical vocabulary with elements from Stravinsky’s, a further evolution of what is already one of the most distinctive voices in improvised music. “It’s inspiring to dig into a great piece like this,” Courvoisier says. “When you study and practice this music, you begin to integrate it the same way you do a jazz tune,” she explains. “It took me probably two years to learn it, maybe more, and when you live with a piece like that it changes your whole approach. Then when you improvise it comes back. I think it’s part of my language now.”

### **Sylvie Courvoisier**

Pianist-composer Sylvie Courvoisier, a native of Switzerland, has earned just renown for balancing two distinct worlds: the deep, richly detailed chamber music of her European roots and the grooving, hook-laden sounds of the downtown jazz scene in New York City, her home for more than two decades. Few artists feel truly at ease in both concert halls and jazz clubs, playing improvised or composed music. But Courvoisier – “a pianist of equal parts audacity and poise,” according to *The New York Times* – is as compelling when performing Stravinsky’s iconic *Rite of Spring* in league with flamenco dancer-choreographer Israel Galván and pianist Cory Smythe as she is when improvising with her own widely acclaimed jazz trio, featuring bassist Drew Gress and drummer Kenny Wollesen. Then there are her ear-opening collaborations with such avant-jazz luminaries as John Zorn, Wadada Leo Smith, Evan Parker, Ikue Mori, Yusef Lateef, Susie Ibarra, Ned Rothenberg, Andrew Cyrille, Mark Feldman, Ken Vandermark, Nate Wooley and Mary Halvorson.

### **Cory Smythe**

Pianist Cory Smythe has worked closely with pioneering artists in new, improvisatory, and classical music, including multi-instrumentalist-composer Tyshawn Sorey, violinist Hilary Hahn, and transdisciplinary composers from Anthony Braxton to Zosha Di Castri. His own music “dissolves the lines between composition and improvisation with rigor” (*Chicago Reader*), and his first record was praised by Jason Moran as “hands down one of the best solo recordings I’ve ever heard.” Smythe has been featured at the Newport Jazz, Wien Modern, and Mostly Mozart festivals. He has been commissioned by Present Music, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and the International Contemporary Ensemble, of which he is a longtime

member. Smythe received a Grammy award for his work with Ms. Hahn and a 2022 Herb Alpert Award in music.

### **Pyroclastic Records**

Pianist-composer Kris Davis founded Pyroclastic Records in 2016. By supporting artists in the dissemination of their work, Pyroclastic empowers emerging and established artists to continue challenging conventional genre-labeling within their fields. Pyroclastic also seeks to galvanize and grow a creative community, providing opportunities, supporting diversity and expanding the audience for noncommercial art. Its albums often feature artwork by prominent visual artists—Julian Charrière, Dike Blair, Mimi Chakarova, Jim Campbell and Raymond Pettibon among recent examples.

2023 Pyroclastic projects include albums from Ingrid Laubrock, Mark Dresser, Sylvie Courvoisier and Cory Smythe, Brandon Seabrook, Kris Davis, and Angelica Sanchez.

**Sylvie Courvoisier & Cory Smythe – *The Rite of Spring – Spectre d'un songe*  
Pyroclastic Records – PR 26 – Recorded December 2-4, 2021  
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