

Lisa Hannigan with s t a r g a z e

Start time: 7.30pm

Running time: 1 hour 15 mins – no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Martin Aston speaks to Lisa Hannigan about how she found a new, more spacious sound on her most recent record *On Swim* and why working with s t a r g a z e felt like a trip to sea.

The first time Lisa Hannigan collaborated with an orchestra, she found the experience, 'incredibly exciting, because of the sheer of the sound and feeling, but also nerve-wracking. Playing my songs sometimes feels like a tiny rowboat muddling along, and then this ocean liner comes along that I'm desperately trying not be run over by!'

By comparison, the Dubliner's live work with s t a r g a z e - the northern European orchestral collective typically numbering 12 or 13 - is more manageable, yet equally exciting, going by their live collaborations, starting at the Cork Opera House in 2015 and most recently at Berlin's PEOPLE festival in June 2018. 'When I first rehearsed with s t a r g a z e,' Hannigan recalls, 'they were sitting in a circle, facing each other, and as they started to play my song, it was like they all climbed into my tiny boat.'

Hannigan's aquatic metaphors mirror her deep love for the ocean, which fed into the titles of her 2008 debut *Sea Sew* and her most recent album, 2016's *At Swim* (2011's intervening album was titled *Passenger*). *Sea Sew* was recorded after Hannigan had spent six years in Damien Rice's band, principally as backing singer (but occasionally guitar, bass or drums), and represented a period of freedom and independence; consequently, the album was a burnished, lighter take on the folk-melancholic sound at the heart of Hannigan's work. Waving, not drowning then. *At Swim*, however, sounds quite the opposite: spectral, stark and weighty, as if she was drowning in her emotions.

As Hannigan explains, the title *At Swim* acknowledges one of her favourite novels, Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but it more closely described her state of mind. Having toured *Passenger* for two years, 'I was living between houses and countries, and didn't know what to do with myself,' she says. A move to London, to change her circumstances and hopefully kickstart a new album, backfired. 'I found the city isolating compared to Dublin; I had great people around me so it was probably coming from myself,' she ventures. 'I just couldn't plug into anything. Too often, songwriting felt like work. It's like pastry, you can't work it too much or it ends up too tough. *At Swim* sums up the feeling of being adrift, lost from myself and from anything solid and real, not knowing where land was.'

Then, to Hannigan's amazement, land ahoy! Or rather, Aaron Dessner of The National, who emailed her, out of the (big) blue, offering to collaborate. 'To this day, I've never asked Aaron why! Maybe it's something banal, like a playlist - though we've both worked with the Australian band Luluc. As a National fan, and of Aaron's productions, I was blown away by this good fortune. His enthusiasm and his love of making music was an open window to my stale process, and I started seeing things in a different light.'

Dessner produced *At Swim* while co-writing three ('Lo', 'Ora' and 'Barton') of the album's eleven songs, playing multiple instruments and organising the session musicians, including s t a r g a z e founder/conductor André de Ridder on violin and string arrangements. Dessner encouraged Hannigan to abandon instrumental ballast. 'Initially, I was afraid to sound stark,' she says, 'but over time, I realised it was the right expression for the songs. Aaron taught me a lot about judicious textural approaches and atmosphere, as opposed to how I'd always heard arrangements, as contrapuntal melodies working off each other.'

Dessner brought some of The National's unmistakable sombre gravitas, but Hannigan contributed just as many stark, dark hues. For example, 'Lo' and 'Prayers For The Dying' respectively addressed the dread of insomnia and the loss of a friend's parent after a lengthy marriage. And while *Sea Sew* had a song called 'Splishy Splashy', *At Swim* included the likes of 'We, The Drowning.'

Hannigan's writing block even extended to words, so she set Anahorish by Irish poet Seamus Heaney to music ('it looked like a song on the page, the way it's divvied up'). Of the two new songs being played tonight (added to a selection of songs from Hannigan's three albums, with an emphasis on *At Swim*), 'Swan' has words (at her request) by Irish playwright Enda Walsh.

Hannigan clearly loves collaboration; solo voyages, after all, can be lonely endeavours. De Ridder and s t a r g a z e love collaboration too. Driven by 'what's going on in contemporary pop, electronica and other uncategorisable genres in and around these confines,' the collective has worked with the likes of Owen Pallett, Villagers, Matthew Herbert, Terry Riley and Deerhoof, and have performed songbooks by Sufjan Stevens, Mica

Levi and Boards Of Canada, while previous Barbican performances include collaborations with Julia Holter, Nils Frahm and POLIÇA.

Both parties are happy, compatible co-voyagers. Hannigan appreciates De Ridder for his, 'lightness of touch and sense of movement. He really understands my songs.' In turn, de Ridder notes Hannigan's, 'pure enthusiasm and appreciation for her collaborators' efforts, an artistic generosity towards experimentation. Yet Lisa always knows what she wants and keeps the essence of the song in the most charming manner.' Together, the Barbican is in for a special evening. No lifejackets required.

Performers

Lisa Hannigan vocals, guitar

Caimin Gilmore double bass
Ross Turner drums

st a r g a z e are:

André de Ridder conductor

Mayah Kadish violin
Shelley Sørensen violin
Thora Sveinsdottir viola
Zosia Jadodinska cello
Maaike van der Linde flute
Marlies van Gangelen oboe
Deirdre O'Leary clarinet
Romain Bly trumpet, horn
Kobi Arditi trombone
Maria Schneider percussion
David Six piano