

Circuit des Yeux with LCO Soloists + Valentina Magaletti

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 130 minutes, including interval

7pm Doors

7.30pm Valentina Magaletti

8.10pm Interval

8.30pm Circuit des Yeux with LCO Soloists

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Selim Bulut spoke to Circuit des Yeux's Haley Fohr about the making of her latest record, *-io*.

Please note, Valentina Magaletti is now opening the concert, instead of Ka Baird.

It was during a period of grieving that Circuit des Yeux – the primary music project of Indiana-born, Chicago-based vocalist, composer, and singer-songwriter Haley Fohr – created her latest album, *-io*. There was personal grief, with Fohr reeling from the death of a close friend shortly before she began writing the record, and there was the collective grief of the pandemic, which struck a few months later. 'I'd never met death that way before,' Fohr says.

Fohr had to forgo her usually collaborative songwriting process in lockdown. Yet despite *-io*'s introspective creation and subject matter, it still has a huge sound. Fohr had envisioned recording with an orchestra, and she stuck to this plan even with COVID restrictions. She wrote, arranged, and produced the album at home, then recorded strings, horns, and drums in the studio with limitations in place. As only six musicians were allowed to record together at any one time, she had to build *-io*'s 24-piece string, brass, and wind ensemble piece-by-piece. At the heart of this expansive sound is Fohr's distinctive four-octave voice, which commands the full attention of the listener.

-io was released in October 2021, but she has only recently been able to perform it live. Taking the songs on the road has been a relief. 'My voice is so big – it's very operatic – so I wasn't really able to practise in quarantine for two years as I live with neighbours,' she says. 'So just by using my voice that way, I feel healthier. I've gotten a lot of energy that I've been holding inside of me out.' Playing the songs every night has provided Fohr with some emotional clarity, too: 'I can feel the evolution of meaning within the songs as I play them live. Despite the dark story told with the release of this record, it feels valiant and triumphant and positive and affirming through this action of repeating it over and over.'

Fohr's live band is made up of four people, which she calls 'the Core'. There's Haley Fohr herself (on guitar and voice), then Ashley Guerrero (drums), Andrew Scott Young (bass), and Whitney Johnson (viola). For this tour, she's also been performing with different string ensembles in each destination, meeting local musicians on the day and rehearsing for a couple of hours before each show. 'It's my first time bringing sheet music to, essentially, strangers – people who are just very good at playing violin or cello,' Fohr says. 'I don't have an ensemble director, so I'm essentially composing and conducting everything myself.'

There are typically between four and seven players in the ensemble on each tour date, so Fohr adapted *-io* for these smaller groups and reframed certain voicings for different instruments. Everything is 'buoyed' around Fohr's voice: 'I'm the nucleus. When I sing, it's so dynamic and my voice takes up so much space. It puts a lot of pressure on me, but it's pressure that I like.'

barbican

For tonight's Milton Court show, Fohr is working with five soloists from the London Contemporary Orchestra. 'We've had a lot of long email threads,' she explains of the collaboration. 'They've already got the sheet music, so a lot of it is simple logistics: 'Measure 5, is this note correct? Which way should my bow be moving on Measure 6?' But there's also this overarching language that I'm still learning. I use very abstract terms when I'm trying to explain 'this passage is supposed to sound like 5,000 butterflies being released at once', or 'this is an overcast sky with heavy large raindrops falling'. These things can mean different things to different people. For me, that's where the interest lies. It's where things can change and differ from night-to-night. I welcome people's interpretations into my sheet music, which I think isn't always the case with composers. I like to leave space for everyone involved to express a part of themselves.'

Fohr started Circuit des Yeux aged eighteen and has released a total of six studio albums since 2008 (as well as an additional two albums of dark country music under the alias Jackie Lynn). In the past, her live shows were focused solely on her most recent album, but on this tour she has begun to incorporate music from her previous two records, 2017's *Reaching for Indigo* and 2015's *In Plain Speech*. 'I've designed the live set to circumvent the heaviness that *-io* presents all the way through, by putting in songs from other parts of my career,' Fohr says. 'I wanted to do this for people who've followed me for a long time. I've been playing music professionally for almost a decade now. I want to give that scope of what we've all accomplished and been through.'

Five months have passed since *-io*'s release, and Fohr has a different perspective on the album today than she did five months ago. 'I wasn't in a healthy mindset when the album came out,' she says frankly. 'I wanted to be, but I wasn't there yet. Speaking about it was very sensitive for me. I wanted to be as honest as I could. But now, I feel – I don't know, it unlocked my brain. I'm no longer in this cage. It's very liberating. I love performing music outside of that mindset.' Depression and grief, she adds, 'is such a foggy thing. I feel removed from it now. I feel healthy and lighter. I'm realising what else that album means to me. There are a lot of themes of unconditional love and the power of units in a whole, and even themes of standing up for yourself – there's a whole song about learning to argue, and the value of debate. It's given me a lot of other insight, in a very glorious, almost golden-hued way.'

Performers

Haley Fohr vocals, guitar

Ashley Guerrero drums

Andrew Scott Young bass

Whitney Johnson viola

LCO soloists

Eloisa-Fleur Thom violin leader

Agata Daraskaite violin I

Zahra Benyounes violin II

Brian O'Kane cello

Sergio Serra cello

Valentina Magaletti percussion

Produced by the Barbican



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