

A Melancholy Muse

With a jazz-edged mix of her native Sweden's folk songs and classic singer-songwriter sensibilities, *Emilia Mårtensson* has become one of the most distinctive singers on the UK scene in recent years. First gaining attention through her ongoing work with the award-winning Kairos 4tet, and now back with her self-assured and shimmering second solo album, *Ana*, the effervescent singer talks to **Peter Quinn** about her love of the dark side of her folkloric roots and her highly personal take on bringing the art of song and jazz together

“I’m quite a happy person, but I fall in love with sad songs,” Emilia Mårtensson says. Sitting in the bar of Kettner’s, Soho, the London-based Swedish singer reveals just quite how sad some of these songs are. Take, for example, the traditional Swedish folk song ‘När Som Jag Var På Mitt Adertonde År’ (‘When I was in my 18th year’) featured on her beautiful new album, *Ana*.

“It’s about a girl who writes a letter to her parents saying that she’s fallen in love with a man,” she tells me, “but he has another woman who he treasures.” You sense the impending doom. “She says, I don’t know how to explain this to you, but this is a love bigger than anything I’ve felt – although I have a lot of love for you and thank you so much for always being there for me. I can’t deal with this, so I’ll see you in heaven – and she commits suicide.” Sheesh, I didn’t think it was going to end *that* badly – they don’t mess around in these Swedish folk songs. “It’s very dark,” Emilia notes, “it’s extremely sad, but there’s something very beautiful in sadness.” There are some happy Swedish folk songs, right? “I’m sure,” she replies. “I just don’t sing them.”

Growing up in southern Sweden, in a tiny village called Brösarp very close to Malmö – Emilia went to school in Ystad, for fans of *Wallander* – the influence of her native folk music informs and colours her own music in quite profound ways. While Sweden is especially noted for its fiddle and nyckelharpa music (seemingly everyone in her village played the latter), Emilia felt herself particularly drawn to its vocal music and traditions such as Sankta Lucia.

“Sankta Lucia is something you grow up with. It takes place every 13 December and it’s my favourite Swedish tradition, because of the music mainly – it’s so beautiful and atmospheric. It’s based on an Italian tradition, I don’t know why, it’s very strange.”

Indeed, Lucia’s legend stems from Sicily, dating from a time when the powers-that-be did not look favourably upon Christianity. So when Lucia gave away her entire dowry to the poor, the man she was due to marry was a little peeved. Needless to say, things ended badly for Lucia – put on trial, she was sentenced to be burnt at the stake. When the guards tried to get the fire going it wouldn’t light. While you might have taken that as a divine signal, the guards thought otherwise and stabbed her instead.

“The 13 December is supposed to be the coldest day of the year in Sweden,” Emilia

continues, “and it happens to be on the same day that this Italian saint died. She was dressed in white and the blood ran down her dress. So we dress in white dresses with a red ribbon around our waist, and because she was a saint we have candles in our hair. We sing these beautiful melodies in harmony. The music would be mainly a *cappella* – it’s incredible. And it’s all about giving people light in the darkest time of the year. That’s where I get a lot of my influences.”

This tradition has been part of Emilia’s life from nursery onwards and she performs it to this day, with friends in London. And the influence from folk music doesn’t end there. While you might think that Joe Henderson’s ‘Black Narcissus’ (also featured on *Ana*) is a world away from unaccompanied folk singing, Emilia sees strong connections between the two.

“I feel myself drawn to certain songs because of the melody line. For me, the melody of ‘Black Narcissus’ is very melancholic and folky. And in that way I feel it’s very similar to a Swedish folk melody. That’s why I find myself falling in love with those kind of melodies.”

Another hugely important part of Emilia’s musical make-up is her love of classic singer-songwriters: Paul Simon, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell. And turning pop material into a jazz

“You try and connect with it, emotionally, and then say it in a conversational way. I think that’s quite a jazz approach.”

vehicle presents its own challenges.

“The beauty of coming from a jazz angle is that you get to be more creative in your approach when it comes to the melody. Going to music school teaches you how to be free with the phrasing and improvise in that kind of way. And it doesn’t necessarily have to be a jazz standard for you to do that. I love approaching songs in more of a conversational way. Like even now, I’m improvising when I’m speaking, right? It’s the same thing when you’re approaching a song. Looking at it like, what does this mean to me? Obviously it meant something specific to Paul Simon when he wrote the song. What does it mean to me, how would I communicate it and then deliver it in that way? Then that becomes improvising, because the phrases become more

conversational. You try and connect with it, emotionally, and then say it in a conversational way. I think that’s quite a jazz approach.”

Emilia caught the singing bug at a very early age, joining her first choir aged five. “My mum put me in a choir to make me shut up, because I was singing too much around the home,” she recalls, laughing at the memory. “I remember singing some songs that were quite swingy and jazzy – I realise now, although I didn’t know at the time – and they were definitely my favourite songs back then.” It was in her early teens when she really started singing jazz, when a drum teacher at her school placed her in a jazz ensemble. By the age of 15 she was singing regularly at her parents’ restaurant, which was to become one of the leading jazz spots in the area featuring artists such as Rigmor Gustafsson.

Moving to the UK in 2000, Emilia’s first port of call was the Colchester Institute, where she studied for a year, mentored by Trudy Kerr. It was while taking her subsequent music degree at Trinity in London that she made several enduring friendships, including Adam Waldmann with whom she performs in Kairos 4tet. Along with Waldmann and others – Jason Yarde, Andrew McCormack, Ivo Neame and Jasper Hoiby – she was name-checked as one of ‘The new faces of British jazz’ in *The Observer* in 2011. “I don’t know if that was as big as it sounds,” she laughs, “but I was very happy to be chosen.” Emilia was the only singer, and the only female. So, a pretty big deal.

“One of the reasons I love living in London so much is the music scene here,” Emilia says, “the people that surround you. They become your family and we inspire each other. I find the jazz community very, very supportive in general. I think a lot of people are surprised about how well the singers get on. It’s something people say a lot, actually – you guys get on so well. There’s no competition.”

Another close musical relationship forged at Trinity is with pianist Barry Green, a key presence on Emilia’s debut *And So It Goes...* and the new album. “I’ve always loved singing with him,” she notes. “Barry is one of a few that are really good at accompanying singers. That’s a skill in itself, being able to be that sensitive. I’ve really reached this dream band. I guess when you start out doing your own stuff you have an idea of how you want to feel when you’re singing. And this is the first time, actually, that I feel like I can completely do whatever I want. It feels great.” ■

