

Hope Still Needed

Interview with Karolina Naziemiec, Polish jazz singer and viola player, living in Los Angeles since 2001

By Bożena U. Zaremba

Your new album of WWII-related songs is entitled “Songs of Hope.” Hope, for what?

Hope for a better future, hope for happiness, for finding or reclaiming love. This is the main message of this album. The songs are from the WWII era, when people went through many hardships, and turns and twists, and really did not know what tomorrow would bring. They were only hoping that everything would turn out all right, or, at least, that things would get better.

Not all of the songs are from that period, though.

Yes, that is true. There are two songs not exactly from the WWII era – “If You Go Away” and “Morning Star,” but they still talk about nostalgia and longing; they talk about fear and worry that the people we love may suddenly be gone forever. “If You Go Away” is especially close to me, because I have recently experienced the pain of parting with or losing close ones. In 2007, my beloved grandmother died, and in 2012, I lost my mother. Being far away from Poland made it especially hard. I think that after these tragic losses, I can better understand what people go through when they lose someone or something important to them.

This is also the only song on this CD that you sing in three languages.

I chose this song for special reasons – first of all, because of my personal connection, but also because, as far as I know, such an arrangement – in three languages – has not been recorded. It was originally written in French; Wojciech Młynarski did an excellent translation into Polish; and the English language fits the message of the song perfectly. I love the French language and believe that it’s well-suited to songs in general. Not all songs translate well into other languages, and not all sound good in every language. In the case of this song – although the text has been slightly changed – the main idea behind it and the emotions are expressed with the same intensity in every language.

The three-language version also underscores the universal implications.

Absolutely.

How did you come up with the idea for this album?

I wanted to pay tribute to WWII heroes, to those who died and those who survived. It has been 70 years since the war ended and I can see that fewer and fewer people who participated in the war are still alive. I observe this in the Polish community here in Los Angeles, for example.

Who do you address this album to?

This album can be enjoyed by people of all generations, I think. Everyone has been scarred by the war, including my generation, even though I wasn't alive at that time. But I heard a lot from my grandparents. On the other hand, my parents, who belonged to the post-war generation, knew the problems of the rebuilding process; they experienced the attempts to regain some routine after the destruction brought about by the war. I also want to reach out to young people, because most of these songs are not known to them. Overall, I wanted to present these songs, to bring them back, and to refresh them through a contemporary sound, as well as uplifting arrangements and faster than usual tempos.

Your voice matches European style – French or Polish – more than English, and is reminiscent of Grażyna Auguścik, rather than Sarah Vaughan or Vera Lynn, the original performer of “The White Cliffs of Dover.”

I am a Pole, first of all; I was raised in the Polish culture and spent most of my life in Poland, which certainly influenced the shaping of my style and my soul. It is definitely a Slavic soul. Besides, lyrical singing is much closer to my heart than the screaming and over-singing, so prevalent in today's singing style, especially in pop music. I wanted to challenge what is most popular and widespread these days and what is most agreeable to young people and perhaps to 21st century people in general. They all want everything to happen now, and the louder, the better. My album certainly does not fit “easy listening.” You have to muse over it and to open your ears to hear what I want to convey.

You are a classically trained viola player and that is your main occupation. When did you decide to start singing?

I come from a musical family, though I am the first professional musician. Music was always an important part of my life. I was surrounded by singing. Nowadays, you sit at a TV or a computer, or you send text messages, and I come from a family that would sit down at family gatherings to talk and sing, whether it was Christmas carols, war songs, or festive songs. When my parents were students in Krakow, they often went on weekend hikes and retreats with other fellow students; they knew lots of songs and had beautiful voices. When I was a student at Warsaw's Academy of Music, I was very much interested in jazz and wanted to additionally study jazz singing, but at that time in Poland, there was a clear division – if you are an instrumentalist, you need to focus on being an instrumentalist. In the US, people treat this as an additional talent, not as an obstacle to your being a good musician. And then, while I was studying at the University of Southern California, I met Carmen Bradford, a great jazz vocalist, who was enthusiastic about my voice. This gave me wings.

How do you, a foreigner, operate on the American music market?

I am trying to find my place as a singer. As an instrumentalist, I have already earned some status. What creates some difficulty is that most jazz standards are sung in English, which is my second language. As a consequence, the right pronunciation sometimes creates a challenge. I came to this country as an adult and some things are simply impossible to overcome. But I have a wonderful mentor and friend, who worked with me on this album. I just need to work twice as hard as native speakers.

How is this album going to stand out on the American market?

In my mind, through the consistency of its message. This is not just another album with jazz standards, but a coherent and logical recording, both in the subject matter and on the musical level.

How did you find the musicians?

I know most of them from the Los Angeles music scene, either from USC or from recording sessions for feature films, sitcoms or animated movies, in which I participate as a viola player. Since I received a thorough musical education and I can appreciate a high level of musical mastery, it was my dream to make a recording with musicians I respect. And I made it! I was really lucky to get some of the top jazz musicians in LA. They are all very busy and gathering all of them for a recording session at the same time and place was like a miracle.

Why did they decide to collaborate with you? Was it for musical reason or were they inspired by the idea behind this album?

First, it was because they knew me from previous projects. Also out of friendship, I think. Although I had initially told them about the message I wanted to communicate in this album, it was only during the recording sessions that they started to appreciate it. For example, Peter Erskine, who is a fantastic drummer, after we finished recording, said that this album has a lot of heart in it. It was a huge compliment, especially since it was paid by a guy who works with Diana Krall.

Do we need this hope today?

Definitely. Even though WWII ended decades ago, American and Polish soldiers fight on many fronts. We still don't have world peace and a lot of countries suffer in the same way as they did 70 years ago. Consider the latest terror attacks. It is sad and overwhelming that in the 21st century, though we should have learned from past mistakes, and realized that violence does not take us anywhere, and the war is not an answer to anything, there are conflicts all over the world and people die. Those who lose their loved ones still need this hope.

More about the artist on: <http://karolinanaziemiec.com/wordpress/pl/home/>. The album is available on Rhombus Records: <http://www.rhombus-records.com/artists24.htm#257>, as well as on Amazon and iTunes.