



Reception of Diana Krall, Unique Jazz Phenomenon.

By **Zuzana Ben Lassoued-Balazshazyová**. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018. 189 pp. ISBN 978-3631745755.

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Diana Krall's debut album, *Stepping Out* (1993), is a delightful venture, more illustrative of her piano playing than her vocals, but at least in 1993 you could say that her piano playing was more interesting than her vocals. She has a light, playful touch on the album, charmingly unpredictable in her ideas and effortlessly drifting in and out of synch with her rhythm section, who leave lots of space for her. Eight years later, *The Look of Love* (2001) finds her engulfed in Claus Ogerman's over-the-top

arrangements and studio production, her piano playing subsumed, her vocals enhanced and her image recast into a diva lounging in stiletto heels. If there ever was a topic suitable for reception history in jazz then surely the transformation of Diana Krall would be one. The question is, as the title of this book suggests: is she a unique jazz phenomenon? Probably not, but she is a very successful one.

Krall grew up in British Columbia, was recognized as a prodigy, and attended Berklee on a scholarship, followed by a stint in Los Angeles and eventually landed in Toronto (where she recorded her debut album for Justin Time) and New York. Her career has been continuously ascendant and diverse, collaborating with Elvis Costello (her husband), T-Bone Burnett, and Tony Bennett. She has won Grammy and Juno awards, has had numerous albums firmly lodged in the Billboard charts, and has received the Order of Canada.

Zuzana Ben Lassoued-Balazshazyová's book is based on her PhD dissertation obtained at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. Krall's ethnic background is Slovakian, and the author is keen to demonstrate connections that enhance a narrative that places her in a specific cultural context by tracing her family's roots, even going so far as to reproduce a facsimile of



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Krall's great grandmother's birth certificate (b. 1884). How this is relevant to Krall's music remains unclear as there is no discernable musical connection between Krall and Slovakia. The book opens with what seems to be a manifesto of sorts, with sections titled "Sociological reasons for complete understanding of music" and "Aesthetical, philosophical and musical factors leading to a complete understanding of music," riddled with antiquated and uninformed assertions about art and society. We are left with the impression that all of this somehow is necessary to justify either the scholarly intent of the work or the integrity of Krall's music, or both. Either way, it doesn't do Krall justice.

The bulk of the book is about comparisons between Krall and other jazz performers. A case in point is the comparison drawn between Coltrane and Krall (pp. 27-30), based on their respective use of microtonal inflections derived from Indian music, in which the real issue seems to be the impossibility of notating the inflections that most jazz performers use; Coltrane clearly was listening to Indian music and emulating aspects of it, but I doubt that Krall was or is doing the same. Similarly, Ben Lassoued-Balazsházyová sets up a number of incongruous and tenuous connections between Krall and Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Bud Powell, Teddy Wilson, McCoy Tyner, and Art Tatum. For example, in the section on Bill Evans, she offers the following analysis: "However, her subdued style does not sound impressionistic [whereas Evans does], but rather mysterious (but not blurry) and calm in a more punctuated style with less or no pedal, not related to any musical period but by her own style" (p. 67). (All of the transcriptions used in the comparisons, incidentally, have no copyright clearance statements, and have been taken from published transcriptions, albeit "transcribed and rewritten in Finale," as indicated in the verso.) And confoundingly: "The major difference between Diana Krall and Art Tatum is that Art Tatum was unpredictable due to his tendency to change keys multiple times within a phrase whereas Diana Krall's style is easier to anticipate because she does not use many key changes or chord substitutions like Tatum" (p. 95).

Perhaps the most tenable connection is between Krall and Nat "King" Cole, but not necessarily framed as pianistic; again, here the analytical language is wanting: "Cole plays with a lighter 'hoppy-bouncy' touch with higher arch in his hand and more rounded fingers than Diana which makes his piano solos crystalline. Diana's hands were also bouncy initially but not light due to her intended punctuation" (p. 63). An analysis of Krall's vocal technique is plagued with dubious assertions about jazz singing in general and the various abilities of performers to be able to sing and play at the same time: "Therefore, singers such as Sarah Vaughan or Andy Bey have difficulties with piano because their first developed instrument was the voice, not a piano. Although Sarah Vaughan started playing piano at the age of 7, she never developed it to the level that Diana did." (p. 108) In other words, what makes Krall stand out is her ability to do both. By itself this is not an unusual or bold assertion but you are left with the impression that someone like Sarah Vaughan is an inferior musician, which is clearly not the case.

The analytical terminology used in the book is idiosyncratic and ideologically motivated, at least in the sense that Ben Lassoued-Balazsházyová's mission is to demonstrate Krall's artistic merits in light of the criticism she—not surprisingly—receives for her more commercially-oriented albums. The book clearly is a proclamation by the author of the value and integrity of Krall's music. As a revised dissertation published by an academic publisher it parades as musicological analysis (roughly two-thirds of the book deals with comparing transcriptions of her and others' music), which could add legitimacy or weight to that proclamation, but because of its shortcomings ends up undermining it. Aside from the numerous grammatical errors there is an insularity to the arguments presented, with solecistic terminology supporting them. Examples abound: "music autonomy" as a standard of musicianship (pp. 36-40); "popvocal-jazzpiano style" and "anti-rubato tempo" (pp. 103-4) as terms for describing the mix of popular music and jazz and phrasing. And in one of the more peculiar turns that the book takes, a quote from Bill Clinton describing his experience as a musician needing to interpret what is written on the page becomes the inspiration for a banal polemic titled "Music beyond music sheets." The book ends with a conclusion that it has "analyzed a relationship of multicultural environment, and solved the problem of identity and integrations of diaspora into a new macro and micro-environment" (p. 175). You get the picture.

Had this book been self-published I would not have felt the need to harp on its faults, as it is clear to me that Ben Lassoued-Balazsházyová is a knowledgeable piano teacher who is passionate about Diana Krall and sees it as her mission to promote Krall through establishing the legitimacy of her music. There is nothing wrong with that. What is wrong is that the publisher, Peter Lang, has let this work be published without any evidence that it has been reviewed by peers, let alone competent copy editors.