

Mother courage

The real Ellen Schoenaerts stands up with the release of an extraordinary debut album

Christophe Verbiest

I first got to know Ellen Schoenaerts (30) at the end of the previous decade, when she was writing the lyrics for her then boyfriend Tom Pintens. The latter, a veteran of the Antwerp music scene, with credentials that include a long stint in Zita Swoon, had always had sung in English. After accepting a gig where he needed to sing in Dutch, he panicked.

But Schoenaerts helped him out, and in the end, wrote the lyrics for three of his albums.

At that point, Schoenaerts had mainly worked as an actress – like her famous grandfather, the late Julien Schoenaerts, and her uncle, the now famous Matthias Schoenaerts. She also had a project with Marianne Loots, a combination of comedy and music.

But now Schoenaerts has brushed all those things aside. “It’s been a long quest, and very interesting for that matter, but I never had the feeling: This is what I want to do for the rest of my life,” she says. “Three, four years ago I felt I had to fully commit to music, because doing all the other things had made me unhappy. Finally the real Ellen is coming to the surface.”

That seems to be the right decision



The Ellen Schoenaerts Kwartet are (from left): Ephraim Cielen, Liesa Van der Aa, Ellen Schoenaerts and Tijs Delbeke

if you listen to her amazing debut album *Feiten* (*Facts*). Her lyrics are extremely frank without being exhibitionistic. It’s not difficult to find traces of her break-up with Pintens; she muses about her six-year-old son Oliver. Musically, she draws heavily on both chanson (Jacques Brel clearly springs to mind) and adventurous rock. Folk, chamber music and avant-garde have also influenced the songs.

No woman is an island

Schoenaerts, who plays a CD release concert in Antwerp on 2 December, worked on the album for two years. “I’m hysterically perfectionist,” she confides. “Some songs have been reworked five times.” She has no

difficulty pointing out the reason for this endless labour. “The songs started out live. We have been playing them live a lot, but it wasn’t simple to come up with versions that worked well on record.”

Three years ago, when she started playing live under her own name, Schoenaerts told me that playing concerts was far more important than making an album. “I discovered that I *do* like recording. It’s a very stressful, fierce and intense process. But playing live is still extremely important: It makes me happy.”

Surprisingly, the album is released under the name of the Ellen Schoenaerts Kwartet. “I haven’t done it alone,” she points out. “I wanted

to honour the great musicians with whom I work. They lift me up, and I respect them very deeply.” Those other musicians are the multi-instrumentalists Liesa Van der Aa, Tijs Delbeke and Ephraim Cielen. Together with producer Simon Lenski, they are responsible for the adventurous arrangements.

Many other musicians also passed by the studio. Bass player Hannes d’Hoine has even become a permanent member of Schoenaerts’ band. “Live, the line-up often alters, since the musicians have other obligations. In the past, I adapted the name to the line-up of each concert: septet, trio, etc. But I’ve decided to stick to quartet. It’s a beautiful and stylish name.”

Singing in Dutch

Schoenaerts sings in Dutch, still exceptional for a Flemish artist. “It’s

certainly no statement,” she confides. “I sing in Dutch because that’s my mother tongue. I don’t have to think about it. It happens spontaneously. But I feel more inspired by French chanson or other international artists. My heroes are Jacques Brel, Serge Gainsbourg, Rufus Wainwright and PJ Harvey. In Flanders, I love Zita Swoon, Gregory Frateur and DAAU.” The album is called *Feiten.*, with a full stop at the end. “It’s a sign of vigour and determination. I’m quite assertive,” she laughs. “Well, I do change my mind a lot, but always very assertively.”

She pauses. “I hate false modesty. It’s important for an artist to take risks and to be, in life as well as in art, courageous. And if you fail, so be it. It’s better to fail courageously than to succeed moderately. There’s a streak of megalomania in me.”

2 DECEMBER, 20.30

Monty

Montignystraat 3, Antwerpen

► www.radicalduke.com

MUSIC REVIEWS

Aranis

Made in Belgium • Home

For a decade now, Aranis have been combining chamber music with elements from rock, jazz and avant-garde. For their sixth album, *Made in Belgium*, they asked 10 Belgian composers (and their own Joris Van Vinckenroye) to write a new composition. Playful or absorbing, compelling or touching, the 12 tracks are quite diverse, but the intense performance of the six members (violin, accordion, guitar, piano, double bass, flute) binds them together to a beautiful album. Wim Mertens, Jan Kuijken, Geert Waegeman and Daniel Denis from Unvers Zero are among the contributing composers.

► www.aranis.be



The Bony King of Nowhere

The Bony King of Nowhere • [PIAS]

“I am a travelling man on the road,” sings The Bony King of Nowhere on his third, eponymously titled album.

Some of the tunes were written when The Bony King (otherwise known as Bram Vanparys) was making a long trip through Italy. Unsurprisingly, wandering as a metaphor for soul searching is an important theme. With the exception of a few unobtrusive guest contributions, Vanparys recorded the album on his own in the Walloon hamlet of Mirwart with only an acoustic guitar. The young Bob Dylan clearly is a point of reference for *The Bony King of Nowhere*, as is Townes Van Zandt. It’s a nice collection of songs, though not quite as impressive as his previous album *Eleonore*.

► www.thebonykingofnowhere.be

Blackie & The Oohos

Song for Two Sisters • Unday Sessions

This is the second album by the fivesome centred around the sisters Loesje and Martha Maieu. Earlier this year, the band made a new soundtrack for *Repulsion*, the spooky 1965 thriller by Roman Polanski. Blackie & The Oohos are, in any case, masters at creating a slightly sinister atmosphere. Their pop noir with folksy tinges is soberly arranged, the proverbial exception “When Light Falls in” also being less interesting. The rest, though, is a must if you like dreamy, fragile pop songs with a dark edge.

► www.myspace.com/blackietheoohos

Dez Mona

A Gentleman’s Agreement • 62TV

After a sober debut album, Antwerp sextet Dez Mona opted for baroque melodrama and sinister jazz on their next two records. Last year they released a contemporary opera. Now on their fifth album, *A Gentleman’s Agreement*, they’re trying to rock and have added a guitarist to the line-up. Still, they stay immediately recognisable, thanks to the torch-song voice of Gregory Frateur. They again exhibit a penchant for melodrama, but the most intimate song (“Fools’ Day”) is the highlight of the album. **cv**

► www.dezmona.com

Family concert by Bruocsella Symphony Orchestra

Experience the fun in a toymaker’s cottage when a young boy and girl encounter the notorious winter sprite, Frost, and the Winter Queen in the Bruocsella Symphony Orchestra’s Musical Winter Wonderland on 24 and 25 November. The concert will weave together a magical winter tale with lively orchestral music, songs and dance.

You will even learn a few things about a symphony orchestra. During the interval is an opportunity to meet members of the orchestra and to try out their instruments. Three performances are presented in three different languages: English, Dutch and French.

This annual event at the Sint-Pieters-Woluwe culture centre is very popular, so booking now is highly recommended. **Anna Jenkinson**

► www.bso-orchestra.be

