

Irene Jalenti, no longer a Baltimore secret

By Andrew Gilbert

Born into a family of illustrious Italian musicians, Irene Jalenti has followed a singular creative path as a jazz vocalist, songwriter and arranger who draws on an international array of kindred musical currents. Possessing a strikingly rich cello-like tone, she's equally impressive improvising a scat solo or interpreting a song with soulful intensity (across five languages). While her sound has often been compared to international legends such as Nina Simone, Mercedes Sosa, Cassandra Wilson, and Beth Carvalho, her phrasing, repertoire and poetic sensibility are all her own.

A creative force on the Baltimore jazz scene since 2010, Jalenti turned the pandemic-induced hiatus into an intensive writing workshop, composing and arranging a gorgeous set of material for her 2021 debut album *Dawn*. With guest stars Sean Jones on trumpet and flugelhorn and vibraphonist Warren Wolf, and her working trio led by pianist Alan Blackman, Jalenti crafted an album that announces the emergence of an artist who has carved out a niche unlike anyone else in jazz.

Among the album's highlights are Jalenti's graceful setting of the Spanish-language verse by Italian-Argentinian poet Alfonsina Storni, "Alma Desnuda," which features some radiant flugelhorn work, and her paean to the heaven's eternal rhythms, "Moon and Sun," another piece where Sean Jones' perfectly calibrated counter melody serves as an emotionally responsive foil to her voice. Inspired by a lyric from an ancient verse by Hellenic poet Meleager of Gadara, Jalenti's sensuous original "Dawn" closes the album, with Warren Wolf's shimmering vibraphone accompaniment enhancing her inviting dreamscape (while suggesting the luminous possibilities embodied by Jalenti).

As at least a third-generation musician, music is both a birthright and a family calling for Jalenti. It's a lineage that includes her paternal grandparents, several uncles, and her cousin Francesco Jalenti, a gifted jazz and classical guitarist who performed

widely around Italy. But she credits her father with shaping her musical evolution, from encouraging her childhood piano lessons to exposing her to a panoply of styles and traditions as she was growing up in Terni, a small industrial city in southern Umbria where she was born in 1980.

“He opened a music store in the 1960s, which he still owns,” she says. “He’s always appreciated all sorts of music, and he opened my ears to jazz, jazz orchestras, and singers like Nat Cole, Frank Sinatra, and Ray Charles. I remember hearing a version of ‘Summertime’ that Ella and Louis do together and being enchanted by Ella’s voice.”

Jalenti wrote a middle school thesis on African-American gospel and jazz (“I had a period when I’d just listen to Mahalia Jackson,” she recalls). Even as an adolescent Jalenti possessed a conspicuously low singing voice, and discovering Nina Simone made her feel even more at home in jazz. But it was participating in the Berklee at Umbria Jazz Clinic that inspired an epiphany that music could be a profession as well as a passion.

“Even with my family background I didn’t think it was an option for me,” she says. “That was such a key moment. The fact I was selected to perform at the final concert, the feedback I got, and the emptiness I felt when it was over told me I needed to pursue this.”

She continued her studies at Sienna Jazz and connected with some French jazz musicians, which led to regular visits to Paris. Constantly advised she needed to spend time in New York City, she marshalled her resources and made a six-month trip. She’d connected with pianist Lewis Porter after reading his acclaimed John Coltrane biography and he helped her land her first Manhattan gig, an afternoon slot at Cachaça opening for Jeff “Tain” Watts. Only four people showed up to hear the unknown singer, but one of them was bass legend Bob Cranshaw. She was on her way.

Jalenti made two more extended trips to New York before earning a full scholarship to the Peabody Conservatory in 2010. She went on to earn a Master's in jazz studies at Howard University, where she worked closely with Connaitre Miller. Miller encouraged her to focus on composing, which became a vehicle for integrating Jalenti's various musical interests. Her Peabody classmate César Orozco, a Cuban/Venezuelan pianist and violinist, introduced her to Latin American songs that brought her to Brazilian stars Maria Bethânia and Beth Carvalho and Argentine icon Mercedes Sosa.

"In Italy we love Latin American music, but I had this insane idea my voice was not suitable for Brazilian music," says Jalenti, who's working on a project focusing on the rich history on the contributions of Italian immigrants to Latin American poetry and music. "César introduced me to all these amazing musicians who showed me how wrong that was."

Given her accomplishments, Jalenti is something of a late bloomer when it comes to recording. Which doesn't mean she's been hiding out. Over the past decade she's performed and recorded with the award-winning a cappella jazz ensemble Afro Blue, as well as with stars such as Esperanza Spalding, Patti Austin, and the Count Basie Jazz Orchestra. Yolanda Adams, Chance the Rapper, Common, Kelly Clarkson, and Marc Anthony have all used her background vocal work.

On faculty at Syracuse University where she teaches Jazz and Commercial voice and directs the Orange Collective jazz choir, she's contributed to many projects and recordings by other artists and performed at high profile venues such as Blues Alley, the Kennedy Center, the Apollo Theater, the DC Jazz Fest, and even the White House. But Jalenti resisted making her own album for years despite encouragement by musical collaborators and queries from fans looking to buy CDs. She knew she didn't want to record a straight-ahead album of standards.

It wasn't until 2020, when the pandemic shutdown forced her to step off the daily grind of gigging, that she felt able to integrate all her various experiences and

influences. Within the sudden silence and seclusion, Jalenti “finally allowed my own music to come out,” she says. “I love jazz and standards, but what do I have to say? Who am I in this?”

Dawn provides a breathtaking answer, the first of many as she continues to expand her artistic vision. Jalenti has found her musical identity exploring out beyond the crossroads where jazz and Latin America and the Mediterranean converge. Expect a lot more beautiful music from her before the day is done.