

LISA MORGENSTERN: CHAMELEON

It's the voice, pure and pristine, that gets you first, wordlessly piercing a soft cloud of tremulous synths at the start of 'Atlas', the opening track on **LISA MORGENSTERN**'s outstanding **CHAMELEON**. Soon, it's swooping and soaring, increasingly impassioned yet perfectly poised, singing of desperation and deliverance, loss and salvation, and tracing a melody of spine-tingling grace and wonder. Its essence lingers long after the song's over, too: hers is a voice which provokes a response as physical as sentimental. What's even more striking, though, is that, as performer, composer and arranger, her capabilities are no less startling. **CHAMELEON**, which combines these consummate talents across its nine tracks, is consequently one of the most astonishing, assured albums you'll hear all year.

MORGENSTERN was raised the daughter of two orchestral musicians, their respective roots – Bulgarian and German – colouring her horizons as much as their occupation. As a child, she grew up with Stravinsky's *Rites Of Spring* as a bedtime lullaby and, while other children watched *Tom & Jerry*, she gorged on VHS tapes of ballets, from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* to what she considers her most sacred influence, Prokofiev's *Romeo & Juliet*. Indeed, though she began piano lessons at the age of five, performing competitively from a young age, ballet was her first true love – its elegance is still reflected today in the music she writes – and she spent much of her teens training to become a professional, only to be thwarted in her dream by a recurrent injury. She returned instead to music, the shadow of other parental preferences – to this day she warms up during soundchecks with songs by the likes of Frank Sinatra, Doris Day and Nina Simone – slowly enhanced by a growing love for punk, rock, metal and even Goth, all tempered by her affinity for choral works. (She's also a crucial force behind Berlin's leading Bulgarian Women's Choir.)

Few of these are obviously evident on **CHAMELEON**, named for the manner in which she constantly recalibrates her aesthetic approach, though they all played a small part in helping shape it. The same is true of her move to Berlin, a city which once inspired musicians to write for clubs, but which has, in recent years, pioneered the integration of classical arrangements into other popular forms of music. **MORGENSTERN** talks of how the city balances "chaos, speed and overload, loneliness, freedom and anonymity," and these contradictions have helped liberate her of formal habits to cultivate a style all her own. In fact, **CHAMELEON** was born of a challenge to create an album using only voice, piano and synths, and it comes as a shock to realise that its rhythms are merely implied, rather than performed on drums or programmed electronically.

Consequently, **CHAMELEON** swings effortlessly from moments of gentle, nimble beauty ('Answers') and fluid, ageless serenity ('At The Top Of A Tree') to eerie improvisation ('Deflowering'), otherworldly perfection ('Journey To The End Of Night') and, on 'Codex', a solo piano instrumental of extraordinary dexterity and grand romance. Its highlights, meanwhile – alongside 'Atlas' – are surely the tremulous compassion of 'Waltz Of A Loner', its emotional intricacy mirrored by its compositional complexity, and the eight minute, luxuriously shapeshifting 'Levitation', whose lotus-like blossoming gradually reaches an unexpected, ethereal climax.

The latter features Sebastian Plano on cello, and the Argentinian – currently signed to Mercury KX – was also responsible for co-producing the album. They first met while **MORGENSTERN** was working in a Hanover recording studio, and crossed paths again by chance after both moved to Berlin, where Plano immediately volunteered to work with her. He's just one of a growing host of admirers, and her flourishing reputation has led to performances across Europe in recent months with artists including Ólafur Arnalds and Max Cooper, as well as at festivals from Iceland Airwaves to Eurosonic to Pop Kultur and Reeperbahn Festival (where she will be playing at Elbphilharmonie 2019).

Wherever she's played, though, **MORGENSTERN** has won over her audience with **CHAMELEON**'s bewitching character. It may be her remarkable, multi-octave spanning voice that gets you first, but her songs – and their live execution, Morgenstern's arms often stretched either side of her as she simultaneously plays multiple instruments while singing – are irresistibly, intensely compelling too. There really is nothing quite like her, nor like **CHAMELEON** itself.