



everything
comes to she
who waits...

Pianist and composer **Rebecca Nash** has found that patience has its virtues, now that her career's taking off. **Tony Benjamin** wants to know more about the waiting gain...

Some big career moments come with a bang and all kinds of fireworks, others announce themselves more quietly, with just a discreet clearing of the throat. With her acclaimed second album leading to a gig at Ronnie Scott's and a prestigious live set on Radio 3's *J to Z* jazz showcase, it's clear that 2023 is going to be a watershed year for pianist, composer and bandleader Rebecca Nash, but she's staying fairly cool.

"I think it feels good" she muses. "Maybe I've just got a bit more space, but everything feels quite good for me in my music. I do feel excited - but I'm trying to be chilled about it."

We meet in her Bristol flat; she returned last year to the city where she grew up after a 20-year musical journey that took her first to Cardiff's Royal Welsh College, thence to London and the Trinity Laban Masters course before moving on to Birmingham and a teaching post at the Conservatoire there. On the way she's quietly distinguished herself as a core member of Dee Byrne's new band *Outlines*, (as well as *Entropi*), Nick Walter's *Paradox Ensemble* and her creative duo with singer/songwriter Sara Colman while, magpie-like, gathering her own choice of musicians for her own projects.

"I remember making a conscious decision when I was living in London to focus on a small handful of projects" she recalls. "Everything I do now feels so meaningful to me. I believe that ultimately you will gravitate towards the right people, and I feel really lucky to have all the working relationships that I do, not just the musicians but people like Michael at Whirlwind (Recordings), Nick Malcolm, Olie (Brice), Dee and Nick Walters - we were all in the same year at Trinity, and Matt (Fisher) was in the year above. These longstanding connections are special and play themselves out in the music. Nick Malcolm recently pointed out he and I have been on stages together for 15 years!"

/// 'I think that things take their own time and this is the conclusion I've come to - if you just keep one foot in the right direction generally it pays off. If you're patient and focused on the music everything else ideally will fall into place' ///

The album - *Redefining Element 78*, out now on Whirlwind Recordings - comprises a conceptual suite of music for her electro-acoustic sextet. It's a compelling combination of head and heart, with smartly creative compositional ideas realised through emotionally intelligent playing. Saxophonist John O'Gallagher, trumpeter Nick Malcolm and Jamie Leeming on guitar are all excellent but Nash's expressively sensitive piano is the music's core. Originally commissioned for the 2019 Bristol Jazz and Blues Festival, the piece celebrates Ian Thorn, a lifelong jazz fan from the city. Having met Ian and his wife Lois and discovering Ian's background as a research chemist Rebecca decided to use the 'platinum group' elements of the

periodic table as a starting point.

"It did start out as a sort of intellectual process but I never wanted the music to sound like that, as a sort of mathematical thing," she explains. "Sometimes the numbers just found their way into the music, like time signatures or certain structural things... I could explain more, but it would be really geeky. It gave me the shape of the ideas but then it needed to become something more meaningful. Music mustn't be boxed in, it can't be too strict."

O'Gallagher was a strong influence at the time, thanks to his book on 12-tone improvisation.


"John and I both teach at Birmingham Conservatoire and I was just looking for inspiration when I got the commission. I'd been talking to him about using tone rows and I was interested in his book. Sometimes it's good to give yourself a brief to explore music in a new way and that idea just happened to be there at that time. John was focusing his PhD on Coltrane's later recordings *Interstellar Space* and *Stellar Regions*. He was analysing Coltrane's use of tri-chords and he'd found it to be very organised - even though some people thought Trane had gone too far at the time. It's cool to set yourself different musical parameters sometimes and so I'm using this approach more and more at the moment."

Following the piece's successful Festival premiere, Nash was offered a day's recording in Real World studios near Bath at the beginning of 2020.

"It was the first time we'd played it together (in our new lineup) and then we went into lockdown. I listened back to the recording and for various reasons the session didn't quite reflect the potential of the music. I'm sure loads of musicians also feel like this: they put an album down and then as you play it out on tour your brain has more time to absorb the music, and rework the material. Then you know what adjustments could make it even better. So, we toured with it in 2021, did six dates, and were supposed to record it again in November '21 but I got Covid then John moved to Portugal. So it came about in its own time and we finally went in the studio in April 2022. Listening back, I think it was definitely worthwhile re-recording it."



Rebecca Nash at the piano with singer Sara Colman



“You don’t realise sometimes, when you’re just getting by, how unusual it is to suddenly be surrounded by just women. It feels very special when it happens, really productive and supportive – creatively important, actually”


Running alongside the album’s development, Nash has been very involved with Rise Up, a project started by Midlands arts organisation B:Music at Birmingham’s Symphony Hall, now in its second year.

“Rise Up is a really good thing and I feel passionate about that project. It’s a place for female musicians to meet like-minded others to talk, and explore their writing with one another. They get one-to-one tuition with people they choose and there are workshops: Nikki Iles is doing one this year, Sara Colman led one on arranging songs, there’s Sarah Farmer, who is looking at free improv, and Emily Jones came and did a business industry thing. The aim is to cover a wide range of topics: business, composition, performance, and also explore how it feels to be a woman in jazz in a safe environment.

“You don’t realise sometimes when you’re just getting by, how unusual it is to suddenly be surrounded by all women. It can feel very special and supportive – and so important, actually. I don’t have loads of horror stories like some female jazz musicians sadly do about feeling continually discriminated against or people being outright sexist, but it can be subtle sometimes and is definitely still an issue. I also think you can feel more pressure as a woman in jazz. I have always thought that if you are a good musician then people are going to respect you but what I can actually say is that I still get ‘Oh, you’re the singer’ from time to time! And then people say ‘Well, you play the piano – but do you sing?’

“I went to see Nikki Iles’ big band not long ago and I realised that she is – in this country, for me – one of the few other role models I have as a female pianist band leader. That in itself is a bit weird. She’s doing so well now and that is so great to see.”

It’s a typically generous – and genuine – thing for Nash to say and no doubt it’s her positivity that ensures the longevity of her collaborations. Looking ahead, she’s anticipating a busy year with a whole range of projects besides promoting the album, including a duo thing with Nick Walters: “It’s kind of Røyksopp meets ambient electronica. We were trying to create a similar big soundscape-y sound to Paradox Ensemble but as a duo. It’s a lot more manageable than an 11-piece band! It’s kind of dancey, ravey, festively... Then Sara and I have just a couple more tracks left to record for *Ribbons*, an album of singer-songwriter material, with contributions from Iain Ballamy, Percy Pursglove and Ruth Hammond on bass clarinet. I’m excited to have a new commission from the Thorns to develop and I’ve just started working with the Birmingham Jazz Orchestra. It’s a brilliant collective and a great opportunity to arrange for big band. I’m really wanting to deepen my practice at the moment and also maybe write for strings. It’s really lovely to play with strings.

“I’m excited by all of this stuff. I feel so lucky – like all my various musical needs are covered by the range of projects I’m involved with. I think that things take their own time and this is the conclusion I’ve come to – if you just keep one foot in the right direction generally it pays off. If you’re patient and focused on the music everything else ideally will fall into place.” 



Reimagining
The Beatles

BRAD MEHLDAU

On The Other Side
Of Abbey Road

Rebecca
Nash
In Her
Element

Bill Laurance and
Michael League
Duo of Dreamers

"I'm still in love
with the piano"

Bobo
Stenson
Spheres of
Influence

Beyond
The Border
The Irresistible
Rise of
Scottish Jazz

Terri Lyne
Carrington
Turning Point

PLUS:
• Chris Sharkey
• Amy Gadiaga • Joel Barford
• New Sonny Rollins
biography reviewed



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