

"Youthful charm

Dobet Gnahoré, from Ivory Coast, performs her first show in the Brotfabrik

There are some voices that only need a couple of minutes to put the public under their spell. Dobet Gnahoré has one of those voices. With her clear contralto, she can murmur with tenderness and sensitivity in a deep register or pass painlessly from whispering to more intermediate registers. The volume and without doubt years of training preserve her velvet voice from all harshness of timbre, even when she launches into energetic musical phrasing. Dobet Gnahoré can even evoke the harmonic yodelling of Central African pygmies (made famous by Zap Mama), even if she only uses it for effect or as a kind of game with the audience.

This young 21-year-old woman's songs are easily accessible to listeners but do not necessarily try to conform to western listening habits. Quite simply structured, they concentrate on well-constructed melodic lines and restrained accompaniments. Soft acoustic guitar picking nearly always sets the tone in the foreground while, in the background, rattles, cymbals and low-pitched beats subtly set the rhythm.

The kalimba or the balafon are rarely used in direct relation with archaic traditions, which results in reinforcing the originality of the pieces. Although she does without keyboards and other electrical instruments, Dobet Gnahoré's music sounds urban and timeless. Urban pop, sung in local dialect, following in the footsteps of the cosmopolitan African singer and songwriter Habib Koite.

In the Ivory Coast, which was once one of the most stable West African nations, life has now become dangerous. At the beginning of the conflict, Gnahoré's sound engineer fell victim to a sniper in Abidjan. At that time, six songs on the "Ano Neko" album had been recorded. A little later, Gnahoré and her French husband, guitarist and co-composer Colin Laroche de Féline, moved to Marseilles. They produced the rest of the album – which has not yet been distributed in Germany -, in Belgium under the partial supervision of her father, percussionist Boni Gnahoré. There is little doubt that he had long influenced his daughter. Dobet Gnahoré was acting at 12 years of age, which explains her presence and ease on any stage today. In addition to her voice, she also masters many percussion instruments and skilfully adjusts the dynamics of a concert to them. Sometimes she sits, all alone, with an earthenware vase at the edge of the stage, beating a minimalist beat and concentrating all her intensity on a soothing, but nonetheless seemingly wary, song. At other particularly stirring moments, the young woman wins over the public with her highly expressive dancing.

Despite all, the concert revealed a meticulous dramatic art, which left no room for real improvisation. That did not take away from Gnahoré's expressiveness or generosity on stage but, beside her, the musicians were slightly overshadowed. Percussionist Laurent Rigaud occasionally came out of the shadows on the balafon, but there was no spontaneous dialogue with Gnahoré's calebasse. At the end of the day, Dobet Gnahoré's talent and natural charm alone were sufficient to bring euphoria to the Brotfabrik, which was full to overflowing." Norbert Krampf, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 08.04.04