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Former President dips into marine literature



DIDIER BURKHALTER:
"Mer porteuse".
Editions de L'Aire, 2018,
194 pages,
CHF 24.–, Euro 24.–

Written near Lake Neuchâtel, Didier Burkhalter's third novel, "Mer Porteuse", offers poetic prose set within the context of questions surrounding family ties and the strength of our origins. In this story of an abandoned child, the Atlantic Ocean becomes a character in its own right: a symbol of separation, yet also a form of connection for human beings. The former Federal Councillor writes beautifully, as displayed in a passage in which the plumes of smoke from an ocean liner create a lifeline attaching the vessel to the sky, "as if it were afraid of being snatched by the depths below". The novel's weakness is a certain linguistic sluggishness or pomposity that deems indifference necessarily

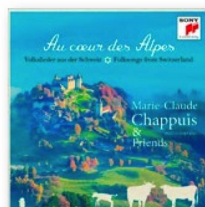
"crass" and that inevitably presents readers with an "ocean of despair" engulfing one of the novel's characters.

It is of course tempting to search for the liberal political viewpoints tucked beneath the prose of the author, former President of the Confederation and Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs. For example, Enor, born of a lineage lost at sea, will become a lawyer but "without betraying his core values". This is to be expected as he comes from a family which renovated buildings, "providing work for companies which hired young and migrant workers". And of course, this housing was first and foremost allocated to families. Merit, family and humanity are thus the central convictions that bring the pages to life. Spirituality is also touched upon, with the theme handled through the personification of a wave. "Dispersed in a myriad of droplets, each a miniscule life of its own, it draws back, healing its wounds with the currents from the deep ...," is how the author imagines it.

But at times, with Didier Burkhalter's lyricism and love for maritime regions such as Finistère, combined with the original structure and an ability to create mystery and suspense, this oriented reading can easily be forgotten. Readers are then left with the story of Kaelig and the orphaned Gwellaouen, European migrants heading to the New World in a century of revolutions. How does she perceive her future spouse? "He is different from the others that measure her up, viewing her as a pretty flower to be picked, to be possessed quickly and without love and later to be left to wilt, slowly, devoid of hope, in a stagnant life, and then to dry out; a flower that has never had its own soil, that has been ripped up and cut away, that will never be able to grow back."

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Traditional, delicate and heartwarming



MARIE-CLAUDE CHAPPUIS
& FRIENDS: Au cœur des Alpes,
Volkslieder aus der Schweiz,
Sony 2018

This is quite the CD – the silver disc is actually green! But don't worry, it's not a garish green but rather green as grass. And before you finish admiring the optics, the acoustic thrills begin. "Guggisberglid", "Le vieux chalet" and "Liauba" are all classic and enchanting Swiss songs. This wouldn't be out of the ordinary if the CD cover bore the name of Gölä or Maja Brunner, but it is Swiss opera star Marie-Claude Chappuis who is singing these delightful pieces. Sometimes softly accompanied by a guitar or the primeval tones of an alphorn, sometimes by the heartwarming sound of an accordion. And every now and again backed up by the rich male voices of the Choeur des Armaillis de la Gruyère.

The singer proved her huge versatility in 2017 with her CD "Sous l'empire de l'amour", accompanied only by the soft notes of a lute. The mezzosoprano could dare such a feat with a voice so unbelievably beautiful, sensual, flexible and expressive. The French lute songs from the 17th century about the joys of love are thus transformed into highly emotional cameos. It was a highlight of her strongly goal-oriented career path. Chappuis spent her apprenticeship years at the Landestheater Tirol, where she experienced a singer's life on fast-forward. Her lucky break came in the form of Brigitte Fassbaender – a former opera singer turned artistic director in Innsbruck – who placed such trust in her. "That gave me a great deal of confidence. I was able to learn how to handle bigger roles with my voice very quickly," she said. She proceeded to perform on the world's stages, and baroque music became her world. "This gave me the opportunity to work with truly great conductors and with the best and most beautiful orchestras in the world."

Anyone who listens to the Swiss songs on the CD will not know whether they should sing along or simply listen in awe. On the one hand there is the self-confidence, authenticity and ease of Chappuis' vocals, balanced on the other by her artistry. Sony proudly announced before Christmas that the new album was once again in the top 20 on Radio SRF Musikwelle. At number 8, just two places behind a certain Gölä.

CHRISTIAN BERZINS