

HANIA RANI: GHOSTS

When **HANIA RANI** reintroduced herself this spring with 'Hello', the preliminary taster for her new album, **GHOSTS**, it most likely startled many who've come to love her work. Otherworldly yet upbeat, its mischievous melody, eloquent Rhodes piano, sparkling synths and nimble rhythms offered little indication of the New Classical style with which her acclaimed solo debut, 2019's *Esja*, is sometimes associated. The song's playful use of vocals and generally frisky nature is also at odds with the mood of 2020's *Home*, *Esja*'s expansive follow up, where she first unveiled her remarkable voice and proved herself similarly inspired with electronic processing and arrangements. The truth, however, is that nothing she's recorded gave advance warning of 'Hello', and that's still not it's most striking attribute. Instead, that's how it represents just one of **GHOSTS'** many dimensions, in turn making it a perfect initiation to **HANIA RANI**'s supernatural talent.

Both a welcome to **GHOSTS'** universe and a farewell of sorts to the past, 'Hello' is a siren's call, and, just as the album's title suggests, over the album's 13 tracks and 67 minutes **RANI** passes repeatedly and gracefully between worlds, joined sometimes by bassist and Moog player Ziemowit Klimek, who also appeared on *Home*. Patrick Watson breathes unearthly life into the ethereal 'Dancing with Ghosts' and Portico Quartet's Duncan Bellamy contributes vital loops to the intricately constructed 'Don't Break My Heart' as well as the poised 'Thin Line'. 'Whispering House', too – written and recorded with her friend, Ólafur Arnalds – casts a peaceful, ineluctable spell, as does the faintly baroque 'Nostalgia', while 'The Boat' conjures up the unfolding ambience of Nils Frahm's *Music for Animals* and 'Komeda' a love for Pink Floyd. Then there's the richly textured 'Moans' and the elegantly swelling 'Utrata', while the quietly dramatic 'A Day in Never' boasts sombre yet enchanting *A Moon Shaped Pool* strings and the largely improvised '24.03' ripples with endlessly refracting synths. Upon reflection, then, 'Hello' was actually a bold, candid signal that the adventurous spirit which has always driven **RANI** has at last been given free rein. "The song," she notes, perhaps not coincidentally, "was *definitely* a starting point when it came to arrangements and vocals."

RANI, who grew up in Gdansk, Poland and currently divides her time between Warsaw and Berlin, is probably still best known for *Esja*, its instrumental piano pieces swiftly and widely embraced during the pandemic for a palliative beauty which BBC Radio 4's Mark Coles described as "sublime and minimalist". (Her Covid era *Live from Studio S2* performance video has now clocked up almost 6 million views.) Nonetheless, she's always embraced broad horizons, far broader than her strict, two-decade training as a pianist might initially suggest. Alongside her classical activities, most notably award-winning collaborations with cellist Dobrawa Czocher, not to mention her first piano concerto, *For Josima*, premiered this spring, she was for a while one half of Poland's respected alternative pop duo Tęskno. She's also worked with other media, releasing a 'highlights' reel, *Music for Film and Theatre*, in 2021, and her scores include Piotr Domalewski's *I Never Cry*, winner of the 2020 Polish Film Festival's Best Score award, last year's *Venice – Infinitely Avantgarde* and, coming later this year, Amazon's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*.

Her interests extend, too, into the realms of art: this summer, for instance, visitors to Zodiak, the Warsaw Architecture Pavilion, are encouraged to enjoy *Room for Listening*, a sound and spatial art installation, designed with architecture studio Zmir, in which an hour-long composition is looped and streamed through 25 speakers. Such levels of activity were, nonetheless, forever thus: when **RANI** first approached Gondwana Records, she presented the basis for both *Esja* and *Home*, and when the label went with *Esja* she had to be persuaded. **GHOSTS**, then, has been a long time coming, lovingly incubated as she's developed her skills with her varied projects and in performances as singer, songwriter, and producer. "I came to the studio thinking about the album from a very different place," she recalls of her revised approach, "more as an improvising artist than as a composer 'executing' tracks. I really followed my intuitions because I was stuck for many years cutting a lot of that away in classical music."

GHOSTS' lyrics, too, are less introverted than its predecessor's, partially inspired by a two-month residency in a small studio in Switzerland's mountains, where she was working on another soundtrack – released earlier this year as *On Giacometti* – for a documentary about Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. "Where I stayed was once an old sanatorium in an area which used to be very popular, but now there are huge abandoned hotels where the locals say ghosts live. I mean, it's kind of a local belief system – these ghosts even have names! – but once you're deep into nature or some abandoned place, your imagination starts working on a different level. Things definitely happened that were maybe a little uncomfortable: glasses breaking and stuff like that."

As it happens, **RANI** grew up in a Catholic country where "a lot of rituals and traditions still go on in the countryside and some people believe that ghosts are people not ready to die." Her love of Studio Ghibli, Haruki Murakami and other magical realism was also already well-established. Her setting therefore encouraged her to investigate such themes further, while Canadian singer-songwriter Michelle Gurevich's narrative style also proved influential. Turning away from her own life, she began imagining other people's, using **GHOSTS'** elusive figures to illustrate her concepts. 'Dancing With

Ghosts', for example, examines ideas of being absent in one's own world, and 'Hello' addresses the liminal state between wakefulness and sleep, while 'Utrata' touches upon the mystical emergence of music itself and 'A Day in Never' the nature of time.

"The edge of life and death," **RANI** summarises, "and what actually happens in between: this was what really interested me. Even singing the word 'death' was quite a shock. It's such a weird word to say out loud, and people are afraid of it, which I found extremely interesting. Most of the songs probably still talk about love and things like that, but **GHOSTS** is more me thinking about having to face some kind of end."

Despite this, **GHOSTS** – as 'Hello' implied – isn't ostentatiously melancholic, and it certainly doesn't wallow in sorrow. Admittedly, with its expanded yet still minimal setup of piano, keyboards, synths (most importantly her Prophet) and a mysterious, bewitching voice, it's sometimes eerie, even haunted, these qualities underlined by Icelandic arranger / Hjaltalín member Viktor Orri Árnason (Jóhann Jóhannsson, Hildur Guðnadóttir, Hauschka) and mixing engineer Greg Freeman (Peter Gabriel, Goldfrapp, Amy Winehouse). But its spirit is warm, beckoning one into an ambitious double album that unfolds at an exquisite pace, informed by revelatory, exploratory live performances like 2022's livestream from Paris' prestigious Les Invalides, which has earned 3.7 million views to date. "I love long albums," **RANI** concludes cheerfully, "and I would love people to listen to this as a concert because it's actually shaped in this way."

If *Esja* was about **RANI** exploiting her principal instrument, and *Home* saw her take steps towards a fuller expression of her art, **GHOSTS** is where she unites her varied interests on what might even be considered her first 'real' album. Drawing upon a fondness for diverse artists like Enya, The Smile, James Blake and Pink Floyd – not to mention her admiration for her guests – and evoking Stina Nordenstam's delicacy, Keith Jarrett's flair, Kate Bush's artistry and Pink Floyd's probing inclinations, it combines a lifetime's musical experience in one miraculous, cosmic world. Say hello, then, to something quite unlike anything you've ever heard. It's the sound of **HANIA RANI**.