

THE STYLE COUNCIL

Take legendary producer Tony Visconti, Bowie-obsessed academic Dr Leah Kardos, and a car boot stuffed full of Stylophones. The result? The Kingston University Stylophone Orchestra and an album bursting with buzzy delights

WORDS: BOB FISCHER

“I

am an early Stylophone nerd!” confesses Tony Visconti, with a wry smile. “I went out and bought one immediately, and so did David. We just looked at each other and said, ‘We gotta get it...’”

The legendary producer is positively glowing with bonhomie, even late on a Monday evening. Effortlessly urbane, he is a one-man anecdote machine. In the five minutes since he appeared on my screen, he has regaled me with a story about a late 1960s mission to retrieve his wandering cat, which led to him being mistaken for a burglar by his disgruntled neighbour, the fruity-voiced thespian Derek Nimmo. He has raved about a recent foray to the home of Samuel Pepys, and told me wistfully about the luncheon he has attended that very afternoon at the Heddon Street pop-up shop dedicated to the work of David Bowie, his most celebrated musical collaborator. Who is, of course, the aforementioned “David”. His comrade in early Stylophone fandom.

Oh yeah, Stylophones...

“I was so surprised when I first plugged it into the studio console and listened to it on big speakers,” he continues. “It was quite a fat sound. And then, as soon they invented the *big* Stylophone...”

“The 350S?” chips in Leah Kardos from the adjacent Zoom window.

“Yeah, the 350S. With multiple octaves and vibratos and different waveforms. That was really a turn-on. It’s a fun toy and yet it’s very musical. If you don’t have much inclination to practise, it’s the perfect instrument. I don’t know if there are any Stylophone virtuosos yet, or if there are any concertos for Stylophone, but Leah will probably write one.”

F

unny he should mention that. We’re gathered here online today to discuss ‘Stylophonika’, an album by the Kingston University Stylophone Orchestra – the unlikely ensemble founded in 2019 by Australian-born Kardos, who is a senior music lecturer at London’s leafiest academic

outpost. Three years earlier, she had persuaded her favourite producer to lend his name and considerable expertise to the university’s expansive new recording facility. Unsurprisingly, the Visconti Studio has become the orchestra’s spiritual home.

“We met on BowieNet!” says Kardos, a self-confessed Bowie obsessive.

Not many rock superstars were launching their own internet service provider in 1998 but, as ever, her idol was ahead of the curve, and the service became a hub for his tech-savvy fanbase.

“I would travel around with the fans, and Tony would be so gracious to hang with us in New York and London,” she continues. “I was a kid, 19 or 20, and I recall saying, ‘One day, if I become a music lecturer, I’ll invite you to be a guest speaker at my school’. I’d always had that in mind, so to actually have Tony working at the university and to be able to call him a colleague is really quite mind-blowing and surreal.”

“I’ll bet. Don’t you have to rein yourself in from saying, ‘TELL ME ABOUT THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD!!!’ every 10 minutes? I would.”

“She doesn’t rein herself in!” chuckles Visconti. “She’s what David would call a ‘superfan’. When I met her, she and her mates from BowieNet were standing on a street corner in New York. I made a few good friends and Leah was one of the bright ones who was nice to talk to.”

Bowie was a high-profile exponent of the Stylophone’s charms. ‘Space Oddity’, which landed only a year after the instrument’s launch, featured gloriously buzzy glissandos. Some 33 years later, he used it again on ‘Slip Away’, a tribute to US entertainer Uncle Floyd, from his 2002 album ‘Heathen’. Visconti beams at the memory.

“I said, ‘David, if you play this over the first violin part, it’s going to be a lovely sound,’” he recalls. “And if you listen to the chorus, that’s him playing the Stylophone. Who could know it would mix with a professional string section, with 300-year-old instruments? So the Stylophone has great potential – you just have to be creative with it. It’s capable of doing many extraordinary things if you put your mind to it.”

In the days following our chat, I listen to the album repeatedly. And it begins to take on new depth, new resonance. What initially felt like a charming novelty becomes something more profound. It is beautifully arranged and performed. The inventiveness of both Visconti and Kardos and the analogue ambience of the Visconti Studio lend the recordings a genuine warmth – a touching throwback to the days of eggbox-clad walls and the gentle clanking of rotating reels.

There's a legacy here. Kardos talks of her intent to preserve ancient folk rituals, and the same clearly applies to her enthusiasm for the Stylophone. Inheriting her passion for this most primitive of synths from her mentor Visconti, she's passing it onto a generation born in the era of Britpop and Blair. I want to hear from them, and I ask if she can hook me up with some of the orchestra stalwarts. She duly obliges, and the volunteers weave a delightful tapestry of memories, snapshots of genuinely transformative moments with both producers.

Take Ershad Alamgir. Before studying Music Technology at Kingston, he had a background in singing Indian classical music and drew on this experience as principal vocalist on 'Space Oddity'.

"I was never into electronic music myself," he admits. "But then two things happened. One was Leah's interest in David Bowie. She's fanatical about him and it's really infectious. She said she was planning something connected to Stylophones because Bowie had used one. Before that, I hadn't even seen one. Secondly, I went to a rehearsal and she attached it to some effects units. I'd been thinking, 'Can I actually see myself doing this? What might people *think*'? But that changed totally."

Cian Ryan-Morgan was also there from the start.

"Leah was one of my favourite lecturers," he explains. "And, at the end of one lecture, she said, 'We're going to meet in an hour and talk about this thing'. And it was just wacky enough to make me curious."

Temporarily eschewing an alarming passion for death metal, he eventually mixed the resulting album.

"In the beginning, there were very few of us. But she taught us to perform with the Stylophone. It's meant to be a kids' toy, but she said, 'If you hold it this way, you can put a finger on the volume button and ride it expressively'. So we worked as a group to get the polyphony across – the chorus and the swelling. When everyone got it right for the first time, it was, 'Oh wow! This kind of works'. That emotionless drone suddenly became pretty cool."

Zuzanna Wężyk is equally animated.

"When the orchestra started, I didn't have time to join," she reveals.

"But a few months later, I saw them in concert and was inspired. I thought, 'I want to be a member!'."

Inspired enough to compose the album's opener? She nods.

"Leah asked if anyone had ideas for original tracks. And I was playing at the organ. Like the Stylophone, it's a quirky instrument in a positive way. I started with the main motif of 'Akoustiki' and was singing along. It was just a one-minute recording on my phone, but I sent it to the group and they liked it. So I transcribed it, actually putting the notation down as a musical score

– like Mozart would have done! Then Leah arranged and produced it and created amazing sounds and vibes."

Louis Bartell is the Harold Budd aficionado.

"I dabbled with synthesisers as a kid," he explains. "My dad was massively into Kraftwerk and Brian Eno, and I fiddled around with a crappy little Yamaha. I knew of Harold Budd through Brian Eno, and I'm a big Cocteau Twins fan too, so I'd heard his work through his collaborations with them and I fell in love with it."

Like all his fellow orchestra members, he is unreserved in his praise for Kardos' drive.

"She doesn't get the credit that she deserves," he insists. "She's really underrated as an artist. I'm bewildered as to how she can have so many things on the go and still be smiling! I've never known anyone work so hard."

As they were during the 2020 lockdown, the group are scattered once again. Bartell speaks to me from Charing Cross station, dashing to buy a birthday card for his grandmother. Wężyk is back home in Gdańsk, performing as a classical guitarist. Ryan-Morgan is in Brighton, with a stack of Marshall amps behind him. Only Alamgir has stayed in Kingston, where he has a home studio festooned with vintage guitars. But they remain united by their passion for the Stylophone Orchestra, and all express their determination to contribute to a proposed follow-up:

And Leah Kardos? Underrated? Criminally so. In the last decade she's recorded five long-players. They're an immaculate potpourri of electronic, classical and modern jazz influences, a cocktail at its most potent on 2017's beguiling 'Rococochet' and its 2020 companion piece, 'Bird Rib'. In addition, 2022 sees the publication of 'Blackstar Theory: The Last Works Of David Bowie', her book about her musical hero's final salvo. I revisit our chat and its constant Bowie-related detours. Did she ever swap notes with the man himself?

"I did once get an email from him," she discloses bashfully. "When I did my PhD, I was making lots of experimental music, including a project that used Bowie samples. His press agent Mark Adams sent it to him, and there was... some feedback."

Go on, then. Don't hold back on my account.

"It was, 'This is really interesting... she's one to watch'," she blushes. "Which was forwarded to me, to make my life complete. Everyone was very kind to the superfan."

She sounds incredibly embarrassed, but Tony Visconti has gone even further. In a Facebook post from December 2019, he described Kardos as "a visionary in the Bowie tradition". An exceptional tribute, which was made in the immediate afterglow of the Stylophone Orchestra's contribution to his forthcoming solo album, the follow-up to 2019's 'It's A Selfie'.

"It sounded so good," he enthuses at the end of our conversation. "Let there be Stylophones!"

The legacy continues... with an unmistakable buzz.

'Stylophonika' is out now on Spun Out Of Control