

# SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE

## Luciana Souza Shines in an Intimate Show at The Soraya

BY RICHARD S. GINELL



Luciana Souza | *Credit: Kim Fox*

The last time I saw **Luciana Souza**, she was providing the soaring, scating lead vocals in the Los Angeles Master Chorale's performance of Osvaldo Golijov's *Oceana* in Walt Disney Concert Hall last October. Prior to that, she turned up scating during Lee Ritenour's set last August as part of the Hollywood Bowl's Brazil Night. This extraordinarily versatile Brazilian singer can apparently thrive in any setting anywhere. Yet for the full-on Luciana Souza experience, the place to be was at **The Soraya** on the campus of Cal State Northridge Friday night, Jan. 17. There, she put together an inspired pair of sets of songs in English and Portuguese, singing and scating with just guitar, bass, and her own percussion accompaniment. And we were onstage with her.

By that, I mean that the stage of The Soraya was converted into a rectangular, authentic-looking nightclub as per the hall's Onstage Sessions Jazz Club series. There was a small, elevated platform for the performers, with long tables for listeners in front, raked theatre seats in the rear, and a black curtain cordoning off the "jazz club" from the rest of the hall — a fairly large space as clubs go yet with an intimate feel. The P.A. sound was

excellent — not too loud, just reverberant enough — and there was free wine tasting as well as a menu of drinks and snacks. I'd say this setup is actually superior to those of most “real” jazz clubs I've been in.

The focus of Souza's show was on selections from her recent album, *The Book of Longing* (Sunnyside), which takes its leisurely, somewhat melancholy cues from Leonard Cohen, four of whose poems she set to her own music on the CD. There already is a setting of poems from Cohen's *The Book of Longing* by Philip Glass — with Cohen's participation in the recording sessions — but Souza goes in an altogether different musical direction.

Souza turned the first number in the cycle *The Book* into a very slow Brazilian dirge, the ironic humor muted, the last lingering lines phrased more freely now. At the opening of the show, she recited Cohen's poem “Split” before performing her song, effectively setting the mood. Another selection from the album, “Alms,” with music by Souza and poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay, evoked melancholy wintry images, appropriately on a rather cold January night in the San Fernando Valley.

Yet all was not gloom in this set — far from it — for Souza interpolated several upbeat numbers from the vast Brazilian treasure chest of songs by composers like Milton Nascimento, Hermeto Pascoal, and Dorival Caymmi. The highlight was Caymmi's “Voce Já Foi à Bahia” (Have you been to Bahia) from 1941, with Souza's clear-as-a-bell voice negotiating the rapid-fire syllables with ease while rattling out the rhythms on a tambourine.



Scott Colley

Not the least of the attractions in Souza's set was the ample space that she gave to her cohorts from *The Book of Longing* — Chico Pinheiro on electric guitar and Scott Colley

on standup bass. Pinheiro peeled off one dazzling single-string and chorded solo after another, at times using an octave multiplying device for a deep, funky-sounding effect. Colley's tube-amplified bass registered with a solid, woodsy, pinging sound, and he and Pinheiro could bounce off each other in wonderfully percolating interplay. Indeed, this band was in no need of a drummer, for Souza was generating authentic propulsive Brazilian grooves all by herself, using brushes on a cymbal and snare drum or tapping on a triangle.



Guitarist Chico Pinheiro performs with Luciana Souza Nov. 30 | Credit: Julye Jocomel

As to where Souza will roam next, the results will be out March 27, when Sunnyside releases *Storytellers*, a collaboration with the equally versatile Vince Mendoza and Germany's WDR Big Band Köln on songs by several heavyweight Brazilian composers.

**Richard S. Ginell** writes regularly about music for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Musical America.com*, *Classical Voice North America*, and *American Record Guide*. He has also contributed to *Gramophone* and *The Strad*, among many other publications. In another lifetime, he was chief music critic of the *Los Angeles Daily News*.