

Vocalist Monica Akihary awarded Boy Edgar Prize

The Boy Edgar Prize, the most important recognizance in jazz, goes to Moluccan-Dutch vocalist Monica Akihary. She is a musician who "actively seeks adventure and doesn't back off when it grates".

The Boy Edgar Prize, the biggest prize in the Netherlands in the field of jazz and improvised music, has been awarded to vocalist and lyricist Monica Akihary. The Performing Arts Fund announced this on Friday at the jazz networking and showcase event InJazz in Rotterdam. The jury noted that Monica Akihary is "at home in musical traditions from all corners of the world". She is a musician who "actively seeks adventure and doesn't back off when it grates".

The Boy Edgar Prize, comprising an annually awarded bronze sculpture, 'John Coltrane' by Jan Wolkers, and a cash prize of 25,000 euros, will be conferred on 6 December during a concert evening in the Bimhuis, Amsterdam.

Moluccan-Dutch Monica Akihary is the singer in Boi Akih, her band with guitarist and composer Niels Brouwer. Boi Akih blends sounds from many traditions in improvisations, beguiling melodies and sophisticated textures. Featuring instrumental virtuosity on diverse percussion and kora or West African harp, among others, it has an international repertoire with influences from the Moluccas, as well as elements of classical Indian music, traditional African music and European jazz. Akihary honours her cultural heritage by singing not only in English but also in Haruku, the language of her father and ancestors, from the Moluccan island of Haruku east of Ambon.

A bolt out of the blue

For Akihary (no age, at her request - "in jazz, age doesn't count" - and resident of Amsterdam), the award came "like a bolt out of the blue". "I am overwhelmed. I'd never thought about this," is her reaction.

"I'm just walking my own path, looking for sounds and what's interesting for our band Boi Akih. My life is dedicated to jazz, improvisation, Moluccan culture, oral tradition and Haruku, the language I was brought up with. I try to make exciting things with those elements. I can hardly imagine that this important prize fits in with that. I always envisage completely different winners."

Akihary was invited to North Sea Jazz festival this year as part of the Sounds of Diversity theme. This week saw the release of her tenth studio album, *From and to Infinity*, which cruises to the Moluccan island of Ambon on waves, the organ portraying the sea. "And now this award as well," says Akihary. "I need to quietly let it sink in for a while. The prize money? Ah, I still have so many great ideas lying around." She sees the Boy Edgar Prize as recognition for 'daring to search'. "That you always feel: this is urgent, this is what I want to make. For me, that has never lain in singing jazz standards."

Ancestors

In performances, according to the jury report, Akihary "makes a deep impression as an improviser and storyteller". Akihary: "The Moluccas have a beautiful oral tradition. Our language is lilting, through melody we pass on history. Listeners feel that without necessarily knowing how to speak the language."

Writing in Haruku was primarily a musical choice. She can do a lot with the sounds in her improvisations. "But the fact that my singing in 'bahasa tanah', the language of our ancestors, is now seen as having added value, does me good. I am a Moluccan whose parents came here in the 1950s. They never got that recognition or a chance to be who they wanted to be."

Akihary performs on Dutch and international stages with many additional musicians. "By steering her own course, and always shifting it, she surprises musicians and audiences", the jury believes.

Jazz, says Akihary, is for her a high art form. "I can express a lot in it, with my voice and with colour. When I sing, I am free and detached from everything."