

Wintsch Explores 'Tiniest' Sounds

Swiss keyboardist Michel Wintsch is among that class of creatively restless musicians for whom the limitations of the piano can be frustrating. For his 2011 album *Metapiano* (Leo), he deployed fascinating preparations to his instrument, and further expanded his sound with homemade devices, electronic manipulations and synthesizer, exploring a maximalist environment for his vibrant imagination.

But for his latest solo effort, *Roof Fool* (Hatology), he took a radically different tack. Using only a grand piano and collaborating with sound engineer Benoît Piccand, Wintsch created an expanded sonic universe that included the various noises created by the physical act of playing piano: his own bodily motion and breathing, the sound of his fingers striking the keys, and the suppression and release of pedals.

As Stuart Broomer mentions in his liner notes for *Roof Fool*, there's a Thelonious Monk recording called "Chordially" in which the pianist's untrimmed fingernails can be heard clicking on the keys. And the grunts and moans of Keith Jarrett that accompany his own playing are well known. But Wintsch isn't interested in accidental or aleatoric sounds. Still, the dazzling play between terse melodic lines, rhythms that flow and then jerk in ever-shifting patterns, and fresh harmonies is at the core of the 14 pieces on *Roof Fool*.

"It's not a concept," said Wintsch. "It's the result of my practice: Working every day on the piano, I often found myself playing with almost no sound, trying to play the tiniest sound but keeping a real energy in the movement—like ghost notes on a guitar—in order to create as much as dynamic range as possible and trying to get away from the often too-clean and well-tempered sound of the piano. Like hands dancing above the piano and barely touching the keyboard. This produces all these sounds, very small and, in a way, expressive, audible for me but not for the audience, which is a few meters away. After a while, it became part of the music, and it appeared to me I should bring these sounds to the listener through amplification."

Those unexpected sounds are meticulously woven into the fabric of Wintsch's playing. His breathing, clacking and thudding feel like part of the dramatic improvisational architecture. "The gestures I use



are rehearsed and worked out, and this is in itself a form of composition," he explained. "The sounds are intimately part of the process, and they are not ancillary. There are also compound objects, fragments of melody, specific harmonies and riffs, which are like vocabulary. All of this is combined—gestures, dance, compound objects, following the inspiration and energy of the movement. Careful listening of all sounds produced through the piano is a perpetual source of inspiration, and in this way, it makes it a partner."

Wintsch has plenty of human partners as well, whether those in his long-running trio with percussionist Gerry Hemingway and bassist Bänz Oester, or his collaborators in the trio WWW: bassist Christian Weber and drummer Christian Wolfarth. That latter trio has been on a tear of late, moving easily between acoustic and electronic instruments. On its recent album *Thieves Left That Behind* (Veto), Wintsch sticks exclusively to electric piano and synthesizer, forging a rich new direction. Both Weber and Wolfarth have worked extensively in experimental circles, exploring electro-acoustic improv, yet in this context they churn out muscular but elastic grooves and rutted landscapes that offer the keyboardist great leeway. The trio improvises everything.

"We practice very regularly, improvising," Wintsch said. "We record and then we listen together. It's part of the process. And during the listening, we talk; we sort out what we like or don't like, confronting our views and deciding what works for our mutual taste and exigency."

WWW moves as a single organism, a true ensemble as opposed to a traditional piano trio. Wintsch embraces a wide array of interests and styles, including the progressive rock he heard while growing up, and he's worked extensively in scoring music for film and theater. "I can't resist quoting Olivier Messiaen: 'I'm like a bee, collecting from as many flowers as possible, and then cooking up my own honey.'" **DB**

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