

Nik Bärtsch's Ronin Holon

Nik Bärtsch: piano; **Sha:** bass and contrabass clarinets, alto saxophone; **Björn Meyer:** bass; **Kaspar Rast:** drums; **Andi Pupato:** percussion

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The second ECM album by Swiss composer-pianist Nik Bärtsch and his band Ronin reaps the benefits of the two years of roadwork undertaken since the recording of “Stoa” (ECM 1939). “We’ve simply played a lot more,” Bärtsch emphasises: “The development of the band as an organism is a very important force for the music. It is through playing that the pieces I write grow and bloom.” In a recent interview with Modern Drummer magazine, Ronin’s Kaspar Rast used the same image, describing the band as “a musical biosystem”. Its processes have been nourished by concerts all around the world – from the Montreal Jazz Festival to the performance spaces of Tokyo –, and also locally. For Bärtsch maintains a Monday night workshop/residency at the Bazillus Club in Zürich. Ronin recently played its 150th concert there; these are players committed, long-term, to the music.

For “Holon” the regular Ronin line-up (Bärtsch, Sha, Meyer, Rast, Pupato) convened with the same producer and engineer (Manfred Eicher, Gérard de Haro) at the same French studio (Studios la Buissonne) where “Stoa” was recorded. The distinguishing characteristics of the music, too, are consistent: the modular constructions, the polymetric pulses, the complex interlocking patterns and repetitive motifs. Bärtsch speaks of the band’s way of working as a “spiral continuum” rather than the newness-at-all-costs priorities of the Western avant-garde. Yet it is clear enough that a conceptual leap has been made in Ronin’s music, for the band’s sound is simultaneously looser and indissoluble, without any relinquishing of the grip upon the groove.

“There is more happening at a higher level of playing together,” Bärtsch notes, “and the solo actions are more integrated, as if the soloists are camouflaged in the surroundings of the sound, individual voices almost ‘hidden’ in the whole. Soloing is more a matter of phrasing inside the compositions. It’s harder to tell where the solos leave the structure and what is or isn’t composed. This is also the sense in which the album has been recorded and mixed – the mix, on ‘Modul 41_17’ for instance – is also an integral part of the composition. I’m happy about this quality of ‘completeness’. The album as a whole is much more a group record than ‘Stoa’ was. Together something has been created that is certainly more than my compositions, and more than any individual influences or contributions.”

Apart from Björn Meyer’s leaping bass guitar, this time the instrumentation is all acoustic, the Fender Rhodes incorporated on “Stoa” abandoned in favour of the unamplified piano. “From the last recording I’d learned a lot about sounds in the overtone registration, about piano sound, and began to hear differently. Opportunities to play better pianos have also helped and so has our improved monitor system in the live set-up, so we can really work on more subtle balances of acoustic playing and develop the dynamics.”

Attention to unconventional time signatures in the music has evolved. Bärtsch stacks up his rhythms and pulses – 3 and 2 and 5 and so on – in the course of building his cellular

'modules'. "It's not about having a mathematical structure at the core, some structural 'secret'. I'm interested in what *sounds*. To have a coherence and also dramaturgical flow, and also to be able to hear the whole structure in several rhythms at the same time, to be able to 'look around' in this space. This is something we are all interested in. On this recording, and especially on 'Modul 44' and 'Modul 45', our consciousness and feeling for several flowing rhythms is developed."

Individual members of the group have been working against the "regime of 4/4" that is today's mainstream for many years, and in many ways. Kaspar Rast and Bärtsch, before Ronin was founded, collaborated in writing music in odd meters. Björn Meyer, with his background in Swedish dance/folk music, glides very naturally between rhythms divided into 3 and 2, and Bärtsch's own interest in this area may also have its folk 'roots', triggered by very early exposure to Romanian music. "These rhythms were in my childhood, if not in a one-to-one cultural context, but as a sound, perhaps a mysterious sound, and I was strongly attracted. In the time since 'Stoa' I've been thinking more about folk and Ronin's affinity for rhythmical music."

There are of course other influences at work. Scarcely a review of "Stoa" failed to reference the impact of Minimalism in general and Steve Reich in particular on Bärtsch's musical thought. In acknowledging the association, the composer-pianist points out that repetition is far from being the exclusive prerogative of Minimal music – as anybody familiar with the constant beat of Western pop must recognise. "There is a wall that's been put up between new composed, let's call it 'classical', music and group or beat-based pop music. This wall doesn't exist for me. There are so many compositions in the classical world based on rhythmical structures..." Yet we generally talk of the idioms as if they were unrelated, considering "popular music as dance music that moves the body, and the challenging structural aspects of modern music as something entirely 'intellectual.'" Unimpressed by this artificial 'highbrow' / 'lowbrow' cultural divide, Ronin continue to view body and mind as parts of the same organism. In their "zen-funk" or "ritual groove music", two terms Bärtsch has coined, the players have to be, to quote Kaspar Rast, "super-tight from the first second: it's almost a rhythmical balancing act because the whole band is the groove." Rhythm is it - as Sir Simon Rattle recently said of Stravinsky - and it is out of rhythm, in its rich complexity, that Bärtsch's compositions grow. Nik, too, quotes Stravinsky on the subject of discipline and freedom: "When one limits oneself, one also has more freedom'... It sounds paradoxical. Of course you can hear that our music is very disciplined. On the obvious level of structuring, the musicians stay close to the composition but on the other hand there is a lot of freedom happening - in the interpretation of the patterns or the new light that somebody gives to a pattern or a composition. These are really the magic moments for me, where I hear the freedom and the very wakeful and alert presence of each band member. The rhythms and the playing are often unfolding on a very subtle level."

It's the art of interpretation as much as the art of improvisation, but Nik Bärtsch has also been re-evaluating his relationship to jazz. "At the time of 'Stoa' I often avoided the word jazz because it triggers specific associations. But I have to say that jazz as a music is still very much alive, and I've started to think that it is good that people – critics and listeners – sometimes put us into a jazz context. Because jazz also stands for a path between all the stylistic directions, and for music of fresh attitude. At least, I'm not ready to give the term to the new conservatives yet."

Jazz clubs and festivals figure amongst the contexts for Ronin's imminent North American and European tours. Dates confirmed include:

February 23 Portland, OR Portland Jazz Festival
February 25 & 26 Los Angeles, CA Jazz Bakery
February 27 Minneapolis, MN The Cedar
February 28 Boston, MA Regatta Bar
February 29 Knoxville, TN Bijou Theater
March 3 Washington DC Blues Alley
March 4 Columbus, OH Wexner Center
March 5 New York City Joe's Pub
March 7 San Francisco, CA SF Jazz Festival- YBCA Forum
March 25 Brixen, Italy, Dekadenz
March 27 Zürich, "EWZ.Unplugged" Series, EWZ-Unterwerk Selnau
April 12 Fribourg, La Spirale
April 13 Basel, Imprimerie
April 14 Karlsruhe, Jazzclub
April 15 Darmstadt, Centralstation
April 16 Munich, Club Ampere
April 18 Bremen, Jazzahead
April 19 Dortmund, Domicil
April 20 Berne, Bee-Flat
June 15 Berlin Radialsystem

Other dates are in preparation. More details soon.

The CD booklet of "Holon" includes a liner text by Nik Bärtsch, in German and English, and liner photos.