

The Heartbeat of a Bird

A voice that occasionally morphs into a trumpet, an accentuated, lyrical piano sprinkled with finely prepared strings: fully introspective, primarily slow, thoughtful, highly intimate and fragile music that moves our ears and souls, while also exuding peace and stillness. Hauntingly, tenderly, and at the same time, full of intensity, Lisette Spinnler and Christoph Stiefel have been playing as a duo since 2008, and after *Bima Sakti* (2011), they have released their second joint album, *The Heartbeat of a Bird*.

The record's title does not actually refer to the strikingly rapid heartbeat of a bird, but rather life itself: transience, the cycle of nature - and its growing endangerment. A robin held in one's hand and a mighty kite bird circling the sky represent, respectively, fragility and freedom, both of which are central to this duo's music. But just as the kite does not whirl about high above the ground for the sake of freedom, but rather in search of food, freedom in terms of musical improvisation is also relative and not an end in and of itself. Just as the flight of birds is subject to physical laws, improvisation adheres to musical prerequisites and criteria with the goal of creating new, unheard sounds in present time, while inviting the audience to participate in this creative process.

This freedom allows the vocalist and the pianist to invent music in the moment, out of the moment, and out of their sometimes wordless dialogue, which poses the risk of being led to the brink, of losing oneself and falling apart - but which does not happen at any point. At the same time, the open dialogue speaks to its own tension and has the effect of making the music sound immediate and direct.

In addition to four "freely" improvised pieces and three of their own songs, the duo has also covered Krzysztof Komeda's "Sleep Safe and Warm" - written

for Roman Polański's film *Rosemary's Baby* - and three Jazz standards: "Body and Soul," which among countless others, trumpeter and singer Chet Baker's version is probably one of the most profound, Miles Davis's "Blue in Green" (lyrics by Cassandra Wilson), and Jule Styne's "I Fall in Love Too Easily" (lyrics by Sammy Cahn) from the early '40s.

Whether it's their improvisations, their own compositions, or characteristic standards to which the duo lends their own language in equal measure: *The Heartbeat of a Bird* works seamlessly and is perhaps most comparable to, although less cool and sober, an album like *The Newest Sound Around* by the duo Jeanne Lee and Ran Blake from the early '60s - to some extent, a contemporary art song. The ample familiarity of the dialogue that Lisette Spinnler and Christoph Stiefel have been conducting for years, its intimacy and fragility, the freedom of expression, the simplicity and charisma: this is where the richness and power, the beauty and charm, and ultimately, the mystery of their music lie.

Steff Rohrbach, September 2022