

Espen Berg
The Trondheim Concert



Five years after releasing my second solo album, *A cres of Blue*, I finally decided to do a fully improvised piano concert and a live recording. This one-taker is a culmination of years of development, reflection and research, and the first of its kind in a series of recordings to come.

On the day of the concert I was well prepared on every level, ranging from the very music itself to the gathering of an amazing team consisting of top tier technicians, engineers, photographers, arrangers, crew and an attentive audience. Only one thing bothered me up until the second before I started playing: I couldn't free my mind from the need of having a firm plan for the opening. In my view, this is what shaped the music of this one and a half hour long concert the most.

The opening defines a starting point, and the rest of the concert is a direct development or response to it. The reason I couldn't think past the opening was that I knew very well that it would become a defining moment. Creating music like this is all about intention and flow, and finding the right balance between progression and obligation. I once read that Keith Jarrett likes to start his solo concerts with chaos to clear the air and to get a feel for the instrument and the room. This was also one of my options of course, but even if it's chaos, it's still a planned action when the decision has been made before you start playing. I had fallen in love with the idea of a fully spontaneous opening, but as the concert neared I felt that this became increasingly difficult to accomplish.

Even when I walked towards the piano with the audience cheering, I could only hear my own thoughts and considerations as whether I should start high or low, loud or soft, dense or sparse, and so on. As I sat down I cleared my mind, let a few seconds go by and managed to let go of this nagging thought. I listened to my imagination, my inner ear, and found the music I was searching for. It was all about waiting for the right moment.



Improvising music in this way is like getting on a moving train. It's a constant flow of storylines, and I only have to choose which one to hang on to. Had I started playing a moment earlier or later, the music would have sounded and developed in a totally different way.

That's why I think of this as the purest and most essential way of creating and enjoying music, and why this format and concept will be at the core of my career as long as I'm able to play the piano. The music I create in the moment reflects my emotions in a profound way, and every time I play it's different. Every second of music is unique, and it feels like an endless resource. Both musically and spiritually.

The idea of free improvisation means different things to different people. For many listeners it suggests the lineage that began with the so-called "energy players" of the late 1960s, musically untutored berserkers whose enthusiasm for Albert Ayler, John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders inspired them to pick up a horn and play whatever notes fell at random under their fingers, typically at maximum volume.

A possibly apocryphal story concerns one such energy player and New York City's Jazzmobile outreach programme. In the 1960s, Jazzmobile (the organization still exists) brought jazz to the people via accomplished musicians performing for free on the back of a flat-bed truck, which parked up on street corners around Harlem. In the story, our energy player climbed, uninvited, on to the truck and joined the band. He made such a discordant noise that the bandleader stopped playing and turned to him and said, "What do you think you're doing?" Replied the energy player, "I'm just playing what I feel." To which the bandleader said, "Well, feel something in B-flat motherfucker."

Espen Berg's public embarkation on free improvisation, contrastingly, followed a lengthy musical apprenticeship. Indeed, Berg did not feel ready to give a wholly improvised public performance until a full fifteen years after he started to explore the concept in earnest, and seven years after he had released his first solo album, *Noctilucent* (which included a few freely improvised tracks). The performance, included on *The Trondheim Concert* in its entirety, took place at the Dokkhuset concert hall in Trondheim on November 13 2019.

Earlier in 2019, Berg released the exalted *Free To Play*, his third album as leader of the Espen Berg Trio. Part in-the-moment soul, part through-composed formalism, part close-quarter collective-improvisation, the album is perhaps the most engaging Norwegian piano trio album since Svein

Finnerud's psychedelia-flavoured masterpiece, *Plastic Sun*, back in 1970. With the serene and elegant and shimmeringly beautiful *The Trondheim Concert*, Berg has produced an artefact of equally lofty stature, created wholly in the moment.

Berg's approach to free improvisation is worth noting, although ultimately it is, as always, what is in the grooves that counts. Berg has trained himself to allow moods, motifs, rhythms, chord progressions and time signatures to emerge spontaneously from his unconscious mind, and then uses cognitive thought to structure and refine them. In practice, the process is dauntingly complex, but like a virtuoso ballet dancer who shows no sign of visible effort during a gravity defying performance, Berg makes it appear simple and toil free.

The process differs from surrealist automatism, which it superficially resembles, because automatism seeks to eliminate all conscious thought from the equation. Berg's approach is, supposedly, similar to that used by Keith Jarrett. One says "supposedly" because Jarrett has preferred to draw a veil over his methodology, perhaps to encourage a certain mystique to develop around it.

Although Berg did not give his first public performance of wholly improvised solo music until 2019, he has been involved in free improvisation since he began taking piano lessons, aged sixteen, in 1999. "I got the young Helge Lien as my piano teacher in high school," he says. "I was self-taught up until then. Right away, Helge threw me into free improvisation. It was scary at first, but it was so exciting that I knew I had to stick with it."

We can be thankful he has stuck with it. *The Trondheim Concert* confirms Berg as among the most compelling musicians of our time, one who seems destined to make as much impact on the international jazz scene as have his compatriots Jan Garbarek, Eivind Aarset and Jon Balke before him. Meanwhile, enjoy this album.



NXN
RECORDINGS

All rights reserved. © & © NXN Recordings 2022
NXN Recordings is a member of Naxos Music Group
www.naxos.no