



CHUTES AND LADDERS (CD)

Christoph Stiefel Innen Language Trio

nwog 40

EAN 0 048544879881

Release Date: 03.09.2021

CHRISTOPH STIEFEL INNER LANGUAGE TRIO CHUTES AND LADDERS



Christoph Stiefel Innen Language Trio

CHUTES AND LADDERS

What does freedom mean in art, and how free can an artist be? To what extent can important artists free themselves from external factors in order to be completely absorbed in their work? Basically, you can't set out to play freely because either you are free or you are not. Whoever feels free can play what they want; it will always amount to free music, even if they play a score note for note.

The Swiss pianist Christoph Stiefel is a free musician in every sense of the word. Yet, at the beginning of his career, he couldn't do much with free playing for quite a long time. *"When playing freely with others, I usually sensed that playing freely meant playing more, and I didn't see any added value in that,"* he recalls. *"Only later, with my first Inner Language Trio, was I able to experience that playing freely can also mean playing little or nothing at all. You just need a sound and you can wait to see what develops from it. And suddenly I felt comfortable with playing free. There are just different qualities that musicians bring along and into a band, and you can learn from them. The quality of my current trio is that it's very conceptual in drawing out the strengths of my music."*

The new album by Christoph Stiefel's Inner Language Trio is playfully titled *Chutes And Ladders*. Behind the allusion to the popular ladder game, especially with children, is a reference to the corona-induced lockdown and its consequences, specifically for musicians. *"This felt to me exactly like the ladder game. You think you're slowly getting closer to the goal, and the next moment you have to start completely over with all the postponements and cancellations. Instead of falling into a depression, though, I wanted to work through this issue in a playful way."*

Chutes And Ladders is the second album on which the Swiss musician works with bassist Lukas Traxel and drummer Tobias Backhaus. The underlying tone, however, is quite different from that on 2019's *Embracing*, where the focus was still on isorhythms, a medieval compositional principle with rhythmic shifts that was used in Guillaume de Machaut's motets, among others. Isorhythms can also be heard on *Chutes And Ladders*, but Stiefel focuses more closely on an aspect that has been driving him more and more in the last ten years: his commitment to the jazz tradition. No, *Chutes And Ladders* is by no means a traditional jazz album, and yet the pianist explores the meaning of various aggregate states of the jazz tradition for his own vocabulary. When he talks about swing, for example, it's not swing in the classical sense, but a swing inflection in the Inner Language Trio's sound.

This year Christoph Stiefel celebrates his 60th birthday, a caesura that makes him look back as well as ahead. In the 1980s he played world tours alongside Andreas Vollenweider, and around 1990 he made a splash with his fusion band Stiletto. He played with the Who Is Who of international jazz, wrote orchestral music, composed and arranged orchestral music for his septet, worked with Norwegian Karl Seglem on improv programs for children, and interpreted standards in his own way with the singer Lisette Spinnler. He left the electric keyboards aside decades ago in order to concentrate on the piano. To this day, reduction remains a key feature of his aesthetic, which now finds a new peak on *Chutes And Ladders*. Every redundancy is left out. The more one plays, the greater the danger of repetition is,

and repetition is just not the Swiss musician's thing. Since the beginning of his career, Stiefel has been driven by the pressing need to evolve.

On *Chutes And Ladders* the reserved keyboard philosopher tells us a lot about himself. Accordingly, the attitude of his two fellow players also changes. Unlike how they performed on *Embracing*, Traxel and Backhaus play a tribute to the bandleader, so to speak. It is his story. In times of uncertainty, he quietly but confidently pulls himself to the shore and makes his position manifest. The headline could also read "Here I am!" – all the while Backhaus and Traxel are fully and completely involved. They give themselves unobtrusively, but indispensably to the shaping of the pianist's story. They don't let the bandleader dictate their path, but decide for themselves where to go with him. Stiefel admits that he chose the places he wanted to go himself. *"Maybe I'm a little more present, because at sixty I'm already wondering how long I should wait to do what I want to do."* Without his companions helping with the navigation, however, he would never get there. Stiefel appreciates that his rhythm section brings all the experience they've gained in other bands, and gives them all the freedom in the world. And yet it is audible that he casts his nets for himself and finds what he is looking for. Only from their common movement does a direction emerge that leads to the goal.

A long time ago, Christoph Stiefel postulated that if the concept becomes more important than the music, the music falls apart – an approach that is also evident on the new album. Of course, the pianist can't get out of his own skin. He loves planning and thinks through every single note, every harmony, every melodic arc, and yet he does not pass on the concept to the listener, but leaves it to the pure poetry of sound. This ability to let go distinguishes him here more than ever. When you're a composer, performing player and producer all at the same time, it's not easy to let go, Stiefel laughs, but only when that succeeds can something special happen. *"It's much harder to do that with original pieces than with standards. That's why so many musicians play standards, because that way you can just take the material and make something completely different out of it. With original pieces, as a composer, you always hear the original idea."*

Another challenge in the material came from the corona situation itself. Before the studio date, they had planned many concerts that were almost completely canceled due to the pandemic. Instead of going into the studio well-rehearsed and knowing how far to go with the songs, Stiefel, Backhaus and Traxel had to take the compositions as they were and filter out the freedom content based on the particular situation. *"In the past, musicians would go into the studio with Miles Davis, for example, and sight-read the pieces, and they took the first take in which the theme was more or less right. That's not our approach, but this time around, most of the pieces just hadn't gone through the longer development process that we normally base them on."*

The trio made all the more of a virtue out of what was not too much of a hardship. Stiefel, Traxel and Backhaus used the completed form as the basis for everything to come. *Chutes And Ladders* feels much more definitive than Stiefel's earlier albums. The songs are not versions originating from a multitude of possibilities, but formulate the essence in a classical sense. They are not at the end, but at the beginning of a process. Stiefel's attitude, seriousness and desire to create have as much in common with jazz as with classical music in the best sense.

At the end this music is a unique gift to the listener. In a process of external influences and inner confessions, a sound of hope emerges from personal experience, one that reconciles the past with the future, leaves intention behind and actually becomes an inner language within the ear.

NWOG RECORDS // LABEL- & PRODUKTMANAGEMENT & CONTACT: IMKE MACHURA // MGMT@NWOG-RECORDS.COM