



SEMI SONG

Jürgen Friedrich Lage Ensemble

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JÜRGEN FRIEDRICH LARGE ENSEMBLE - SEMI SONG

Some musical works open themselves up immediately. You listen once and know what you have. And then there are those that arouse your curiosity, want to be heard again and again until they reveal more and more of themselves from the depth of their own center, in order to manifest their overwhelming complexity in the end. Jürgen Friedrich's large-scale program *Semi Song*, recorded by his Large Ensemble, belongs to the latter.

Semi Song is an intoxicating piece of music whose parts merge together into a complete work of art. It bursts the corset of a normal album – whether on CD, vinyl or via streaming. Indeed, this album hints at this quality after just a few bars. But let's forget for a moment how the sound comes to us, which is just a medium. It doesn't take much imagination to visualize the immense amount of work that goes into this opus. Jürgen Friedrich himself draws the comparison to a film, whose credits show endless rows of names contributing to such a work of art. In the case of *Semi Song*, however, the list

would be quite short, because apart from the performing musicians and the sound engineer Christian Heck, who was actively involved in the musical result, the entire work on this mammoth project was entirely in Friedrich's hands. And yet the comparison with film is only partially accurate because Semi Song is more akin to one of those epic TV series of the present whose narrative depth of field often goes far beyond the format of a singular film. In each piece on the album, Jürgen Friedrich describes a self-contained story that is, nevertheless, directly related to all the other pieces on the program.

The plot and dramaturgy of all these pieces are absolutely unpredictable. When a composition begins, the music does not tell us where the journey is going. Different components – of colorfulness, density, dynamics and melodicism – seek new paths in each piece. At the end of each track, the music aspires to find a balance between all its creative elements, just as a circle is closed at the end of the entire suite. After a good 73 minutes, Semi Song ends at the exact moment when everything that needed to be said has been said. The mystery of surprise is exploited to such an extent that it takes hold again and again, even when the repeated enjoyment of the music has long since crossed the border from the new to the familiar. In this respect, Jürgen Friedrich thinks symphonically because the more often one gets involved with the music, the more fascinating its almost limitless variety of forms becomes. Strictly speaking, Semi Song is a musical palimpsest in which new layers of perception keep unfolding.

The Jürgen Friedrich Large Ensemble is an orchestra of soloists. Although the language of the composer – who does not take to the keys himself here, but leaves the piano to Pablo Held – is absolutely anchored in the here and now, he nevertheless follows the virtues of iconic large jazz ensembles such as the Globe Unity Orchestra or the Jazz Composers Orchestra. Unlike many comparable ensembles today, Friedrich gives the soloists involved the greatest possible leeway. If we want to stay with the image of a filmmaker, Friedrich provides script, scenery and costumes, but leaves it to the actors to fill the plot with life according to their liking within the given framework. In other words, the respective soloist is situationally the bandleader.

The line-up reads like a Who's Who of German Jazz, ranging from Pablo Held to Uli Kendorff, Steffen Schorn to Bastian Stein, Nils Wogram to Sebastian Gille, from Shannon Barnett via John-Dennis Renken all the way to Fabian Arends, to name but a few. The composer wants to take such an array of independent creativity to the limit with the greatest possible efficiency. "The solos should be able to go somewhere else even in the context of the Large Ensemble if they want to go somewhere else," postulates sound director Friedrich. "The players should not think they have the task of implementing a certain function within the musical dramaturgy. That would already be too much of a guideline for me. In this large ensemble all participants should feel as if they were on stage with their own quartet."

This tension between subtle ensemble arcs and expressive solo performances lends each individual moment tremendous vehemence. At certain points, Friedrich deliberately relies on a vacuum, which he describes as a lack of leadership, to draw his fellow players out of their shells. Of course, this only works when the leader and the players have built up great mutual trust. Jürgen Friedrich does not think in terms of instruments or basic timbres, but only in terms of people and characters. What contribution can the respective musician make, what constellations and contrasts result from the personalities of his crew? "If I sense that a person might like to play a solo in a certain environment, then I ask them. That happens completely regardless of whether it's a trumpet, a trombone or the double bass. It's all about the personalities. The instrument colors almost don't matter."

Jürgen Friedrich's Large Ensemble is not a big band, but rather an orchestra. There are neither the typical brass salvos, nor an omnipresent rhythm carpet. Friedrich exploits the complete spectrum of an orchestra and also allows himself the time necessary to do so. In times of crisis, Semi Song is a stroke of luck, because the work reminds us that art – no matter how much it may have eavesdropped on life – can also be a triumphant luxury. A luxury that makes no claim to exclusivity, but simply reveals itself for what it is: a great, extensive and celebratory festival of the senses.

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