



THE MUSIC OF PILGRIM
SWISS JAZZ ORCHESTRA & CHRISTOPH IRNIGER

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Christoph Irniger and a big band? Actually, one associates the saxophonist more with more manageable formats. As seen in bands such as Pilgrim, Cowboys from Hell, Noir, Counterpoints or the Christoph Irniger Trio, he prefers smaller formations, from trio to quintet, in which he brings out every voice, intention and interaction in full balance. All the more surprising now is the compactness and density he achieves in his orchestral debut, *The Music of Pilgrim*. The title may be confusing at first, because – although it is music by and for Pilgrim – it is not a Pilgrim album. But more about that later.

This topic, a big band, is not entirely new for the Swiss musician because after all he was a member of the Lucerne Jazz Orchestra from 2007 to 2014. So he knows what he's doing and yet, together with the Swiss Jazz Orchestra, he's entering new territory. Indeed, he jumps from the ten-meter board into the big band pool, both fresh and impartial, which does the album good. As with so many contemporary productions, the pandemic was the catalyst for something new. But unlike all those artists who tackled solo projects in the seclusion of their living room studios, Irniger plunged headlong into the very big spectacle. Well versed in melody and rhythm, he used the time of the gig lull to deal extensively with

harmonies and to develop compositionally. He began writing harmony progressions and arrangements and came across the philosophy of the legendary power big band of Thad Jones and Mel Lewis. From that, he began to reinvent compositions that he had actually written for Pilgrim into those for a large formation. He thought big from the start and basked in the brilliant spectrum of a big band's possibilities. He freely admits that he indulged in the pleasure principle. What he wanted to hear himself, he put into notes.

This pleasure in playing inevitably translates into a pleasure in listening. One feels the power of a colossus whose cauldron is heated to bursting point with great melodies. The pressure of the unconditional desire to tell stories keeps the steam engine running. Still, you can't listen as fast as the ideas flow. Irniger has definitely brought this lust for fabulating and painting variable sound pictures with him from his small bands and translated it into an unpredictable game of tension and release. "It's important to me to be original," he confidently posits. "I want to hear in my music that it's mine. When I find myself playing something I've heard several times before, I'm immediately seized by the need to break through it. That's not to say it doesn't yet exist, but in my world it has to be at least new. I write things to challenge myself with them."

Irniger does not seek a deliberate break with his previous projects in his collaboration with the Swiss Jazz Orchestra. On the contrary, suddenly the time was there to try out something that he might not otherwise have been able to realize in this way, although it had been fermenting inside him for a long time. The poetry of the incalculable, therefore, leaps out of every single note of this album. The impulse for this project did not come from Irniger himself, but from the Swiss Jazz Orchestra, which had invited the saxophonist as a soloist in November 2020. The material was already in place, but could not be performed due to the lockdown. So he plucked up the courage and asked whether they could make up for a concert with his own music. The orchestra already existed; Pilgrim's material was also there. So all that was needed was a way to synchronize one with the other. "I didn't have to do anything more than reopen the completed pieces and add something to them," sums up the newly minted big band leader. "What was new for me in the process was the whole sound of the instruments together. How does a flute sound with a trumpet? You have to know that, because you don't normally hear the flute when there's a trumpet."

Irniger has already worked with many of the musicians involved in other contexts. They know and appreciate each other. The Swiss Jazz Orchestra is a well-organized ensemble that performs new material every Monday. For Christoph Irniger, this joint project was a stroke of luck because the musicians gave their all to the cooperation. Egotism as well as airs and graces were left at the door. "I'm more used to the small lineup," Irniger recaps. "Working with 20 musicians is definitely a much bigger challenge. I have to be able to talk about what I think. It is difficult for me to work with people when I don't know what they think. The SJO made this challenge easy for me because of their positive nature, spirit, commitment and the fact that I already know many musicians from other contexts. Therefore, the work was similarly relaxed as in the smaller bands I'm used to."

In the end, Irniger treats the big band like a large instrument. The recording was made live in a relatively small room, and this physical compactness is palpable. The individual voices create a sound plasma in which the separate instrument hardly plays a role; in the live mix, almost every instrument could be heard through every other microphone. It was like an avalanche that, once it had started rolling, could no longer be stopped. And although this live recording was not intended for release, Irniger felt like a magician when listening to the results. The energy once ignited left him no choice but to share this sound with the rest of the world.

Christoph Irniger and a big band? Sure, what else! Forget very quickly everything you have heard and think you know about big bands. With subtle full power, the master of small formations completely reinvents big band jazz.

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