

Keno Harriehausen Quartet

What is an ensemble? A group of individuals in which every voice is being carved out as clearly as possible to make the individual performance as audible as possible? Or is it the opposite: a firm body of musicians, like a symphony orchestra, creating a collective sound in which that sum of individual performances merges into one? The truth doesn't lie in the middle - as it does so often - but fully embraces both aspects in their entirety. The Keno Harriehausen Quartet is a highly vivid example for an ensemble in which multifacetedness of the sum of the individual voices and the unity of the inseparable whole works at its best.

Pianist Keno Harriehausen, saxophonist Karlis Auzins, cellist Maya Fridman and bassist Andris Meinig don't beat around the bush. From the first note, they make it clear what it's all about. Subtle vehemence pairs with insistent clarity. This music grabs you with each tone, each breath, each movement. It doesn't stay out, doesn't remain neutral, won't accept the background. Keno Harriehausen and his fellow musicians from Germany, Latvia and Russia take the freedom to absorb the listener to the fullest.

The lineup in itself marks already the unusualness of the band. The combination of tenor saxophone, cello, double bass and piano would rather make you think of a modern chamber ensemble than a Jazz band. But pianist and composer Keno Harriehausen isn't interested in typical jazz formats anyways. More than 60 years ago, American composer, conductor and music theorist Gunter Schuller demanded for the so called third stream in his thesis. The combination of classical music and jazz should be neither Jazz with classical music nor classical music with jazz but an independent music that frees itself from common reflexes. What Schuller failed on a high level can be found fulfilled in Harriehausen's music in a nearly magical way. The music is in some moments reminiscent of Shostakovich, Reger and Ravel, but also of American Free Jazz and Scandinavian searching of tonal colors. Yet, all these references lose themselves in the decisiveness of the performance and in the compelling responsibility to every single tone.

Harriehausen made a long journey to get to this point. He lived in Amsterdam, Trondheim and Copenhagen and experimented everywhere with timbres, structures and interpreting. The formation of his quartet changed several times. Initially, a drummer was part of the ensemble instead of the cellist. „We hit it off right away and didn't even question what we were doing,“ Harriehausen remembers. „Yet with the melodies I always had the feeling there would be a better way to express the classical European aspect of the music. The cello was the perfect instrument for me, since it has these dramatic and heavy qualities.“

What Harriehausen has sowed over many years in northern Europe now sprouts from Leipzig. It may be due to the nordic influences that Harriehausen's compositions seem to appear like landscapes molded into sound. These imaginary landscapes don't just stretch in front of the associating eye but the focus also moves inward. „Apart from temporary trends this perspective is essential for me“ says Harriehausen. „It's about

being in contact with myself. My goal is to create music that allows the listener to find a deeper perception of the moment.“

Harriehausen does not stop with the creation of the music. He intensively reflects its effect, the parley of introspect and outward levels of perception and the role of his music in society. Composition and improvisation, structure and freedom, individual and group stand in very distinctive relationships to one another. A cosmos of limitless possibilities arises from the coordinates. The palette of constellation of sounds that unfolds from the instrumentation of piano, saxophone, cello and bass is sheer overwhelming. By his own account, the biggest challenge for the bandleader, composer and pianist is to fill this space without getting lost in it. He is not searching for the best compromise, but goes into the extreme of unifying the opposites.

„We have found a sort of storytelling that follows its own rules in the freer parts. You need the right flow to get it out and to the people. It’s about letting the energy out, not directing the form towards it.“

There have been so many things said about the relationship between composition and improvisation that it almost sounds like a platitude when you acknowledge the quartet for every improvisation being a spontaneous composition at the same time. What separates the approach of the Keno Harriehausen Quartet from similar endeavors is the extreme awareness in every moment of the collective performance. Each of the four members always sense intuitively where they are and what role they play in the flexible whole. Also in freer parts they never improvise into nowhere. The four musicians don’t just know exactly where they want to arrive, but also that they will arrive there. They stay very clear within the music and don’t let external concepts distract them. As high as the degree of complexity may become, everything follows a very natural logic.

„We have a very similar notion of improvisation. As musicians we have very different backgrounds but we all throw ourselves with all our vulnerability into the context. There may be question marks on the way but the exclamation marks come from the drive to give it everything.“

After his long journey through Europe, Keno Harriehausen has achieved to create an independent, completely new and in many parts unheard musical world which doesn’t cut itself off reality but grabs the painful yet exhilarating intensity of life with eight hands. Or to say it in his own words: „To me it’s indispensable to consider what one can give to others.“

- Wolf Kampmann