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Simon Below Quartet Encircled

Simon Below: grand piano, synth, compositions

Fabian Dudek: alto saxophone, flute

Yannik Tiemann: double bass

Jan Philipp: drums

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Simon Below Quartet - Encircled

Simon Below Quartet's debut album, *Wailing Wind's Story*, released five years ago, already drew the attention of many. For example, Thomas Mau of WDR3 radio praised "the incredible quality of their interactions." In September 2020, Traumton Records released the second record by this award-winning band, which received the Grand Prix at the Avignon Jazz Festival and other prizes. *Elements Of Space* was recorded at the famous *La Buissonne* Studio in Pernes les Fontaines in southern France, where many ECM productions were made. The radio program *Tonart* on *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* described it as "an exciting journey that constantly conveys an element of uncertainty," and summed it up as "a courageous and successful album." In regard to the quartet's most recent tour, the FAZ noted in June 2023: "Besides tricky grooves, catchy motifs and harsh abstractions, the variation between [...] breathtaking culminations and relaxing moments impresses again and again."

The pieces on the third album by the name of *Encircled* also present a wide range. The spectrum ranges from the atmospheric opener "Bliss", with its enticingly melodic theme, piano nuances and at first warmly timbrated, then somewhat rougher saxophone modulations, to the 17-minute-long, multifaceted opus "Magnum Homeward Odyssey", which begins distinctly rhythmic, then exhibits more and more chamber-musical traits, to finally vigorously celebrate the finale.

In between comes the quietly nuanced "Awakening In The Wood", with its dreamy character largely shaped by Dudek's flute and a few gently flowing piano motifs, as well as "Calm", which begins with a duet of airy saxophone and double bass and later undergoes a slight increase in volume and dynamics, but also remains very atmospheric overall.

"Occupants' Code", on the other hand, resembles the aesthetics of contemporary music in some facets and Dudek's flute playing exhibits multiphonics concepts. "Lake Molten Soil" sounds even more gripping and intentionally a bit nervous. Powered by clattering and freely whirling drums,

saxophone and synthesizer soar to twittering heights. "Can We Escape?" begins with a distinctive theme, whose harmonic-melodic approach is soon undermined by Below's piano improvisation. All the more so, Dudek torpedoed the original atmosphere with one of his unique solos escalating into extreme registers and timbres as the piece progresses. His immense urgency is mirrored and spurred on by powerful interjections from the band. For the finale, the aforementioned "Homeward Odyssey" performs an immersive but never straying musical trip: after a rhythmic, staccato-oriented piano intro, the flute enters, the two embellish around each other and intertwine, then Below takes the pressure off and pauses for a bit. A longer flute improvisation follows, joined by synth miniatures, rustling brushed drums and carefully placed bass notes. Later, the piece goes through further metamorphoses before Below becomes more and more free in his expressive piano solo, energetically supported by Jan Philipp's swirling drums and Yannik Tiemann's dryly growling double bass.

It is, of course, part of Simon Below's concept that the album as a whole, as well as some of the pieces in themselves, "do not convey a consistent mood in which one can dwell." It is much more important to play together and "to collectively reach this conscious state of freedom, in which we can completely change direction at any time," Below says. His self-conception as a band leader and composer refrains from focusing on his own person. "It's about developing material that can take us to a new level. To achieve this, I wrote down less sheet music this time and instead provided small instructions for the others. These can be more or less clearly outlined images or structural guidelines such as grooves or patterns that everyone can flexibly work with and that simultaneously lead to guided improvisations." In faster passages, he says, these "instructions" are substantial in order to maintain a certain order without restricting personal ideas too much. As a result, everyone pays even more attention to each other and really listens to the music because it is not predetermined in sheet music.

Besides the conceptual development, *Encircled* also presents changes in the current band sound. Unlike before, the flute is used now and the synthesizer, which Below acquired about two years ago, is completely new. Furthermore Jan Philipp plays more percussion (different rattles for example) than on the previous productions.

Not all of the six new compositions that were recorded made it onto the album, especially since some unplanned recordings were also created at the studio. "On the third day, we mainly improvised and recorded loads of free pieces," Below explains the creation of the two short tracks on *Encircled*. Other tunes were developed over the course of several concerts in 2021/2022 before the quartet went into the Rec:Publica studio in Lubrza, Poland in October last year. Below greatly appreciated its rural remoteness. "I also go out into nature a lot at home and a while ago I even bought a camera for this. I really value taking time in the here and now." Aside from that, the studio set in an old mansion offers other advantages, he says. "We've discovered performing live that we play more together in larger spaces - and Rec:Publica has a large, high-ceilinged room that made it easier for us to feel comfortable and realize our sound ideal."

With *Encircled*, the Simon Below Quartet presents an exciting album that compellingly unites diverse dynamics and varying timbres. The musicians' creative will seems more determined than ever, while the masterful blend of intentionally simple and more intricate moments, of subtle entrances and vital joy of playing appears remarkably lively. A successful balance of intelligent and passionate musicianship, of elaborate and emotionally appealing music that is not heard every day.

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