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Release September 10, 2010

Christian Zehnder Quartett **Schmelz**

Christian Zehnder: vocals, yodeling,
overtone singing, laudola, bandoneon

Barbara Schirmer: swiss cimbalom

Thomas Weiss: percussion, drums

Michael Pfeuti: double bass, bassetto

Listening tips:

- [3] Schmelz
- [1] Melancholie
- [8] Gejomare

Christian Zehnder Quartett - schmelz

The voice is a mysterious instrument. You think you know it - after all, it's something you use every day. It seems to have already been fully explored, its dimensions defined, and then along comes some one like the singer from Swiss duo 'Stimmhorn', Christian Zehnder with his new quartet, and questions begin to arise. Schmelz doesn't have a lot in common with what the title of the CD seems to imply.

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Aesthetic is an agreement on questions of taste. In the case of the voice, a consensus has emerged over the past centuries, one that values purity of sound above all. This has its roots in church music, which has always sought to avoid loss of control in any form of emotional outbreaks –this is how we prevent the work of the devil from finding its way into our world. The result is an exaggerated form of an artificial voice, flanked by the slightly rougher but tolerated sidelines of folk vocals, and has dominated the European idea of how a voice should sound until today. The avant-garde did, of course, run up against this, adding gasping, yelling, and syllabizing to the tools of the craft of sound dramaturgy. But even the lamenting call of the blues is

restricted to gradual changes of timbre, articulation, and diction, and essentially conformed to the ideal of what should and could be accepted in folk music.

There were, however, always exceptions to these rules, and they mostly went hand-in-hand with physical and cultural distances from the norms of Christian Western civilization. Africa had an extensive tradition of trance chanting before the missionaries arrived. Fascinating sound traditions are still known in Asia today, like the Tuva's overtone or throat singing. And in Europe as well there were always remote regions which resisted uniformity. „Where we live in Switzerland“, says Christian Zehnder, „there is a separate development of overtone singing which occurred independently of what we know, for example, from Huun Huur Tu“. And then he expounds on the resonating cavities of the head and breathing techniques that elicit seemingly archaic sounds, sounds that irritate because they oppose the ideal of the foreseeable and controlled with a rough and emotionally moving power of expression.

Christian Zehnder is not concerned with the effect here. He is much more a basically curious person who is not satisfied with what he has already accomplished, and is constantly in search of alternative possibilities of expression. Born in Zürich and educated in Basel, he has been through various stages of artistic development over the past two decades, starting with the award-winning duo Stimmhorn, to diverse projects which have brought him together with colleagues like the overtone singers of Huun Huur Tu, the theater lab of the Amazonas Opera at Munich's Biennale, or the renowned Latvian Radio Choir, all leading him to experiment with his own groups gländ and kraah. He studied yodelling extensively, examined the art song and language of the theater along with the nearly obsolete songs of seldom frequented alpine valleys, and in this way collected an instrumentarium of vocal expressions that distinguishes his music markedly from the „normality“ of known vocal experience.

His current quartet and schmelz program are consequent developments of all the reconnaissances he has dared to date with groups like kraah. Christian Zehnder is all about the color of sound, and the entire ensemble of artistic expression. Language, for example, becomes one of many mediums of creation, the content sometimes ironically broken, sometimes disjointed into syllable fragments. The whistling and nasalization of the overtones stands on a par with the acrobatic range leaps of the yodelling, the pointed lyrical diction with the laconicism of reciting, musing moments. Musically, everything is possible, from a hint of tango to a touch of avant-garde, whereby the schmelz quartet (born out of the kraah trio) attains a new, iridescent character through Barbara Schirmer and her Swiss hammered dulcimer.

The result of this combination is fascinating and irritating. Alpine folk music meets a pinch of Balkan, the seemingly mediaeval meets sounds one would expect from tribal Africa. Schmelz is modern chamber music on the one hand, and cryptical cabaret on the other. The program plays with our expectations of imaginary folklore, swings into theatrics, pretends to be chanson, then arabesque, juggles with the language that it hacks to pieces or savors poetically, elevates and skeletonizes. Christian Zehnder's sound ideas are open to influences and associations from all cultures, from Asia to South America, anything that serves to realize his musical vision. This is how a distinct musical world comes into being, a world that, even though in the middle of Europe, appears more unusual and exotic than anything faraway places have to offer.

Christian Zehnder on schmelz and his vocal art:

„Yodelling and overtone singing are the most primal and emotionally stirring forms of singing that are not actually bound to a certain culture. You can find yodelling all over the world, in the most amazing forms. Global yodelling as a form of singing and communication that connects the peoples of the world. It is also my biography, singing out of me, and it simply does not care about vocal styles and rules. It is a very fickle animal, my throat. It can sound sweet, like in Schubert's songs, but usually ends up in the rambling, mumbling crescendo of some larksome mountain dweller.“

Links:

Web: <http://www.zehndermusic.ch/>

MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/christianzehnder>

Traumton: http://www.traumton.de/neu/records/index_zehnder.html

Christian Zehnder became known with the award-winning duo Stimmhorn, which has shaped modern Swiss folklore with extraordinary sound performances since 1996. Besides his own projects (kraah, gländ and schmelz), he has worked as a soloist with various international formations like Huun Huur Tu, Mercan Dede, the casalQUARTETT and Don Li. As a New Music artist Christian has already performed with the Amazonas Opera of the Munich Biennale and cooperated with the renowned Latvian Radio Choir from Riga. His interest in the performing arts also takes him to the theater, where he works in projects as a performance musician, composer or director.



"...Take Christian Zehnder, who's developed his own freestyle vocalise, incorporating elements of jazz and contemporary music. Unclassifiable stuff, but his vocal range makes him one of the world's most amazing performer..."

Time Out England, August 09