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Sebastian Sternal THELONIA

Sebastian Sternal: piano

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"I had already made the decision to record a solo album quite a while before the pandemic," Sebastian Sternal says, immediately dispelling a possible misunderstanding. The fact that the multi-award-winning (WDR Jazz Prize, New German Jazz Prize, etc.) pianist and composer is now presenting his first solo work after almost 20 years of professional career may come as a surprise to some. After all, on the two albums with his large Symphonic Society he successfully transcended genre boundaries (both received Jazz Echos, Vol. 2 also the annual prize of the German Record Critics) by combining a jazz octet and a string quartet. Sternal then performed brilliantly in a dynamic trio with the American star bassist Larry Grenadier and Jonas Burgwinkel - for the album *Home* he received his third Echo in 2018.

For Sebastian Sternal a solo recording, with the piano as the singular gravitational center, was a logical development after all of the different previous projects he had worked on. These also include various duos, for example with Frederik Köster. When it came to the point of realizing the plan, the particular circumstances of 2020 were not entirely inconvenient. "After the initial excitement about Corona in March, a phase followed in which everyone quietly stayed at home," he recalls. "That's what I was doing too, of course. Without concerts and dates outside, my life changed dramatically. So for a few weeks, I sat at the piano alone a lot and worked intensively." Additionally spurred on by an already arranged recording date in the chamber music hall of Deutschlandfunk, he began profound artistic research.

The result is *Thelonia*, his most intimate work yet. "I've been playing the piano for 32 years, and you experience a lot," the musician says, who was born in 1983 and now lives in Frankfurt. The new production reflects many facets of Sternal's creativity of the past years, and of course his overall artistic development. "A solo album like this would certainly have turned out quite differently five years ago. I have the feeling that my music has a greater level of self-evidence now. With that I don't necessarily mean the material, the 'ingredients' of my music, but rather how I use it in improvisation. I've become more stringent in telling what I want to say."

Concentrating on one's own strengths naturally plays a substantial role in this. "Sitting alone at the instrument is much more focused and also creates a different emotionality. My relationship with the piano as a loyal friend is deep, even if we fight with each other once in a while. Unintentionally, it brings to my consciousness what is most important." While composing, he remembered pieces from the past, Sternal says, some of which even made it onto the album. "Coffee Bay", for example, comes from my first trio CD in 2007 and of course sounds very different today." Here, Sternal uses extended playing techniques inside the piano (just like in "Free"). The titles "Prayer", "Calgary", and "J.T." have appeared multiple times in earlier repertoires and were originally written for the Society or for the duo with Köster. However, the vast majority of the compositions on *Thelonia* is entirely new.

"I took a lot of time to try out certain timbres and styles of playing, to explore variations with different bass lines and chords - and to discard some of it again," Sternal says, describing the developing process in spring 2020. He is getting closer and closer to the essence by abstaining in some places and in others going further than before. "With a solo production, you have the freedom to decide by yourself where it goes. No one pulls you away when you want to stay with a motif just a little longer. Nor intervenes if you want to leave a certain passage the way it is, without adding in anything more. The only boundaries are those of my imagination, that's what I've tried to consciously celebrate - also by completely improvising some pieces in the recording sessions."

Sternal says of himself that he is drawn to song structures, lyrical playing and allusions to the Classical Romanticism of Schumann, Brahms, and Chopin. On the other hand, he points to his nervously jumpy "Birds", in which dissonances and offensive expressivity go in the opposite direction. "I also like more open structures and disruptions. I learned this studying with my professor John Taylor back then. He had an incredible feeling for combining beauty with puzzling disruptions."

Already the opening track "Arc" reflects Sternal's idea of occasionally presenting subtle riddles. "Embraceable You" also moves from the catchy leitmotif into more associative, mysterious realms. "It's all about raising question marks, but not always delivering the the answers to them," Sternal explains about his concept. He flirts with little uncertainties, harmonic breaks, and opening up spaces for the audience's imagination. "Motifs can become cliffhangers, connections can emerge between some pieces, and many things are interwoven throughout the album." As further sources of inspiration besides Taylor and the Classical Romantics, Sternal names French Impressionists like Debussy and Ravel, as well as the spirit of Ligeti, which especially comes alive his improvisations.

The album title *Thelonia* is a personal dedication from Sternal to his family and of course also a reference to Thelonious Monk. "I'm a big fan of the jazz tradition, even if it's only reflected in my music in sublimated form," Sternal says. To him, the transformation of the name into the feminine form symbolizes an opening, a mental bridging from the historic to the multi-dimensional present. It goes without saying that Sternal's creative will interprets the two jazz standards on the album, Gershwin's "Embraceable You" and "The Way You Look Tonight" by Jerome Kern, quite differently than Monk or Fats Waller. While Sternal also sees himself rooted in the history, his playing reflects influences from many directions - including ones that don't become apparent right away. "I studied with Eve Risser in Paris and find her free style of playing very inspiring. On the other hand, I'm also a big fan of the electro-funk band Knower. Although I sound completely different myself, I'm convinced that such influences find their way into my music, though sometimes in a very indirect way." Like probably everyone of his trade, he has studied Cecil Taylor and Art Tatum, Jarrett and Corea, but also Achim Kaufmann. And thus all these encounters appear over and over again as flashes lighting up a very broad horizon.

When Sebastian Sternal presented excerpts of his new repertoire live as a preview in the fall of 2021, the FAZ noted: "The balance between airy, transparent passages and temporarily denser sections characterizes Sternal's solo program just as much as his personal illumination of jazz and late Romantic influences. [...] Rightfully, Sebastian Sternal is enthusiastically celebrated for his brilliant playing, his power of imagination and his creative will at the end of the show." It is precisely this expressiveness of Sternal that constitutes the distinctive character and intensity of *Thelonia*.

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