

CHRISTOPHER ELSON

SPEAKING HANDS: FOUR PIANO TRIO ALBUMS

QUEBEC PIANIST EMIE R. ROUSSEL brought her bandmates to the Halifax Jazz Festival in July, and their tight and convincing performance on the waterfront earned them the Stingray Rising Star Award (judged jointly by a festival jury and online voting, with a prize of a thousand dollars to put toward the production of an album). Steeped in contemporary idioms, showing both its influences and its own real coherence and directional integrity, her trio impressed the jury and the audience with its ability to move fluently from acoustic to electric instruments, its surprising compositional variety, and its overall competency and collaborative flair. The bandleader held the crowd's attention at a large outdoor venue in the daytime, bringing them into the music and conveying the band's personality—something that never comes easily—and her relaxed charm at the microphone did not hurt, as she told punchy anecdote after punchy anecdote about the songs and their often quirky titles, such as “Nulla regula sine exception” (The Exception Proves the Rule) and “All the Things You Want in a Bowl.”

Roussel is based in Rimouski, where she teaches in the jazz program at the regional CEGEP, and she has two regular collaborators on tour and on recordings: bassist Nicolas Bédard and drummer Dominic Cloutier. The poise and confident drive evidenced in the trio's Halifax performance were clearly born of a lot of live experience, and the album notes to their most recent recording, *Intersections* (2017), emphasize how visiting eleven countries on four continents influenced the vibe and concept of the group. The aptly-titled album features even more tonal range than their live performance, although this might be perceived as its main weakness. There are also collaborations here with New Zealand-born trumpeter Lex French and Guadeloupe-born vocalist Malika Tirolien. The sung tunes can be a bit stylistically jarring, lyrically less than satisfying, and they seem somehow

calculated alongside the more intimate and natural trio settings. This hesitation aside, most of the tracks provide exciting and satisfying listening. The first piece, “3e Vague” (Third Wave), begins with an ostinato bass line before opening up on to a fleshed-out funk figure that strongly suggests a Michael Jackson song. The full structure of the tune also includes an airy, lyrical bridge, and its compositional quality and complexity is indicative of the level of inventiveness of the overall recording. The influence of recent Nordic piano groups like the Esbjörn Svensson Trio must also be remarked here, particularly in the equality of treatment of the bassist, who occasionally treats his sound with effects. The exciting interplay between a very percussive pianist (sometimes playing inside the piano) and a busy, melodic bassist is one of the key features of the group’s identity and may be heard to good advantage on tracks like “9 Till Late,” which incorporates unison licks, bass and piano trading, drum soloing over a bass/piano pedal, etc. As in their live performance, the electro-acoustic piano sounds also make an appearance here, enriching the palette. These sounds are paired with fretless bass on the intro to the lively “23e Étage,” with its building sense of menace resolving in the body of the composition to a back and forth between shifting harmony over a stable bass and a suggestive melodic line from an apparently other stylistic and emotional source.

Beyond this accomplished example from the young Canadian jazz scene it has been a good year to discover or rediscover recent releases by leading international pianists and their current groups. *The Other Side* (2018), for example, was Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen’s first piano trio album in eleven years, and it proved to be more than worth the wait. Following the death of bassist Harald Gill Johnsen, who was a member of his original trio, Gustavsen pursued different alignments and produced a number of fascinating albums that experimented with a range of stylistic possibilities. This year, however, he returned to the fundamental piano trio format, at which he so excels, with a lovely album that recalls earlier recordings in this form while at the same time foregrounding new sources, approaches, and horizons that clearly depend upon the distance travelled in the interval. Settings of Scandinavian folk tunes and hymns, original idiomatic contemporary pieces with an ECM jazz feel, and several readings of Johann Sebastian Bach compositions are melded together in a structured, purposeful outing that includes ten tracks with an undeniable spiritual bent. “Taste and See” is one highlight, as is the Ludvig Mathias Lindeman hymn “Kirken, den er et

gammelt hus” (Built on the Rock the Church doth Stand), which has a lovely bass cadenza opening up against some very discreet electronics (a legacy of the past decade’s experiments) before falling into a swiny, irresistible melody-driven meditation engaging the trio together. Gustavsen is an academically-trained thinker of music and ecstasy (a summary of his thesis on “The Dialectical Eroticism of Improvisation” can be found online), and his contained ecstasy shines through the gorgeous production values on this album. At times he even rivals Keith Jarrett for moments of grave and grooving, gospel-like meditation built upon masterfully-controlled tension and achingly-deferred release. This does not mean that either flamboyant virtuosity or grooving simplicity are absent, just that they are always set against a mood—an existential disposition, really—of discretion and thoughtfulness, to which drummer Jarle Vespestad and bassist Sigurd Hole also deftly and delicately contribute. The album thus deserves to be on any jazz fan’s best-of or must-get-to lists for 2018.

The prolific American pianist Brad Mehldau also released the album *Long Ago and Far Away* (2018), which was the long-delayed recording of a live performance from 2007 featuring the late, great jazz bassist Charlie Haden. Mehldau made several recordings with Haden’s groups beginning in the 1990s, and Haden’s widow, Ruth Cameron Haden (who co-produced this album), underlined the depth of their friendship in her liner notes, which quote her husband’s first impressions of Mehldau from a 1993 concert: “That pianist is brilliant. He is special, so unique.” In his own liner notes, Mehldau also described their shared desire to advance the music in full awareness of the paradoxes and resources of the inside/outside divide: “I would submit that [Haden] was not particularly interested in freedom for its own sake. He cherished order and formal integrity in music just as much, and what he cherished most was beauty.” The album, purposefully and posthumously excavated from their common past, finds two of the music’s most advanced practitioners making something beautiful out of that fully-assumed challenge of complexity, and the 12-15 minute length of most of the pieces already gives a sense of the richness of the ideas that demand collaborative exploration in their impeccable, unrushed unfolding. Recorded in Mannheim, the set begins with the bebop classic “Au Privave” (Play Along), which gets a unique medium-tempo, avant-gardist retelling. Mehldau’s contemporary classical vocabulary and the perhaps unequalled autonomy of his left and right hands, which he deploys in such a striking way, come together

to move this standard in a surprisingly stuttering, atonal direction. Haden's unmistakable tone and his renowned gift for suggestive voice-leading at a distance from the core harmonic changes are also used to complement and push Mehldau. The result is an exquisite thinking-through of unusual possibilities. Other tracks achieve something similar, though sometimes in an apparently simpler guise, as with "What I'll Do." The final track, "Everything Happens to Me," is an erudite pastiche of comfortable, drawling American folk songs, austere classical *études*, innocent lullabies, darkening nightmares, and lyrical flights, all held impossibly together by the two explorers. Overall, the album is a gem that represents another strong moment in their collective output.

This exciting collaboration sent me back to a more recently recorded album by the Brad Mehldau Trio—namely, *Blues and Ballads* (2016). This album takes a very different but recognizable tack right from the opening piece, as Mehldau begins the Buddy Johnson standard "Since I Fell for You" with bassist Larry Grenadier in a cocky but dignified strut sitting just right on Jeff Ballard's fabulous drum sound. Mehldau deploys a vast range right from the outset with huge, reharmonized chords; perfectly slurred blue notes; percussive, insistently varied repetitions of single notes; and much else. The motivic, constantly reconsidered cadenza at the end raises and extends a modest little bluesy lick, provisionally regrounds it in a rich deep bass, and then pushes it out into emotionally grimmer territory, apparently finishing on a note of seriousness that is reduced to just the piano, both hands speaking intensely up and down the instrument in a tireless reconsideration of the lick. In one of the many pleasurable and surprising turns on the album, the trio then moves into an unexpected additional outro, coda to the coda, with Grenadier finding a perfect bass line on which to rest a further revision of the initial idea, Ballard digging out an appropriate new grittiness from his ride cymbal, and the band finally coming to rest only a full minute later, with a warm, bluesy satisfaction.

The blues inflect the ballads and the ballads inflect the blues on this album, and the traditional approaches to both get a hard look in the ostensibly two-sided setting, opening up something beyond any merely generic perspective. Perhaps the most interesting example is the setting of the Beatles' ballad "And I Love Her." Mehldau has always treated popular music as a legitimate addition to a very generously conceived American Songbook for jazz improvisors, and his exquisite phrasing and attack on this reading

of Lennon and McCartney is every bit the equal of his interpretations of the composers of longer-standing standards. He pushes his band with such intelligence and panache that the long 64th note single-note lines are just as limpid and carefully integrated as the sparest chordal rhythmic punctuation, all of it in the service of a rich aesthetic coherence. The out-vamp is as bluesy as anything in the blues songs, and the play with melody and hook is allowed to work itself out in its furthest ramifications. This is a brilliant piece of jazz piano playing and stellar integrated ensemble work.

These four recordings reveal a great many possibilities for the piano-centred jazz combo today. Others await another chronicle for review.