

Eve Klesse

brushing hippos

The darned seventh year is long over, Eva Klesse's quartet can celebrate the band's eighth birthday in January 2021. They got to know each other in Leipzig while they were studying, and when things got serious about their job, it was actually clear to everyone that it had to be these four. Since then, they have grown richer through joint work and play experiences, countless kilometers traveled together and many quartet concerts and have developed a profiled, subtle group sound in the context of contemporary European jazz.

by Hans-Jürgen Linke

Eva Klesse and her quartet have released their albums every two years; *Creatures & States* is the fourth. In 2018, founding member Robert Lucaciu was still with *Miniatures* as a bass player, then Stefan Schöneegg from the Cologne scene joined the band for him. And something else drastic happened in 2018: Eva Klesse was the first German jazz musician to receive a call to the Hanover University for Music, Theater and Media and now teaches jazz drums there.

The new album is not about concrete events and changes, but - simply and obviously - about living beings and the conditions in which living beings get. One of the most beautiful of all states is happiness. Wonderfully, there are so many variations of it, and countless ways to be happy. Eva Klesse's composition "*Brushing Hippopotami*", which opens the album, shows a rather bizarre way: Brush hippos? In reality, hippos are thick-skinned amphibians that weigh tons and have pot bellies. So it's not about reality. For the unreal, the more distant zoological name "Hippopotamus" is more appropriate. It is perhaps reminiscent of the cute "*Happy Hippos*" that were invented in the 1980s as a promotionally effective and child-friendly form of tempting candy.

Eva Klesse tells a completely different story in the booklet. Their music has nothing to do with hippos and sweets, but with a dream that - as befits good dreams - didn't go very well and leaves a smiling, questioning and somehow tender feeling.

For each track on the album, the booklet tells such a graceful story about its creation. These stories may not only be there for the listeners and readers, but are also

aimed at the quartet playing. Because they contain narratives and images for emotional states that the music refers to, that are important to the composers and that improvisation should deal with - if one temporarily allows this conventional separation between composing and playing musicians to apply, which, as is well known, does not apply in jazz.

Structurally, "*Brushing Hippopotami*" takes a narrative and trauma-like course. A small, friendly melody emerges from a polyphonic, amorphous intro, below Stefan Schönegg's bass dabs a groping rhythm, which staggers more underscores the melody than structures it. Evgeny Ring gently but firmly takes the lead on the saxophone, remaining reserved, as does the bass solo that follows. Philip Frischkorn on the piano then increases the energetic situation, supported by Eva Klesse, whose work on the drums is mainly colorful and noisy, but also repeatedly contributes moments of climax with strong accents.

There is not a hint of exaltation in the energy that gradually flows together here. There always seems to be something like a wide-awake caution dominating the group consensus - a mood one would have, say, when watching a well-behaved hippopotamus in a china shop: keep calm, carry on, don't be alarmed! Then the little hippo is brushed, the dream ends faster than it started. But it's not the dreary reality that he ends up in, but an astonished shaking of the head: What was that now? program music?

elastic

Such music can only work if it avoids any well-trodden path. In other words, not avoiding it at all, but not coming close to clichés from the outset. Nothing can be sweet here. No cuteness and nursery rhyme schemes are allowed to play a role, that would make everything sticky. And attempts to superimpose such impulses or drown them out in denial should by no means determine the spirit of the interaction.

And this is where the fantastic qualities and the sustainable, elastic consensus of this quartet lie. All four composers and playing musicians have an equal share in it. The quartet is able to shape emotional states with clear and comparatively scarce musical means. All four have mastered the fine art of taking a back seat to the group and in the spirit of the music played together, without denying themselves. They are able to make the common expression their own concern without revealing their own individuality. And they're always alert enough to play their game away from whatever lurks in a broad middle ground that you might call mainstream. Nevertheless, there is nowhere an impression of brevity or even incompleteness.

Stefan Schönegg sees this collective ability primarily as a rare quality in the structure of the band and as a result of working together. Even during the release tour of the album *Miniatures*, he says, compositions from the current album were always on the set list. So the band took two years to develop the individually contributed compositions in a joint effort, to appropriate them, to shape them. Only comparatively few of the new pieces were still fresh when the new CD was recorded. "All four band members have their own distinctive signature," he says. "And it's really exciting how something like a common picture emerges from these four very individual compositional signatures in the end." The quartet is actually a real band in a very empathetic sense. "We're attuned to each other, we play a lot and we like each other. A lot of people say that about themselves, but in this quartet it's very special, I've never had that in this quality."

At the same time, this job description is a kind of guide to how a lively group process can be initiated and fed with sophisticated compositions. How can it happen that there is no contradiction lurking between starting material full of chamber music refinement, precise sound constellations and well thought-out planning on the one hand and mutually generated freedom on the other. The composed material with which the Eva Klesse Quartet works contains free space for improvisation, but does not see this as empty space. Everyone always knows exactly what they are working on at all times, how they have to do it and how not. And it may be that the stories told also contribute to this.

Equal distribution of musical responsibilities is also part of a sustainable group consensus. Each band member makes a contribution to the album and tells the appropriate stories in the booklet. Everyone provides information about compositional influences, contours, images of emotional states and the horizons of thought in their own music. The booklet thus reveals an amazing level of awareness with which the music is designed and of self-reflection.

Stefan Schönegg's "*Herbstmonat*" story refers to the Indian summer and the melancholy of a view of the cold times at the end of summer. Eva Klesse not only writes about the Hippo dream, but also about Arvo Pärt's search for answers ("*Choral for P*") and about contradictory and difficult-to-understand conditions in creative work ("*Einsiedlerkrebs*", "*Flirr!*"). Evgeny Ring's stories deal with impressions that are difficult to classify during the China tour with the quartet ("*Mr. Liu*") and Pablo Picasso's Blue Period ("*La Vie*"). Philip Frischkorn's varied and tradition-conscious compositions are dedicated to the confusingly well-structured "*Minotaurus*" and the writer David Foster Wallace ("*Hal Incandenza*"). And "*Der Tuchmacher*", which ends

the album, seems to have something to do with love.

So there is a random variety thematically in the stories about this music. And that is exactly what all the compositions seem to revolve around with great intensity: confusion, contradictory states and stops, excitement, anticipation and other ambiguities.

diligence and accuracy

In striking contrast to this thematic tangle, the music has an overall well-crafted structure. It is played with great care and accuracy and with a great love for nuance and detail. The band gives a significant weight to the composed material, all working with great virtuosity on the colors with which the pieces are designed and painted. This gives the album as a whole a kind of impressionistic shape.

Eva Klesse confirms this impression: "As a band, we enjoy these small, quiet moments. It doesn't always have to be the big gesture that creates the music." When the music was recorded in the studio in the Cologne loft, a concentrated rather than exalted atmosphere came to the fore, so that this impression of impressionism and chamber music introversion favored will. In the concentrated studio situation, their playing on the drums seems more interested in noise, color schemes and mixtures than in energetic outbursts. Eva Klesse doesn't gather a large number of small knock-and-bell percussion instruments around her, but rather concentrates on what the drum set has to offer. That's quite a lot.

In general, the renunciation of effects, electronic sound processing and piano preparations is part of the band's musical concept. All four focus on craftsmanship. There is even something of a penchant for purism in this music. It is not based on narrow-mindedness and limitation, but on a conscious choice for sonic clarity.

On the other hand, that's not all. "Live on stage, we give and take each other great liberties," says Eva Klesse. "We surprise each other and also increase to very expressive ways of playing - also with this material." Stefan Schönegg thinks that there are not always, but sometimes downright "magical evenings" at concerts, when spontaneous challenging situations arise from the security of the joint playing experiences emerge and "unexpected doors open".

The distribution of roles in the band is flexible and equal. "Everyone contributes," says Eva Klesse. "I was just the initiator and I provide the name." The music played here is dense, collective and complex, full of elegance and depth, and it leaves any GEMA (Gesellschaft für musikalische Aufführungs- und mechanische Vervielfältigungsrechte) -notorious polarization of E (Ernste Musik = 'serious music')

and U (Unterhaltungsmusik = 'light music') far behind. Everything here is made with great seriousness. Also the fun of playing and the joy of music.

In any case, writes Eva Klesse in the booklet story for her piece "*Einsiedlerkrebs*", musicians have to live with two ways of life: a nomadic, unsteady life on tour, where you travel around foreign countries with something like your own little snail shell on your back, and a withdrawn self-reflective existence that is absolutely necessary during the creative process. *Creatures & States* gives such and other contradictions cross-style, lively-sounding forms.

Current album: