BOXED SET



Zlatko Kaučič at 70: Inklings
Zlatko Kaučič (Fundacja Słuchaj)
by Stuart Broomer

Recorded in celebration of Zlatko Kaučič's 70th birthday (he recently celebrated his 73rd), *Inklings* is a four-CD set that's a fitting tribute to one of the great percussionists of free jazz, as well as a musician who has forged a singular leadership role as a teacher and bandleader in his home country of Slovenia. Kaučič also has maintained a significant international career with a stellar range of recurring partners, including recordings with a quartet made up of saxophonist Evan Parker, pianist Agustí Fernández and bassist Joëlle Léandre. The liner notes here make Kaučič's status abundantly clear. In place of critical analysis or biography, there is a series of tributes from those closest to his work, other major improvisers including Léandre, pianist Elisabeth Harnik and three of the musicians who appear in this set: Fernández, saxophonist Rodrigo Amado and bassist Barry Guy. Each of the four CDs present Kaučič in a distinct setting, with musicians of different approaches, but all highly compatible. Discs one and three document duos with saxophonists, while discs two and four document two wildly different trios, each enhanced by Kaučič's inventive presence. He is consistently engaging, matching and shining with some of the fastest-thinking and executing improvisers currently active.

The first disc presents Kaučič in duet with Norwegian tenor/soprano saxophonist Torben Snekkestad at the 2019 BCMF Festival in Šmartno-Brda, Slovenia. Snekkestad moves with perfect logic, from pensive ruminations to sudden emotive bursts, his extended improvisations taking myriad turns. On the opening, "VE", he and Kaučič have a thoughtfully structured dialogue in which they match shifting rhythmic impulses. On "VEN", Kaučič creates a dense field of metal percussion, with gongs, cymbals and bells suggesting a celebratory sonic tapestry that Snekkestad gradually enters, his soprano suggesting the tentative airiness of a flute, notes half-articulated, curving into silence. Barely voiced notes blur into taps that merge in the wind tunnel-like scraped steel sounds of Kaučič's cymbals, Snekkestad eventually alternating exuberant flights, vocalic asides and murmurs, all beyond any predictability, yet all of it draped over the percussionist's uncanny flurries and intrusions in a dialogue so closely realized that impulse, prod and aside become indistinguishable. The brief "VENC" extends that sense of interiority, Snekkestad's tenor playing etching silence with the barest voice, gradually expanding, all of it fed by cymbals reduced to the echo of a shimmer.

The third disc has the other duo set, this time from the 2020 BCMF festival with Portuguese saxophonist Amado joining Kaučič in an improvised, four-segment suite entitled *Free Fall*. As good as the first three segments are, they're eclipsed by the final one, which consumes half of the 48-minute length. It begins with a heightened delicacy, occasional metal clicks from Kaučič, while Amado contrasts delicate multiphonics with lyrical figures for a few minutes. When Amado introduces a substantial line, Kaučič joins with a sudden flurry and the two are wholly engaged in an explosive dialogue in which Amado matches the tenor's strongest historical voices, from Sonny Rollins-like rhythmic specificity, through John Coltrane-esque lyricism to Albert Ayler-ish intensity—and all are achieved with a unifying sonic character that is entirely his own. This is something that becomes increasingly clear in an extended lyrical passage later on, following a drum solo that ends in an extended duet; here, Amado alternates tense restraint and explosive release with such speed and control at the edge of disintegration that one might be awestruck, he and Kaučič always perfectly co-ordinated.

Recorded at the 2023 BCMF Festival, the first of the trios has Kaučič with German trumpeter Axel Dörner and Slovenian bassist Tomaž Grom, a younger musician who has elsewhere recorded duets with each of these partners. Their singular 36-minute piece is entitled "Tiha Misel Zabalesta," translated as "A silent thought shined." It is the most challenging work here, a constantly shifting exploration in which textures vary from dense and impenetrable to sparse and evanescent, always alive and always changing. The music begins as a wall of complex sound in which sorting out individual contributions can be difficult. There are also sounds that at times suggest a menagerie of large, possibly dangerous, animals, not all of which, though some, can be traced to Dörner's astonishing sonic inventory. Early on, Grom offers some long glissandi that suggest sirens, moving to bird-like calls and then savage bowing. Later Dörner suggests a hive of disturbed bees or flapping sheets of metal. At times there are sudden openings, the trumpeter's multiphonics briefly foregrounded by a relatively conventional bass line or a traditional flurry of percussion from Kaučič; there are also moments of startling delicacy, almost a breath of chimes.

Cecil Taylor once remarked that if he played bass, he'd like to play like Barry Guy. What sets the trio of Guy, Kaučič and pianist Fernández apart is that the latter's virtuosity also resembles Taylor's, however different his materials. On "Inkling 2" the trio creates a dense hive of light, rustling percussive detail in which the members fuse to a degree that Guy's bass might well pass for prepared piano. "Inkling 4", a delicate miniature, has plucked piano strings combined with delicate bass and percussion in a piece that hints at the incidental sounds of a woodland, while "Inkling 5" is a firestorm of reverberant piano interior, siren bass and riveting percussion. The sheer integration of the three improvisers, as well as their individual virtuosity, assumes a different form with the inclusion of two of Fernández' composed ballads, highlighting Kaučič's luminous subtlety. "Can Ram" is so finely etched that the opening suggests that the musicians are embellishing air, while Guy's pizzicato lines are delivered with an expressive depth rarely achieved by bassists. The concluding piece, "La Niña De La Calle Ibiza", is a finely etched ballad, limpid with empathy, Fernández' lyricism at its finest.

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Posneto ob praznovanju 70. rojstnega dne Zlatka Kaučiča (nedavno je dopolnil 73 let), je *Inklings* štiridiskovni komplet, ki predstavlja primerno poklonitev enemu izmed velikih tolkalcev free jazza, pa tudi glasbeniku, ki je v svoji domovini, Sloveniji, oblikoval edinstveno vodilno vlogo kot pedagog in vodja zasedb. Kaučič je obenem vzdrževal pomembno mednarodno kariero z izjemnim krogom stalnih sodelavcev, med drugim tudi s kvartetom, ki ga sestavljajo saksofonist Evan Parker, pianist Agustí Fernández in basistka Joëlle Léandre. Spremna besedila tukaj jasno potrjujejo Kaučičev status. Namesto kritične analize ali biografije so vključena pričevanja tistih, ki so njegovemu delu najbližje—drugih pomembnih improvizatorjev, kot so Léandre, pianistka Elisabeth Harnik ter trije glasbeniki, ki nastopajo na tej izdaji: Fernández, saksofonist Rodrigo Amado in basist Barry Guy. Vsak od štirih diskov predstavlja Kaučiča v drugačnem kontekstu, z glasbeniki različnih pristopov, a vsi izjemno kompatibilni. Prvi in tretji disk dokumentirata dua s saksofonisti, drugi in četrti pa dva izrazito različna tria, oba obogatena z Kaučičevo iznajdljivo prisotnostjo. Ves čas je izjemno angažiran, enakovredno se meri in sije ob nekaterih najhitreje mislečih in delujočih improvizatorjih današnjega časa.

Prvi disk predstavlja Kaučiča v duetu z norveškim tenor in soprano saksofonistom Torbenom Snekkestadom, posnetem na festivalu BCMF leta 2019 v Šmartnem v Brdih. Snekkestad se giblje z brezhibno logiko, od zamišljenih razmišljanj do nenadnih čustvenih izbruhov, njegove razširjene improvizacije pa zavijajo v številne smeri. V uvodni skladbi »VE« s Kaučičem ustvarita premišljeno strukturiran dialog, v katerem usklajujeta spreminjajoče se ritmične impulze. V »VEN« Kaučič ustvari gosto polje kovinskih tolkal—gongi, činele in zvonci oblikujejo slavnostno zvočno tapiserijo, v katero Snekkestad postopoma vstopa; njegov sopran nakazuje zračno krhkost flavte, ton je napol izrečen, ukrivljen v tišino. Komaj zaznavni toni se zabrisujejo v trke, ki se stapljajo z vetrovniškimi, drgnjenimi kovinskimi zvoki Kaučičevih činel, Snekkestad pa nato izmenjuje razposajene vzlete, vokalne vstavke in šepete—vse onkraj predvidljivosti, a vse ovito v tolkalčeve nenavadne izbruhe in posege v dialogu, tako tesno prepletenem, da impulz, spodbuda in pripomba postanejo nerazločljivi. Kratka »VENC« nadaljuje ta občutek notranjosti; Snekkestadov tenor riše tišino z najtanjšim glasom, ki se postopoma razširja, vse pa napaja zvok činel, skrčen na odmev lesketa.

Tretji disk prinaša drugi duet, tokrat s portugalskim saksofonistom Amadom, posnet na festivalu BCMF leta 2020, v improvizirani štiridelni suiti z naslovom *Free Fall*. Čeprav so prvi trije deli izvrstni, jih zasenči zadnji, ki zavzema polovico 48-minutnega trajanja. Začne se z izostreno nežnostjo—občasni kovinski kliki Kaučiča—medtem ko Amado nekaj minut prepleta subtilne multifonike z liričnimi figurami. Ko uvede izrazitejšo linijo, se Kaučič odzove z nenadnim izbruhom in oba se znajdeta v eksplozivnem dialogu, v katerem Amado dosega izrazno moč največjih zgodovinskih tenoristov: od ritmične natančnosti v slogu Sonnyja Rollinsa, preko lirike, ki spominja na Johna Coltrana, do intenzivnosti Alberta Aylerja—vse to pa uresniči z enotnim zvočnim značajem, ki je povsem njegov lasten. To postane še bolj očitno v kasnejšem razširjenem liričnem odseku, po bobnarskem solu, ki se izteče v podaljšan duet; tukaj Amado z osupljivo hitrostjo in nadzorom izmenjuje napeto zadržanost in eksplozivne izpuste na robu razpada, pri čemer sta s Kaučičem ves čas popolnoma usklajena.

Posnet na festivalu BCMF leta 2023, prvi trio združuje Kaučiča z nemškim trobentačem Axelom Dörnerjem in slovenskim basistom Tomažem Gromom, mlajšim glasbenikom, ki je že snemal duete z obema partnerjema. Njihovo enotno 36-minutno delo nosi naslov »Tiha misel Zabalesta«. Gre za najzahtevnejše delo na tej izdaji, nenehno spreminjajoče se raziskovanje, kjer se teksture gibljejo od gostih in neprebojnih do redkih in izmuzljivih, vedno živih in v stalnem preoblikovanju. Glasba se začne kot zid kompleksnega zvoka, v katerem je težko razločiti posamezne prispevke. Občasno se pojavljajo zvoki, ki spominjajo na menažerijo velikih, morda nevarnih živali—nekateri med njimi, a ne vsi, izhajajo iz Dörnerjevega osupljivega zvočnega arsenala. Na začetku Grom ponudi dolge glissande, ki spominjajo na sirene, nato preide v ptičje klice in nato v surovo igranje z lokom. Kasneje Dörner pričara vtis roja razdraženih čebel ali plapolajočih kovinskih plošč. Občasno se pojavijo nenadne odprtine, kjer trobentačevi multifoniki za hip stopijo v ospredje ob razmeroma konvencionalni basovski liniji ali tradicionalnem izbruhu tolkal pri Kaučiču; prisotni pa so tudi trenutki presenetljive nežnosti, skoraj kot dih zvončkov.

Cecil Taylor je nekoč pripomnil, da bi, če bi igral kontrabas, želel igrati kot Barry Guy. Tisto, kar loči trio Guy–Kaučič–Fernández, je dejstvo, da virtuoznost slednjega spominja na Taylorjevo, čeprav so njegova sredstva drugačna. V skladbi »inkling 2« trio ustvari gosto, svetlikajoče se zvočno panjasto strukturo, polno šelestečih tolkalnih detajlov, v kateri se člani zlijejo do te mere, da bi Guyev bas lahko zvenel kot preparirani klavir. »inkling 4«, nežna miniatura, združuje brenkane klavirske strune z občutljivim basom in tolkali v skladbi, ki namiguje na naključne zvoke gozda, medtem ko je »inkling 5« ognjeni vihar resonančne notranjosti klavirja, sirenskega basa in vznemirljivega tolkalnega toka. Popolna integracija treh improvizatorjev ter njihova individualna virtuoznost dobita drugačno obliko z vključitvijo dveh Fernándezovih komponiranih balad, ki poudarjata Kaučičevo svetlečo subtilnost. »Can ram« je izrisan tako natančno, da uvod daje vtis, kot da glasbeniki krasijo sam zrak, Guyeve pizzicato linije pa dosegajo izrazno globino, ki jo basisti le redko dosežejo. Zaključna skladba »La Niña de la Calle Ibiza« je tankočutno oblikovana balada, prežeta z empatijo, v kateri Fernándezova lirika doseže vrhunec.

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