

Anna-Lena Schnabel
Books, Bottles & Bamboo

It says something about Anna-Lena Schnabel's artistic mettle that on this, her debut as a leader, she does so much more than simply hold her own alongside pianist Florian Weber, bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Dan Weiss. With bold original compositions, a Horace Silver ballad and a free group improvisation, she guides these seasoned, in-demand players toward fresh and unpredictable sonic terrain. You're not likely to hear Weber playing melodica, toy piano and prepared piano in the normal course of things, but that is what Schnabel requested and what Weber so brilliantly carried out.

"It was more important that I have a special color for every tune than to prepare every little string of the piano like [John] Cage or something," says the Hamburg-based alto saxophonist, who titled the session ***Books, Bottles & Bamboo*** in honor of the very objects they placed inside the piano. "Different stuff also, like plates," she laughs. "I didn't want to make the preparations complicated because they have to be easy to change between every tune."

Schnabel cites influences as disparate as Charlie Parker and Harry Partch but somehow finds a coherent route through them. Her music is steeped in jazz but readily veers into other experimental areas of sound. The raw quality of her alto tone suggests a lineage running from Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy through Oliver Lake and others, but Schnabel also includes John Coltrane and Michael Brecker in her personal pantheon. Her mouthpiece-only introduction on "Dying Swan Under the Bamboo Moon" evinces a connection to Asian music, she says, "because with the mouthpiece you don't have to play single tones. They're not separate, you can combine them and do glissandos. For me it gives a more eternal feeling for the music."

Born and raised in Lower Saxony, Schnabel attended Hamburg's Academy for Music and Theater and had the opportunity to study with Ernst Friedrich Felsch, Marcio Doctor, Frank Gratkowski, Karsten Gohde and Wolf Kerschek among others. She has recorded with Dominic Miller and Lars Danielsson, and performed with Jiggs Whigham, Maria Joao and Michel Benita as well as the late legends Kenny Wheeler and John Taylor. She has won several scholarships as well as the Jazzspatz prize, the Praetorius Musik Preis and the Ebel Stipendium.

Her first encounters with Florian Weber were with the German Youth Orchestra Big Band, where Weber served as a teacher. "We met again at a European workshop where I also taught," Schnabel adds, "and he asked me for a project, so we came into more musical contact." The harmonic acuity, lyricism and purity of tone in Weber's playing, not to mention the startling mix of prepared and natural piano sounds, lends a deep mystery and complexity to ***Books, Bottles & Bamboo***. The fact that Weber, Morgan and Weiss work as a band in Weber's *Biosphere* was also a big inspiration for Schnabel and a key to the session's success. (Weber and Weiss also recruited tenor monster Donny McCaslin, lately of David Bowie fame, for the offbeat 2016 trio release *Criss Cross: Exploring the Music of Bill Evans and Monk*).

Taking satisfaction in her album's implied story arc, Schnabel notes: "'Burnout' is the first and 'Peace' is the last." The former opens with a lightning

alto/melodica unison, a sound so unexpected that it's almost initially disorienting. In a surprise move Schnabel harmonizes the same line on the outro; the density and angularity of the lines almost recalls early '60s George Russell. In contrast, "Peace," one of Horace Silver's most affecting melodies, finds Schnabel and Morgan exploring as a duo before the band comes in, preserving the intimate rubato feel. "I always love to do that song," Schnabel remarks. "If I have problems and don't feel so well, when I start this tune it somehow opens the heart and I feel more at peace. It has a real big power."

On "Toy" Weber suddenly shifts to toy piano, an item sufficiently important to Schnabel that the band had to scramble to buy one the day before the session (their own was too heavy to bring on the plane to New York). "Drunken Books" also takes its title from the technology at hand, as Schnabel reveals: "I often have special images in my mind, like little stories when I write tunes. 'Drunken Books' is because the piano was filled with books, and it made the sound of a bar piano, honky-tonk style, this blues [sound]." There's an imagined story behind "Luggage" as well: "It's kind of connected to 'Dying Swan' — the swan dies and arrives in hell. That's what 'Luggage' is about. I imagined how it would sound if he went into the Inferno of Dante. It starts very slow and heavy and large, and then in the end he gets free, he leaves hell, he's more in a heavenly state. You just have to go through it."

At every turn, whether it's the mournful building intensity of "Loss Laments," the fragmented, almost Threadgill-ish funk of "Plop" or the crisp interplay of "Reef," Schnabel and her bandmates achieve a simpatico that attests to their big ears and the depth of their commitment as improvisers. "I was really surprised by how fast and deep they understood what I meant with the music," Schnabel says. "With just two or three hours of rehearsal, everything was there, instantly. When you play with them they're so close to you all the time in the music. I think it never happened to me before, that I immediately felt so deeply connected to other musicians."

David R. Adler
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