



Nils Wogram: Root 70 with Strings

New album „Riomar“

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There aren't all too many formations in Jazz, and even fewer in German-speaking countries, that have worked constantly over many years. Root 70 is, however, such a group. From album to album, one can follow how trombonist Nils Wogram, saxophonist Hayden Chisholm, bassist Matt Penman and drummer Jochen Rückert have not only founded a dynamic group identity and diligently merged into a unit over many years. One can also hear how these musicians have set new focal points in their work together, again and again, far beyond the sum of their individual parts. On *Riomar*, they transcend the quartet context for the first time and expand their structure by three string instruments.

A jazz band and strings? That, of course, immediately awakens the suspicion that the band could be at the end of their own means. So often one has seen jazz and pop musicians who, earlier or later, add strings, brass or background singers in an attempt to cover up the fact that their ability to express themselves is slowly trickling away. Nils Wogram takes no stock in this approach at all. On the contrary. Exactly when one compares this with his early recordings, two key routes in his collected work offer themselves up. The composer of complex tonal abstractions, who orients himself to the possibilities of New Music, faces the jazz trombonist, who, full of the joy of playing, absorbs the specific groove of his urban surroundings. On *Riomar* he succeeds in unifying both of these strands into one main path. The music is complex and, at the same time, light, abstract and intimate. Wogram looks to play consciously with clichés, and while he reminds us of Charlie

Parker's album, *Charlie Parker with Strings*, he adopts the ethereal stringency of an Anton Weber instead.

In contrast to Parker, the strings don't lend the playful drive of Root 70 any sort of Hollywood-esque note, but rather give the music additional complexity. Here Wogram aims to upset the classic way the roles are doled out between jazz musicians who improvise and classical musicians who play from sheet music. The strings are integrated in the process of improvisation and, thus, become members of the band. "Musicians who play with the quality of those we have in these recordings are able to pick up on voicings from Anton Weber and to create something spontaneous from them," says Wogram, pleased.

Nils Wogram isn't looking to synthesize jazz and classical music, as often has invoked by some many others. Neither does he want to warm up the Third Stream, which has rightfully sunken into oblivion; rather, he's much more interested in the question as to how classically trained string musicians can take up the dynamics of a jazz group. "Root 70 is not a band whose strengths lie in free improvised music or in a kinship to serious classical music," says Wogram. "The strengths of the band lie quite clearly on the side of jazz. The strings tend to introduce new color into the music, but they move a bit further towards the side of jazz than normally happens in such projects."

The worlds of jazz and classical music are not at all represented by the camps of both groups of musicians. In the structure of Wogram's compositions such a dialog is directly at work, one between lightness and strictness, which has long been characteristic of the trombone player's work, who currently commutes between homes in Zurich and Cologne. Wogram finds the superficial philosophy of the crossover problematic. He searches and finds stringent ensemble solutions for the seven musicians, who might introduce their different social values within the project, but, in the end, overcome them. Violinist Gerdur Gunnarsdottir, violist Garreth Lubbe and cellist Adrian Brendel have approached jazz for a long time via very different paths. To prevent any kinds of groupings from forming, however, Wogram consciously does without a pre-rehearsed string group and decided on three musicians who could play a part in the project individually as do the four protagonists of Root 70.

Wogram gets on a bus with six other musicians and the listener and goes on a trip with everyone, a trip which ends only when he comes back home with the last track. For he is and remains a story teller. “The older I get, the less I want to emphasize solely musical components, such as dynamics and contrast. I feel inside me the impulse to tell something that goes beyond these elements. There’s an atmosphere I have placed at the foundation of my concert programs and albums, something that is retained over the entire time. Of course, I allow fractures to happen on *Riomar*, but this happens less often than in earlier albums. The new record is more of one single piece.”

Seen from the context of Root 70, this insight is remarkable, since the music for this band has always originated out of the performer Nils Wogram’s perspective, someone who has to and is allowed to implement the pieces with his band together, as a trombonist. He still has the desire to play in him on *Riomar*, and yet this makes itself felt completely differently. Here, not one musician reveals himself, one who wants to hit the gas pedal of the material, but rather Wogram as a performer withdraws for the benefit of the pieces. “Root 70 has always had pieces which served as a vehicle for a specific attitude of performing,” Wogram admits frankly. “This does not happen on the record with the strings at all. I mostly had the overall sound of the CD in my ear. Only after this did the solo parts result. I never wanted to place particular aspects of my playing in the foreground, but rather the record was always about the overall sound.”

On *Riomar*, several journeys take place at the same time, and the listener may decide which journey he or she would like to take. In this way the music tells the story of a journey that reveals itself via concrete landscape images and Mediterranean moods. Both sides of Nils Wogram’s musical personality set out together, and the band Root 70 continues its safari into the land of unlimited collective expressions. *Riomar* is a seductive invitation to shift one’s position. Whoever doesn’t follow this call will miss something.

By Wolf Kampmann (Translation Bruce Carnevale)