

THINK AGAIN

Scheme for Thought, the new album by pianist **Elan Mehler**, introduces a fresh dimension to the New York sound, created by Mehler's drummerless quartet. He's a name we're going to be hearing a lot more of, says **Stephen Graham**

When you hear the story of how hitherto unknown US pianist Elan Mehler got signed it's hard not to think of the film *Lost In Translation*. In it Bill Murray plays the nonchalant hero, an American actor filming a commercial in Tokyo, stuck in a hotel. Besides meeting a woman played by Scarlett Johansson not a lot actually happens. It's as if he is marooned in the hotel, hemmed in by the city beyond and seemingly incapable of making any contact with anybody.

Elan Mehler may not have been marooned in his spa hotel in Vals in Switzerland before he met DJ Gilles Peterson who was holidaying at the time. But his wistful, elegiac tunes must have echoed through the draughty corridors of the hotel mostly eluding the hotel guests, presumably with thoughts of warm towels and a good pummelling higher on the agenda than listening to thoughtful soundscapes and cunning codas. In his blog Elan wryly muses: "You wonder how all those stone faced automatons you see

at hotels playing 'Take the A Train' while reading a newspaper got that way. I mean they must have liked music at some point. Well, now I know. You play enough background gigs and it's just so much easier to turn off. The flipside is where I usually end up – get a couple of drinks in me – a touch of existential angst. Peel my eyes open to see an empty lounge or a girl in the corner reading a German self help book."

Thankfully, though the tunes did not escape Peterson who mixed business with pleasure, and spent his evenings after putting his children to bed sipping Armagnac as he listened to Mehler perform late into the night. Peterson signed the young Brooklynite and arranged for the Japanese DJ Daisuke Tanabe to remix one of Mehler's songs, 'Scheme for Thought' which came out tantalisingly last year. Peterson's label Brownswood dithered about putting out the album but thankfully they have now done just that with its title taking the name

of the initial song but without the remix included.

Mehler's quartet and the album though are a world away from the land of remixes and DJ turntablism. Initially when Peterson suggested a remix, Mehler thought that he didn't like the album mix! Most remarkably the group manages without a drummer and pits Mehler's piano against David Moore's Fender Rhodes in what turns out to be an inspired piece of casting with Moore's bleeps shattering the spell of Mehler's zen-like solo lines like an alien trying to communicate from space. Andrew Zimmerman's grandly sad-sounding tenor provides the commentary for much of the quartet's direction, keeping the tempos slow and telling and the sound soft and muffled. It could almost be the cool school as channelled through Debussy and the net result is that Tod Hedrick's bass becomes lighthouse keeper for the gentle hues and elegiac tendencies of the writing.

The quietness recalls Norwegian Tord Gustavsen's trio at times but Mehler also introduces the alt. country songs of Gillian Welch live, as he did during the band's debut at the Vortex in London in late August, and the album concludes with Welch's 'Elvis Presley Blues'. Clearly Mehler does not wish to locate his music in the tundra. The 28-year-old from the Boston area moved to New York to attend NYU as a teenager where he studied piano performance with Don Friedman and Frank Kimbrough. He took a year off between his junior and senior year to live in Paris and got a gig there at a piano bar

where he became house pianist. "It was really ideal. Then coming back I was playing local gigs, I wasn't making a living, doing some teaching, playing gigs around like the Knitting Factory and Tonic. When I lived in Paris somebody I knew from school had the gig in Switzerland through a cousin's connection. They were there for a few weeks and the pianist had a gig back in New York. I came in for three days, then came in for a week, the next year two weeks and now I'm there in the spring and summer."

Very tall, Mehler is six feet eight, he comes from an Israeli American family – Elan is an Israeli name – the quartet owes its genesis to the pianist's time at NYU, working extensively with the saxophonist Andrew Zimmerman, with Fender Rhodes player Moore, joining later from the New School. Mehler doesn't work with a drummer with this group "it leaves a lot of space for the melodic thing we're doing" but he acknowledges it puts a lot of onus on the bassist, "he really has to listen to us locking in".

Mehler's jazz listening began with Dizzy Gillespie's *Live at Newport* and Duke Ellington's *Money Jungle* as a teenager. "When I was in college Bill Evans was a big thing. I have something like 30 albums of his. I'm also a big Paul Bley fan." Mehler doesn't sound like either Evans or Bley which is a sign of his maturity already. He is an underdemonstrative soloist and this is one of the band's strengths. The diffidence reflects the introspective moods, but it's not exactly nervous or unsure of itself. It's as if no

one has to take a solo and the fleshing of the instrumental lines is more important as the themes appear and mutate in miniature form Mehler could prove to be one of the discoveries of 2007. His distinctive sound is unlike anything else coming out of New York and if the quartet manages to stay together, it could mark a new exciting presence on the international scene. Mehler's realistic enough to realise that it all takes time. He's back playing in the Swiss spa next spring, but hopefully the Swiss won't have him all to themselves for too long. ■

