

MODERN

Elan Mehler – Brooklyn, Vals and the sound of the mountains as inspiration – Paramount Music

It is a weekend in late summer 2010, a Saturday afternoon, children are playing in the backyard, the pleasantly warm weather is switching between sun and clouds, the atmosphere is laid back and relaxed, all the shopping has been done, and later some friends are coming over for a barbecue in the garden. A wonderful mixture of jazz and folk is coming from the speakers directed outside, and nothing could fit this mood better than the *Half Seas Over* album. Together with his new band, Elan Mehler accompanies Adam McBride-Smith's soft voice on the piano. Musical memories of our youth come to mind when we hear these warm tones that remind us of 1970s folk music and singer/songwriter compositions. These songs were a product of joint studio jam sessions after New Yorker Elan Mehler had asked the singer to take the mike for his second album *The After Suite. The New Breed*, which was initially recorded as a pure piano ballad and then with the whole band, is one of the key songs. McBride-Smith and Mehler each discovered the other's completely different compositional approach to songwriting and jazz composition on the piano and, at the same time, the wonderfully harmonious mélange of both.

It is thanks to a spa hotel complex in Switzerland that Elan Mehler had the opportunity to record his music in the first place. A few years ago, he played at the Therme Vals hotel bar where BBC radio broadcaster Gilles Peterson was spending a few days with his family. Peterson very much liked what Mehler played in the evening while people were having drinks at the bar and gave him his business card. The pianist was delighted with the praise, but did not know Peterson. He met him soon after in New York, where he – better informed this time – handed the broadcaster a demo CD. It resulted in *Scheme For Thought* (Brownswood), a debut with several compositions that Mehler had played at Therme Vals. For Peterson, it was the record he had wanted to release with his small label for a long time; for music critics from all over the world, it was a masterpiece of contemporary jazz. Whereas initially he exclusively composed instrumental pieces, Mehler added songwriting to his compositional skills when working on his next brilliant work, *The After Suite* (Brownswood). These were songs that were later mostly sung by Becca Stevens. While they were jazz songs, they had something that set them well apart from many established jazz greats. There was something new about them. When you hear the choral section, one layer over the other, it increasingly becomes music itself and might briefly remind you of Chick Corea's fusion style and his band Return To Forever. Yet the music speaks its own language here – in his own words Mehler would call it "paramount".

Elan Mehler, only 30 years old, was born in Boston, Massachusetts. He started playing piano when he was seven and later studied the instrument at New York University. He has a natural talent: None of his family members or friends played an instrument or influenced him. "When I was a teenager, my love of jazz actually had a negative effect on my personal relationships with friends. I remember very well listening to the duo Bill Evans and Jim Hall in the car and making everyone with me listen carefully. Every time someone spoke, I rewound the piece and said: "You aren't really listening!" I was a real pain in the neck and simply could not understand that this music was not as life-changing for my friends as it was for me. As a musician, there is something very personal connecting you with your band members, a kind of intimacy I was not able to find in my friends. Today I am also very interested in many other genres. When exploring the musical tastes of others, I often discover an entirely new field which I did not know or expect outside the world of jazz".

Interestingly though, his favorite music until the age of ten was rock, most notably by Led Zeppelin. If he set his iPod on "random" today, Mehler would listen to an inspiring mix from across many genres, ranging from Nick Cave and Joanna Newsom to Led Zeppelin, Nirvana and the minimal musician Steve Reich or the Argentinean classical music composer Osvaldo Golijov. And when asked what sounds from our environment he is particularly fond of, he replies by returning to Vals, where he has played the piano and improvised in bars between his recordings and club gigs many a time: "In Switzerland, I like the sounds of the mountains very much. They are almost the opposite of what we call sounds and such a stark contrast to Brooklyn/New York City. The wind on the peaks sounds fantastic!" We do not know what this exceptional composer will play for us in the future. However, for the moment it seems that he has found in *Half Seas Over* a form that is important to him, that truly inspires him and that he himself cannot actually classify. "I don't know if Adam's music is West Coast folk or whether we could call mine East Coast jazz. *Half Seas Over* simply started with me falling in love with Adam's music and, when we began to write together, I simply worked with what I am good at without destroying or adding to the feeling of the songs." Someone who can take a backseat and empathize to such an extent and plays such a crucial role in influencing the music might soon be given the opportunity to work at Soundtrack Studios. And they can often accompany that soft Saturday afternoon at any time of year. Just like Elan Mehler's very personal music.

Michael Rütten



Photo: © Brownswood Recordings

NB. When someone is able to play such extraordinarily beautiful, visual and also quiet sounds, we simply have to ask that person how he or she would perform for a deaf audience. "A very interesting and, at the same time, difficult question. I would not dare to assume to know how a world without sounds may sound, and I am not sure whether I am an artist who is able to communicate the inexpressible. I try to enter a different medium through music. At the same time, I think that modern dance is often very antirhythmic or completely detached from the music and I do not experience enlightening moments watching it. So I have to hand over to Bill T. Jones and his Dance Company..."

And how should we ideally listen to music? "There are no rules. Listen to it loudly, listen quietly, but listen carefully! I have noticed that many musicians are irritated by the fact that a real "one track download" market has developed. I do not really have a problem with somebody only downloading one of my tunes. But when you really like a piece by a musician, you should also know what the rest of the album is like or at least find out where the song has come from. So, go ahead and download individual tracks and, if you like them, get the album, too!"