

Thursday, July 18t, 2013.

Interview with Marcel Krömker – Double bassist in The Berlin Quartet, Germany.

By Cristina Dominguez – Universidad de Carabobo, Venezuela.

Cristina: Being a jazz musician, how would you define "improvisation"?

Marcel: Ah, a philosophical one... I think there are many explanations; music for me is made in the moment. It's not something to put in a museum. It's similar to Zen art. Even a classical musician who plays exactly what is written on the paper and also prepares every single note very well has a momentum of "improvisation". Because the sound in that very moment is something unpredictable, something very unique. This is where improvisation for me starts. But as a jazz musician I like to go onto a stage and first "feel" the room, the people and the atmosphere. It sounds esoteric but I believe it is something spiritual actually. So ideally I go onto the stage and want to play the music that fits best into the room, to the present people and finally to the very moment. To be able to do that you need to study scales and chords and forms etc. But the important thing is to be very much aware of the moment and listen to what it needs. Shall I go on?

Cristina: Please!

Marcel: Or do you have a question to that?

Cristina: Well, you already got into one of the other questions I had prepared, but I prefer letting you go on with your explanation first.

Marcel: Sometimes it's a problem, when musicians come together and need to show their technique, I think. Many jazz musicians in these days are afraid to let go and to play "wrong" notes. They are focused on playing right, fast and very virtuously. But I think that people like Thelounious Monk, or Miles Davis, or Wayne Shorter are geniuses because of their skill to be original and very strongly present in the moment. Some other musicians sound much more boring to me although they are crazily virtuous players. Some have much better technique than Miles. Jazz music is a very good place to express all these things because you are freer than in classical music and you can spend more time in finding notes YOU think that are fitting instead of using the notes of the composer. So to me jazz music is much more personal. Classic is more about melting as a group together and to step back, behind the music. That's not bad! Just a different approach! You can think about it like this: classical musicians have to be great interpreters and jazz musicians have to be strong individual characters. But at the end it's all the same: it's about making

something fitting natural in the very moment. I've finished.

Cristina: (Laughs) This is a great perception of jazz music, I totally agree with you. So, you started messing with another question I had: what would you say it's needed to know for improvising? According to your own experience.

Marcel: Actually you don't need anything. You can improvise perfectly with kids who have no knowledge, just because they are not afraid. The most important skill is to be sensitive and brave. These 2 things are sometimes in the way of each other. But if you are talking about becoming a professional jazz musician then I would say: you need to know about harmonies as much as you can. About tunes and history. About your instrument. You need to practice as much as you can (but not much more than 4h a day...), etc. On a workshop with Bobby McFerrin, he said he likes to start concerts without preparing how to begin the concert. So he comes on stage and just starts something, very often very communicative with the audience. He said he needs this to be still excited. And I agree. You need this moment of fear/excitement to be very good. You sound the best when you go slightly over your limits. For that you need to be very brave. But at the same time super sensitive. Because you need to listen very well and to be aware of small changes and "mistakes", so you can adjust very fast and make changes of the plan all the time. Maybe my definition of improvisation is changing plans continuously! (laughs).

Cristina: I really liked how you last defined improvisation, "changing plans continuously"... I've heard from jazz musicians say that improvisation requires a certain preparation, what do you think about this?

Marcel: Of course it depends completely on how you see it. In a very philosophical way, it needs nothing. Just you, and the moment, and your awareness. But to use this moment in a very effective way and to be able to fill all the moments that are not perfect, you need a lot of practice, time and experience. If you see it from the practical side: I prepare for every concert very much! I try to learn the music by heart. For that I study the chords, the forms, the sounds, the notes, etc, a lot. But all this you do to be as free as possible in the moment of the concert. You study to be able to do the things that I just talked before. You try to free yourself very much from the form, chords and notes to be able to still focus on the moments and adjustments. But you need to prepare like hell for that!

Break

Continued on Monday, July 22nd, 2013.

Cristina: Well, last time we were talking about the preparation a jazz musician needs to perform, what other advice can you give about that topic?

Marcel: That's a very general question. Can you give me some specifications about what you mean?

Cristina: Ok, let's talk about when you are about to improvise a solo, what do you do to prepare yourself for that moment? Do you have already a kind of scheme that helps you create what you are about to play?

Marcel: Well, ideally it's like this: in the moment of the performance you should try to get into the flow of the music. No shame, no preconception. But joining in the moment. We talked about that. But to achieve that, you need lots of preparation. And if you listen to famous records and their alternate takes, you can hear that many famous musicians don't play a very different solo each time they play the same song. On the *Kind of Blues* album - the most sold jazz record - you can listen to some alternate takes and you can hear in the solos that every musician has an idea, a preconception of what they will play. So, to prepare a solo, I advice to study the chords, the scales and all the options, alternate chords and also the rhythm, etc. You should try to know the tune completely by heart and to have many options to play on every chord and every phrase. You can start by playing the melody and play variations of that. Even drummers do that. What many musicians forget is that jazz music is to be played live. And it is to be played together! This you can only practice in the band. So once you learned your chords and melody, and so on, you should very soon go and play together with as many people you can! Different drummers, different piano players, etc, because with every band your solo will sound different. And some of the ideas might sound very good with one band and with another one completely wrong! You can also practice this in a very good way: to play with CDs. I don't mean play-a-longs. But I mean the masterpieces, or the CDs you really love. Put them and play with them. Imitate the musicians on the CD and develop new ideas out of that. Like this you can develop your own style and practice to play with a band and to get ideas on how to play together. But really: nothing (!) replaces to play together in a band and to connect with the musicians around you and to try your solos in that surrounding.

Cristina: Which are the most important elements in improvisation?

Marcel: I think the most important skills I told you before. Listening, connecting, enjoying the moment... Technically you can never stop learning. You can learn many layers of rhythm. Many layers of alternate harmonies. Lines, bop phrases, hard bop, swing, modern jazz, jazz rock... But most important is always how to play with others, to be ready to connect, react and to create new ideas, not to be afraid and to do something nice out of "mistakes". We call this "jazz vocabulary". Or the "jazz language". People with a huge vocabulary have more options, but it's not the most important thing.

Cristina: Well, in conclusion, what would you say is the importance of improvisation in jazz?

Marcel: Do you mean what is the most important thing in improvisation? Or do you mean why improvisation is important in jazz?

Cristina: Why improvisation is important in jazz? In your own perception.

Marcel: Jazz is a language, like any other music style. Pop and classic and the different folk music styles are other languages. The improvisation took a big part in jazz songs. It became the main art in that language for some people. In the Keith Jarrett Trio or Wayne Shorter Quartet, the part of improvisation takes most of the song. While in big band music or other modern bands there is sometimes not one solo. But it's still jazz, because the language - the phrasing and chosen notes and harmonies and rhythms - are jazz. I think improvisation is an art which is very important for all musicians! I think that also classical musicians can learn so much by improvising in their language. Many folk musicians do it. But I think jazz music is probably the only music form, where improvisation can be the most important part of a song or a piece of music. In my bands, sometimes a song takes 4 minutes and sometimes 15 minutes. I think that doesn't really exist in classical or pop music. But it's so beautiful because it is so much connected and reflecting the very moment (I mean the same song is 4 minutes in one concert and in the next concert maybe 15 minutes). It depends on the mood of the players, the acoustic, and the mood of the audience also... This is possible only in jazz, I guess, and maybe some folk styles, of course. I love that, it's like a meditation, like Zen art, I guess...