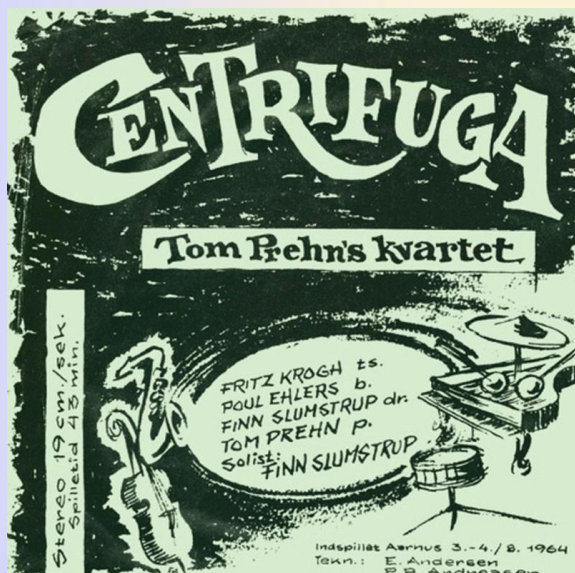


Moment's Notice

Reviews of Recent Media

April 2022

Tom Prehn's Kvartet
Centrifuga & Solhverv
Corbett vs. Dempsey 079



Danish pianist Tom Prehn's slim discography has seen the light of day thanks largely to the efforts of John Corbett, first for Atavistic's Unheard Music Series and more recently for Corbett vs. Dempsey, which has now released the second volume of this extraordinarily advanced European free music. The only thing conventional about this music – then or now – is the quartet format, rounded out by tenor saxophonist Fritz Krogh, bassist Poul Ehlers, and drummer Finn Slumstrup. The 44-minute "Centrifuga" was recorded in August 1964, and no matter how much you think you know about the evolution of this music, Prehn's group will throw you for a joyous loop.

Lovingly restored from private-released reels, these performances contain a pretty jaw-dropping range of group invention and exploration. And while there are some passages of fierce intensity popping up on this release, what's really striking about it is the dynamism and the often otherworldly quality of the sounds. Prehn can play his ass off, but he's just as interested in creating great billowing clouds, or working from some inventive preparations, or spider-crawling his way through an unpredictable line. A cautious harmonic line from the bass, cymbal sizzle, patient birdsong from Krogh, it all comes together into something primal and organic, the sort of thing that the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and others would be exploring later in the decade.

While the saxophonist is the most energetic player of the group, it's very much listening music. The ideas move quickly even if the tempo doesn't. There are extreme shifts of register, color splashes, inventive techniques, and loads of space for this suggestive collection of musical voices. It's fascinating to speculate about what these fellers were listening to, and specifically whether they'd encountered Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor during their Copenhagen residencies. Krogh certainly brings the heat on several occasions, and there are several sections of mutant swing that do seem to recall early Taylor. Far more plentiful, though, are the utterly distinctive moments from each player. Slumstrup switches the snare on and off, creating a kind of pinwheeling effect that I associate with Lovens and Baby Sommer. And Ehlers is a revelation, able to crank out fleet lines in the upper register and possessed of a fierce arco technique that sounds like he's clawing his way out from inside the bass. There are also lengthy unaccompanied passages for Ehlers and Slumstrup, and they're consistently crackling with energy. Prehn again is a marvel, alternating between wondrous prepared sounds and densely knotted chords in wave after wave of energy.

Perhaps even more astounding are the four "Solhverv" tracks from January 1965, which are collectively even more dynamic and exploratory. They are more than comfortable operating in a nearly silent context, the most open tableau on which to paint small slashes, inviting whispers, the gentlest plink or pizz. I can also hardly believe the astonishing "Solhverv 2," a righteous study for close-miked sax pads and prepared piano. I cannot think of a player who was working similar territory this long ago. Somehow, the piece makes its way to a whinnying herd of horses, and from there to a fascinating section where each player operates in a different tempo. The third and fourth tracks lean forward into some of Howard Riley's early groups, as well as early work from Alex Von Schlippenbach. It's total exploration at a time when many players were still worrying the outer edges of free-bop. Nothing wrong with that at all, but it does give you some sense of how bracing this marvelous music is.

- *Jason Bivins*

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