

## Feature: Jazzhead!

**REVIEW OF  
JAZZAHEAD!,  
BREMEN,  
GERMANY, APRIL 6  
TO 22, 2018**

**JAZZAHEAD!  
REPORT: MEETING  
POINTS AND  
MUSICAL POINTS  
BY JOSEF  
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It can be both a challenge and a vibrant sign of life that the annual phenom known as jazzahead! (yes, lower case, but with the affirming smack of an exclamation point) resists easy description. At the heart of Bremen, Germany-based enterprise, it is a “trade show” of sorts mixed with conference and a compacted festival equipped with dozens of mostly half-hour musical showcases, an all-important piece of the puzzle. And it is a puzzle which, in its now 13-year history, has become Europe’s central convergence point for a myriad of jazz-involved person—agents, record labels, festivals, promoters, educators, and more. To date, the focus is largely on Europe, but with a slowly growing contingent of jazz people from elsewhere in the world and the U.S. in the mix.

Experiencing jazzahead!, on the ground—and on the busy vendor floor and in its various musical venues—is the best way to get a grasp on what it is all about. Founded by Peter Schulze and Uli Beckerhoff, jazzahead! is by now, for many, a valuable meeting point, a kind of “network-palooza” for those with interests in jazz projects and promotions. For others (myself included), its main virtue is as a concentrated exposure to emerging and established acts—mostly from the “other” side of the Atlantic and often from fresh stylistic perspectives. It is a dizzying three-night/two-day confabulation, with music performed in halls in the central Messe Bremen conference center and, for a dose of funkier and more relaxed ambience, Bremen’s nightclub-hang zone of the Kulturzentrum Schlachthof, a reformed slaughter house.

Each year, the event puts a spotlight on the music of a particular country (along with a traditional German Showcase section, an “Overseas Night,” and a “European Jazz Meeting” segment of showcases.

Last year, we heard a long and satisfying night of showcases from Finland, while this spring’s 13th annual, 2018 edition turned to the fertile musical soil of Poland, whose contributions to jazz run deep and continue to inspire. On the downside, the presiding, living emissary of Polish jazz—veteran trumpeter Tomas Stanko—had to cancel a planned show due to health issues. In the wake of that gap, two specific younger figures assumed

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Marcin Wasilewski Trio  
PolishNight (c) Jens Schlenker Messe Bremen



Sendesaal, Bremen (photo, Josef Woodard)

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prominence in the Polish musical hierarchy of the weekend.

For one, we had the formidable and poetic pianist Marcin Wasilewski—the long-time pianist for Stanko—whose own solo career has reached new heights thanks to several ECM releases and his lived-in, empathetic trio. Wasilewski's trio (with bassist Slawornir Kukiewicz and drummer Michal Miskiewicz), fortified by a 25-year history of listening together, was heard, before an overflow crowd, as the prime time showcase set on the Polish night. On Saturday night (the designated “Club Night” with shows scattered around multiple Bremen venues), they returned in a fittingly intimate environment of the riverfront Weserburg Museum für Moderne Kunst. There, the lyrical subtleties and bursts of wily energy rang out in crystal clear fashion. But the newer voice on the Polish jazz block was the veritable star of 2018 jazzhead!, the saxist marvel Maciej Obara—long brewing on that scene but just now spanning outward into a more global profile and dates in North America, again thanks to the reach of his ECM connection, with the release of his album *Unloved*. Whereas that album heeds and demonstrates the artist's masterful touch in a more ethereal, melancholic dimension we often encounter on ECM releases, his first moments in Bremen painted the picture of a more full-dimensional and versatile player.

The saxist showed up for a melodic cameo with the folk-jazz vocalist Monika Borzym's set, featuring effective Joni Mitchell rethinks, and then in more free and raucous mode at the end of the “Polish Night,” in the ranks of the potent group Piotr Damasiewicz/Power of the Horns.

But his strongest showcase came on Friday night's annual “Gala Concert” moment, in the historic ambience of the 1920s vintage Die Glocke in downtown Bremen (incidental note: this was the theater where Keith Jarrett recorded his Bremen Concert solo album in the 1970s). Here, Obara's stellar Polish-Norwegian ensemble—with the fertile and fiery pianist Dominik Wania (also heard and much appreciated at the Power of the Horns show the night before), nimble Nordic drummer Gard Nilssen and bassist Ole Morten Vågan—readily tapped into the meditative, considered lyricism as heard on the ECM album, but added ramped-up energy quotients and interactive thickets. Most impressively, the dynamically sensitive saxist at the center showed himself capable of bold, cleanly-articulated bursts and understated poise and reverie, to suit the varied turf of material.

Other fascinating sounds emerged from the eight-set Polish Night, starting at the beginning, with the opening set by Kamil Piotrowicz Sextet, an engaging, inventive and chamber-tinged body of work led by the pianist whose album half-ironically called *Popular Music* was nominated for the Grammy-like “Polish Phonographic Academy Fryderyk Award.” His is a name to remember, as is Joanna Duda, a young pianist/keyboardist whose mostly acoustic trio fired up the Schlachthof venue with a willfully diverse but somehow unified set in which jazz traditionalism blended with R&B, atonal detours, electronic textures, and other seemingly disparate elements. Here was a fresh variation on the currently well-populated realm of the jazz piano trio format, liberally reconfigured.

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Joanna Duda  
PolishNight (c)JensSchlenker\_MesseBremen



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Saturday afternoon's eight-set "German Jazz Expo," a fixture in the jazzahed! showcase game plan, proved to be front-loaded with the most impressive acts in the opening positions. The acclaimed young Berlin-based band Max Andrzejewski's HÜTTE worked up a wily, tuneful stylistic chemistry experiment with elements of oblique pop and rubbery Bill Frisell-ish qualities, and virtues including the drummer-leader's compositions and saxist Johannes Schiermacher's free flights as an improviser. Freer and stronger still, the saxophonist Johannes Ludwig took an impressive stand as leader of the bass-less Fearless Trio, also with Simon Nabatov and drummer Fabian Arends, navigating adventurous material which also made liberal allowances for effective free play—even within the limiting 30-minute time limit.

Scandinavian acts of note figured into the mix, as well. Finnish saxist Paulli Lyytinen's Magnetia Orkestri—with the charismatic leader sporting a cowboy hat—won points of distinction, elasticity, humor and post-Ornette Coleman homage with a personal touch with his limber "chordless" quartet. The all-female acapella group IKI, of Danish/Norwegian/Finnish heritage, proved to be an enchanting entry in the recently-expanding world of female vocal groups—akin to Trondheim Voices and the Finnish Signe—who use their trained voices and restlessly creative impulses to combine experimentalism with ancient vocal traditions, with echoes of jazz and other idioms.

During Saturday night's "Club Night" sprawl of shows in the conference center and all around Bremen, one of the most substantial entries and ultimately one of the more lingering experiences for this jazzahed! visitor in 2018, was both off campus, and off-topic in terms of jazz, proper.

The pristine, historic and acoustical splendor of the Sendersaal (run during the year by jazzahed! co-founder Peter Schulze and site of memorable ECM nights in years past) provided an ideal locale for the unique ORLANDOviols. The group, consisting of six expert players of the viola da gamba, antique forefather of the cello, offered up a mesmerizing and deeply musical program, "Harmony of the Spheres," which was framed by 16th century Renaissance music of Palestrina, but wended through music of Steve Reich, J.S. Bach, and a German of a much more recent vintage, the late great 20th center maverick Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Coincidentally, one of the 31 showcases I happened to catch this year was by Stockhausen the Younger, trumpeter-flugelhornist Markus Stockhausen, whose band breezed through some agreeably romantic meditations, on the far side of his father's avant-garde extremism. That's just one of countless cross-references, familial lineages and studies in contrast to be ferreted from any given jazzahed! meeting. Convergence is the operative word in Bremen for these few spring days and nights.