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Monheim Triennale II: Freedom Reigns on the Rhine (<https://www.jazziz.com/monheim-triennale-ii-freedom-reigns-on-the-rhine/>)

by JOSEF WOODARD ([HTTPS://WWW.JAZZIZ.COM/AUTHOR/JOEJOEWOODARD-COM/](https://www.jazziz.com/author/joejoeWOODARD-COM/))



By Josef Woodard

Midway through the adventurous new festival known as the Monheim Triennale, an anomaly appeared on the festival's central stage, located aboard the docked ship *MS RheinFantasie* on the Rhine River: music stands. In a festival where improvisation is not only an operating premise but a philosophical guidepost, paper (or iPad) scores might seem antithetical.

However, the stands seen in the set by “The Horns” held only loose sketches around which the musicians would venture into unknown territory. Improvisational spirit was in ample supply, in the able, spontaneity-loving hands of trumpeter Peter Evans, alto saxophonist Darius Jones and trombonist Shannon Barnett (who also flexed her vocal skills on a cleverly deconstructed “I’m Glad There Is You”).

Freedom reigns in Monheim, thanks to this newcomer on the festival scene, now in its second of three annual events. Jazz festival culture has evolved and expanded into global proportions, including the left-of-center avant-garde/improvisation-geared branch of festival action, but most model themselves after established patterns and paradigms. The Monheim Triennale proposes a new way to “festival,” a new spin conjured by festival architect and director Reiner Michalke. The veteran jazz presenter directed the Moers Jazz Festival for many years and ran the

influential Cologne music space Stadtgarten. To capture the special event, notable Finnish film director Mika Kaurismäki was on hand, with a busy and all-seeing crew, to gather a mountain of footage for the forthcoming feature documentary *Five Days in Monheim*.



Mika Kaurismäki. Photo by Niclas Weber.

Essentially, the concept — fueled by Monheim’s progressive mayor Daniel Zimmerman, who “headhunted” Michalke for the task — is to cull a large group of improvisation-friendly musicians from around the world and around genre bases, and organize a dense schedule of short sets in groupings among them.

The first year of the Triennale, known as “The Sound,” was devoted to sound installations and special community projects; one such lastingly important piece was Robert Wilson’s sweet and conceptually rich *Yes There Is Nowhere*, in a downtown park. Next came “The Prequel,” which took place July 4-6 and built up to the culminating event, “The Festival.”

In the current group of musicians, various ethnicities and identities converged into a cohesive ensemble, which seemed to grow with affable empathy as the festival progressed and hanging commenced in the centralized Hey Lu hotel; journalists and others were also based there, allowing for unusual crosstalk of the parties involved. Among the peripheral effects of the Triennale agenda is a sense of community and ensemble-building, versus the often ephemeral nature of festival-hopping musicians deprived of settling into a place and a specific festival aesthetic.



Darius Jones. Photo: Niclas Weber.

Among the most memorable players were trumpeter Evans, who essentially stole the show; German pianist and avant-theater legend Heiner Goebbels; American saxophonist deserving wider attention Jones; the intriguing Palestinian electronic musician Muqata'a, whose palette includes processed field recordings from his embattled homeland; and mesmerizingly fluid culture-bridging vocalist Ganavya Doraiswamy, a South Indian-born and California-based artist whose every appearance in Monheim seemed to magnetize those within earshot, on and off stage.

The unorthodox sonic persona of experimental Scottish bagpiper Brìghde Chaimbeul was captivating, particularly in her solo show at the nearby Marienkapelle church; she also performed in duet with Goebbels and during a pop-up set with Evans and Georgian keyboardist Anushka Chkhaidze. Chaimbeul's new adventures in drone, while coaxing extended sounds from an ancient source, were at times reminiscent of minimalist accordion legend Pauline Oliveros, and the inherently limited harmonic scope of her instrument drew fellow improvisers into alternate approaches to tonality.

In other corners, the ever-evolving guitarist Oren Ambarchi, an Australian based in Berlin, creatively mutated his guitar sounds in directions beyond guitarisms as we know them. His duet with Muqata'a was a hybridized textural treat. Multi-instrumentalist and good vibes supplier Shahzad Ismaily danced around various margins. Also impressive were drummer Ludwig Wandinger; the wonderful maverick vibraphonist and trombonist Selendis Alexander Johnson, whose trombone encounters included literally deconstructing the instrument and its musical components; and Iranian electronica artist Rojin Sharafi.



Brighde Chaimbeul. Photo: Niclas Weber

On violin, voice, spoken word and other interlaced disciplines, yuniya edi kwon — a Minnesotan transplant to NYC — made his strongest impact in a pop-up solo set in the church, showcasing the varied elements in his artistic satchel. Vancouver-based vocalist Julia Úlehla fascinated in her own way, with a free-ranging approach to vocal gestures and links to her Czechoslovakian heritage, as heard in a set called “The Voices” with Doraiswamy and Jones in ripe collusion.

Opening the festival, logically enough, a two-hour round robin performance introduced each musician. Thus, audiences got a preview of what was to come in the following days. The round robin opened auspiciously with Evans, closed with Doraiswamy and included a juicy double-trombone tête-à-tête, or recipe sharing, with Barnett and Johnson, which they reprised in the festival’s Grand Finale.

To me, the event’s standout was Evans, whose every performance revealed a special musical chemistry in motion. As an artist at home in Baroque and New Music, as well as jazz and free-improvisation, he was the most virtuosic musician in the grouping. But more importantly, he managed to juggle his technical command with a searching musicality, which came on with a reckoning force in his solo performance at the church, on Bb trumpet and piccolo trumpet. Built from athletic circular breathing, fleeting snippets of melodic content — including a brief, ironic military fragment — and extended instrumental colors, his cathartic solo show was the talk of the town (well, of those who could get into the small venue). And yes, Evans does also fit the Monheim Triennale’s manifesto: He’s a good listener and plays well with others.



Peter Evans. Photo: Ralf Brunner.

Featured photo of Peter Evans by Niclas Weber for Monheim Triennale.

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