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REVIEWS

12 Points! Project

RAY COMISKEY

With the third year of its annual festival exclusively devoted to young European jazz musicians, the Improvised Music Company's programme lived up to the standards set by its predecessors. And, as before, diversity was a keynote.

Diversity, of course, is not the same thing as originality or freshness of conception. That's a rarer commodity, and the surprise was that, out of a dozen bands or performers, perhaps as many as three or four had that indefinable quality suggesting they were on to something promising and personal.

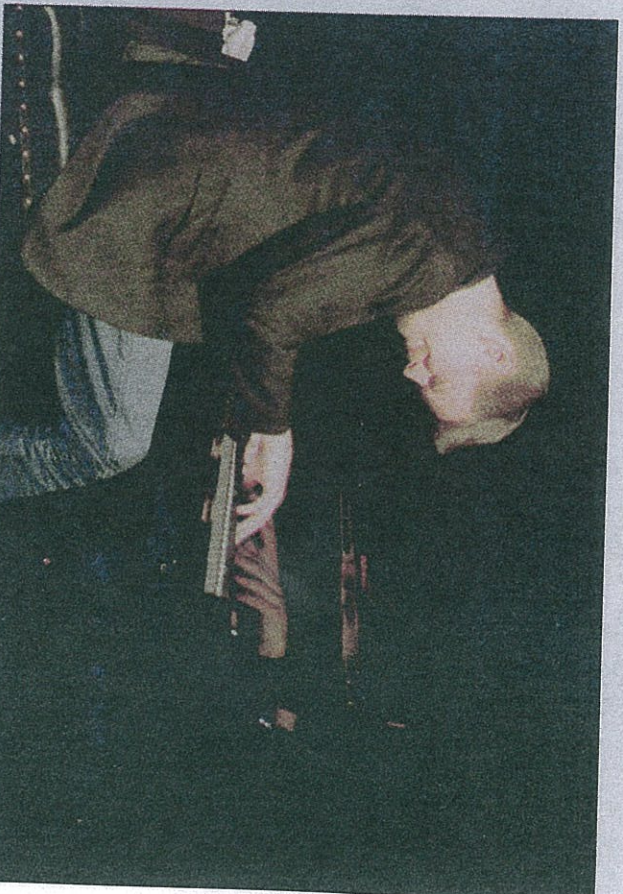
One was Finland's Aki Rissanen, the only solo performer. In a recital which was one of the high points of the festival, he proved to be a gifted pianist and natural improviser whose exquisite impressionism, whether in composition or in his three spontaneous improvisations, reflected the influence of classical harmony, particularly French models like Messiaen and Debussy.

Another was Morla, with saxophonist Seán Óg and guitarist Simon Jermyn. A breath of fresh air, they also fleshed out the musical textures with electronics, using them with verve and individuality. Among other things, they wove Armenian and Greek elements into a surprising music whose kaleidoscopic colours, textures and original lines constantly confounded expectation.

Also strikingly different was the award-winning British piano trio, Curios, with the gifted Tom Cawley, Sam Burgess and Josh Blackmore. Their work has a deceptively casual, almost "found" air, yet behind the apparent ease and accessibility it's meticulously wrought and instantly identifiable.

They struck an enviable balance between structure and improvisation, with all three players involved in a musical democracy of a high order.

If what Magnus Fra Gaarden does is not in



Finland's Aki Rissanen, the only solo performer at 12 Points! A natural improviser, his performance reflected the influence of classical harmony. Photograph: Ian Oliver/Letoon

this class, anyone checking out their work would concede that their relatively simpler music, using trombone, saxophone, guitar, bass and drums, was distinctive. They have an elusive quality, and they're a more sophisticated group than their Copenhagen predecessors from last year. Ibrahim Electric,

Of the rest, it was a generally good, if mixed bag. Norway's Albatross duo of pianist Eyolf Dale and saxophonist André Roligheten were a delightful mix of the organised and the free – their intuitive, restrained work varying from the playful to a wry, Kurt Weill feel, with a hint of Jan Garbarek.

Similarly enjoyable was Zapp, a Dutch string quartet. Witty, and a magisterial blend of the written and the improvised, their music showed a strong narrative sense and a surprising capacity for what is essentially a classical format to get a real groove going, as they did to particular effect on *Radiohinter*, a piece reflecting its sources in Herbie Hancock and Radiohead.

Some accomplished groups tried too hard to be different. Both Sweden's Paavo septet and Spain's Guitula Valle Quintet relied a lot on rather busy arrangements which failed to achieve a balance between structure and solo room. Paavo's quirkiness broke the flow of the music more, making it episodic; with Valle's

quintet this was less of a problem, but somehow the music, engaging enough, nevertheless took off.

Germany's Hyperactive Kid, a skilled tenor-guitar-drums trio, lived up to its name with intricate, angular compositions, and extended improvisation, generally though exclusively free. They're like their similarly instrumental compatriots, Der Rote Beret, but with less imagination and humour.

Disappointment might be too strong a word, but the rest were among the festival's lesser lights. Italy's Luca Aquino Quartet vied by a brilliant trumpeter, but the electric penumbra suggested more of Nils Petter Molvaer and Miles Davis than anything new. The opening Audiofeeling quartet, from Poland, offered swinging but unremarkable post bop, while France's Emile Parisien Quartet was like a compendium of cutting-edge jazz devices, all delivered with high seriousness; a case of manner over substance.

Nevertheless, this was a fine festival and significance – and uniqueness – of the idea represents seems to have been grasped elsewhere in Europe. Next year, 12 Points! moves to Stavanger in Norway, before coming home in 2011, and alternating between Dutch and other European venues thereafter.