

Phil Trelor / Feeling & Thought

Recollections - Twelve

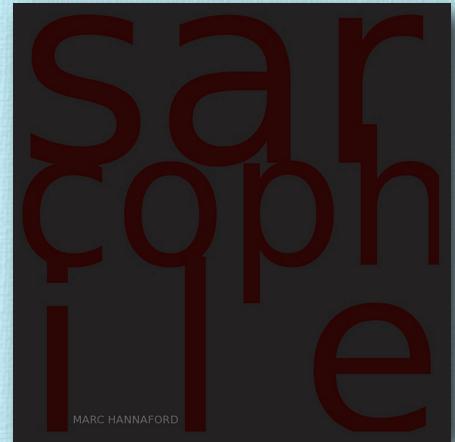
SARCOPHILE¹

the here and now of

Hannaford, Pankhurst, & McLean

piano bass drums

the Marc Hannaford Trio



This music pays tribute to the jazz tradition but in no way competes with it. Nor does it emulate. It has a focus and a center all its own yet connotes much that has gone before. These are connotations in the literal sense of the term; shadings that are not fundamental to the expression itself. The expression, a creative *tour de force*.

That I perceive these connotations as such should not be understood as judgement on my part, nor should my reference to them be construed as the gospel according to Phil T. These were feelings and thoughts that passed through my being during the several listenings I've given Sarcophile. That I put these in writing here is primarily indicative of my having been inspired to do so. This music is, in a word, staggering.

Though 'staggering', one is left with much to contemplate, and not just left dangling in awe. This music is far too thoughtful and grounded to be awe-inspiring, though inspiring it certainly is. Interestingly, the gravitation towards contemplation increases with repeated listenings; after the staggering effected first time round finds itself on more sober ground.

This music cuts a track into terrain that is still relatively uninhabited. Clearly, it is motivated by an understanding of compositional thinking and an aspiration to address some of the problems that arise when one places improvisation in close proximity with compositional design. And although there are myriad possible ways to address these problems the place to start lies squarely on a foundation of music-in-practice. Marc Hannaford has clearly spent a huge amount of time devoted to the practice of compositional thinking, on the run.

The jazz tradition is embraced here in several different guises, and I use the word advisedly. While there is absolutely nothing resembling pretension, a piano trio it most certainly is. In the broadest sense one need only consider the trios of Bill Evans (in any of its incarnations), Keith Jarrett (particularly the one from the late-'60s which included Paul Motian and Charlie Haden²), Chick Corea (with Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes³), to the adventuresome journeys taken by Chick Corea with Dave Holland and Barry Altschul,⁴ and, whatever might be implied by that term, piano trio, it is rendered crystal clear. This is no less true of the Marc Hannaford trio. Is that a good thing? Listen to this music and decide for yourself. I think it is. Hannaford is putting his own characteristic stamp on that entity, the piano trio, and is doing so in the company of two musicians who are not only up to the task but contribute enormously to the challenge being met. And meet it they do. (No pun intended re. the album's title!) As with the Evans, Jarrett, and Corea projects, so too with Hannaford: essential to the music is the conversation that glues it together as an entity; an essence fundamental to jazz music since its inception. And the topics of conversation in the Hannaford mould are, especially in some cases, very demanding. As musical practice goes, there is no place here for the faint hearted nor those content to bring to the moment routine clichés. In fact, the music concedes no place for clichés other than perhaps those born of its own terms. Having said this, Hannaford and, to a slightly lesser extent Pankhurst too, tilt their hats from time to time to the tradition through chord voicing, melodic inflection, and solid groove. Meanwhile the three musicians are ever focused on *co-operative* consequences.

The majority of Sarcophile's eight pieces are based on rhythmic and pitch construals that are utterly rigorous in their construction. But not one of these players is overwhelmed by structure *per se*. In fact, they meet these complex structures with apparent ease, enabling space for creative engagement. It is in their creative engagement that the tension and release inherent to music as well as lively conversation becomes manifest. And this is created real-time. Negotiating these complexities could in no way be born overnight. A great deal of concerted effort and devotion has gone into their making, not to mention the evolution of a

common aim. Maybe those with a jaundiced frame of mind might make the claim that the music made by this trio is more mechanical and/or systematic than it is organic. Obviously, such a claim would depend on how one conceives of these terms in relation to the creative act. There is much that lies beneath the surface, the least of which not being vision. Systematic or otherwise, what penetrates these depths to reveal the music's vision is soul-full commitment and a focus that transcends superficial concerns. And it's the realization of vision that takes one to the realm of contemplation and where, for those who listen, space is discovered for their inclusion; for their minds to wander and their feelings to explore. The compositional thought intrinsic to this music accounts for its foundation; a foundation that is as broad as it is stable.

The mention of foundations lends occasion to comment on another aspect of Hannaford's compositional materials: ostinato.⁵ This device is anything but new to Western ears. It dates back to around the 13th century and has been put to use by some remarkable composers, Dufay, Josquin,⁶ and Busnois,⁷ being among those of early years, Chopin, Hindemith, and Bartók among those in more recent times.⁸ And the fact that the 'pop' world has done them to death doesn't necessarily demean their potential. Indeed, Hannaford explores the potential of ostinatos in an engaging way, using them as a 'ground', often stated in unison between acoustic bass and piano bass and over which he deftly improvises. This, in itself, might not be all that remarkable. However, like much of the music on *Sarcophile*, there is more to the story than might be suggested by its surface. These ostinatos are points of departure; departures for extensive extrapolation such as witnessed throughout the extraordinary seventeen-minute 'Chicken Man' with the initial (what I read to be) 5/4 ostinato⁹ being the launching pad for an amazing journey which, as far into the cosmos as it travels, never loses sight of home. And a fairly near relative to the ostinato, the chaconne (also the bearer of an extensive history in Western music), is the structural grounding of 'Jack Hammerford', the CDs opening track.¹⁰

While listening, I had pass by my mind's aural mirror reflections of Herbie Hancock, in the attitude of line played at times by Hannaford's right hand; of Chick Corea, suggested in his sometimes glassy-like sound while at others, jagged, displaced chords ('We Talk in Jests' – particularly the first six minutes or so); of Thelonious Monk, suggested generally through whole-tone runs and tightly voiced chords; Charles Mingus, alluded to through unanticipated tempo changes yet unerring in their precision ('Bound')¹¹; Paul Bley, in occasional compositional phrase shape ('Anda Two', particularly the opening); of Olivier Messiaen, in repeated bell-like textures (shades of *Vingt Regards*¹²) and an approach to harmonic relationships that render the notion of tonality – in the sense of it as an established diatonic entity – just one colour among many others (the many others being the more usual in Hannaford's hands).¹³ Hannaford's pieces look at, for the most part, specific pitch collections and their attendant intervallic idiosyncrasies with these becoming material for expression through the improvised moment which, in its turn, is contextualized by rhythmic precision intrinsic to the piece at hand and maintained in a staggeringly assured way by all three players. Through pitch collections that don't subscribe to diatonic tyranny, Hannaford and bassist, Pankhurst, render some extraordinarily angular lines and melodic phrases with these always bearing direct relationship to the composition being played. Thus, when all said and done, my aural mirror bore only a scant, momentary, reflection in a broad and vibrant musical environment replete with powerful and personal statements expressing life in the here-and-now.

The conversational element so crucial to the high profile accorded to 'music' here bears stark witness to Pankhurst's and McLean's creative instincts. They both bring to Hannaford's pieces an intelligent, aware notion of what it is to be part of a piano trio. When engaged with the conversation their judgement is ever astute. And when 'solo' space is theirs to accommodate, they do so with utter respect to the particular piece at hand. Pankhurst's remarkable four-minute introduction on 'Chicken Man' leads inexorably into the 'head', leaving no doubt whatsoever as to where it was going all along. And 'Anda One', as with 'Something We Can Dance To', brings the drums a little further forward in the musical mix and with it some truly astounding musicality, not to mention dexterity, from McLean; indeed, characteristics identical with him throughout the entire disc.

The youngest member of this group is James McLean. As, in writing this Recollection it's not been my purpose to sing the praises of the individual players but rather to focus on the music played, I'll refrain from the temptation here to be expansive regarding him. Suffice in the present context to say that, given McLean's mere twenty-two years, he brings to this music a remarkable maturity, accompanied with ears aplenty and an open mind. And this gives rise to an observation that applies equally to all three players: despite the incredible technicalities of the music, clearly, it's the music that comes first.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sarcophile: a digital CD purchased at: <http://marchannaford.bandcamp.com/album/sarcophile>
Downloaded May 2, 2012.

² Keith Jarrett. *Life Between The Exit Signs*. Vinyl. Vortex Stereo–2006

³ Chick Corea. *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*. Vinyl. Solid State (United Artists) SS–18039

⁴ Chick Corea. *The Song Of Singing* Vinyl. Blue Note Records BST–84353; A.R.C. Vinyl. ECM 1009 ST.

⁵ “A clearly defined phrase repeated persistently.” Ref. the Harvard Dictionary of Music, second edition, 1970. London: Heinemann Educational Books (reprinted 1983), p. 634 ~ 5.

⁶ Josquin Desprez (ca. 1440 ~ 1521) *Salve Regina*. Ref. L’ensemble A SEI VOCI. Compact Disc, Astrée Auvidis, E–8507

⁷ Antoine Busnois (d. 1492) *In Hydraulis*. Ref. The Clerks’ Group, Edward Wickham. Compact Disc, Gudeamus, ASV, GAU–143

⁸ For these and other references see the entry at n. 5 above.

⁹ Given the complex rhythmic nature of much of Sarcophile’s music, this ostinato could be spelt with 4 being the basic metric division and an overlay of 5 – i.e., 5 : 4 rather than 5/4 – but whatever the case, there seems to me to be some sort of a relationship going on between 5 and 4. But perhaps I’m misreading this altogether(?)

¹⁰ I’m not proposing here that this is how Hannaford conceived of it but rather that what it is that he *did* conceive of can be related to in this way; that consciously or intuitively, he has tapped into traditional concepts and that in the doing, has, in a sense, reinvented them.

¹¹ A precision that no doubt derives from proportionately related time divisions stemming from a basic pulse agreed upon, constantly clear, and ever present to the three player.

¹² Olivier Messiaen (1908 ~ 1992) *Vingt Regards sur L’enfant Jésus*. Perf. John Ogdon, piano. Vinyl. Argo Stereo ZRG 650 - 651; Perf. Yvonne Loriod, piano. Compact Disc, Adès Mono ADE 682; Perf. Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano. Compact Disc, Teldec 3984-26868-2

¹³ I should stress here that in making these direct references I’m not proposing emulation. I think that the power underlying this remarkable music is inspiration, not emulation. And without seeking to put too fine a point on it, this trio is, individually and collectively, inspired.