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Brötzmann - Münster Bern (Cubus Records, 2015) ****1/2

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By [Colin Green](#)

Great musicians are often less skillful than mediocre ones. Proficiency is no guarantee of quality. Peter Brötzmann – who is quite candid about his technical shortcomings – is a good example. His limitations are his strengths: an expressive rawness free of any suggestion of slickness or flim flam. This can be heard most starkly in his solo recordings, now a significant body of work ranging from *Solo* (FMP, 1976) through *Nothing To Say: A Suite of Breathless Motion Dedicated to Oscar Wilde* (FMP, 1996) and *Petroglyphs* (Long Arms Records, 2004) to *Solo + Trio Roma* (Les Disques Victo, 2012) to which there can now be added *Münster Bern*, possibly the most impressive yet. The performance was given during the Festival for Improvised Music in October, 2013 at the Münster (Cathedral) of Bern: a generous acoustic in which the full colour and nuances of Brötzmann's playing are revealed, as seldom before.

There was a time when Brötzmann's music quite consciously rejected tradition, as if starting from a clean slate, and favoured the anarchic. This reflected a cultural temper – more emotional than aesthetic – particular to post-war Germany, as well as the internal dynamics of his trio with Han Bennink and Fred Van Hove, but he has long since moved on from this. In his solo work, it seems

that we're getting Brötzmann at his most personal, free of any responsibility other to hone his music, dig deeper and explore his own history. His solo recordings are full of allusions to the music he heard in his youth and the great jazz and bluesmen of the past. In the closing section of the otherwise frantic 'Frames of Motion' from *Solo + Trio Roma*, he seeks solace in the ballad 'Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams' (originally recorded by Bing Crosby); and on *Solo At Dobialab* (Dobialabel, 2012) – unfortunately, marred by audience noise – Brötzmann's now trademark 'Master of a Small House' theme keeps returning, like an *idée fixe*. These tunes clearly mean something to him, though it's pointless to speculate what, but as Lester Young said: every solo should tell a story. Brötzmann's music is not programmatic, but it's clear that a drama is being played out that has not changed significantly in recent years – darkness against light. To a certain extent one knows what to expect, but listen closely and the course of the narrative is never quite the same.

There remains a scorched-earth aspect to his music – and a tone like sandpaper – but there's something more. As Brötzmann has said: "I'm getting closer to my idea of how the horns should sound". This process of refinement (a word not generally associated with his music) has brought with it a sense that he is accessing some of our most basic and ineffable feelings. If there's an inspirational core to his music "it's the blues that each person has inside".

The performance begins with 'Bushels and Bundles' on the Hungarian *tárogató*. One sometimes feels that the basic unit of measurement in Brötzmann's music is the human breath; specifically, what can be done in the time it takes him to breathe out. By all accounts, this has become more difficult as he gets older (the respiratory force is so great that it's rumoured he once cracked a rib while playing) but his music has become more focussed, less discursive, as each new burst has to make its mark. Here, the ambience allows the intakes of breath to be heard clearly, and the buzzing see-saw sound of the instrument is accompanied by the groan of Brötzmann's exhalations and the afterimage bouncing back off the cathedral walls. As the piece progresses, other subtleties are revealed – the variations of mouth on reed and the differences in contrasting registers – more pronounced than in Brötzmann's other solo recordings, even those made in the studio.

The piece seems to be concluding, with a solemn statement of the 'Master of a Small House' theme – bathed in an acoustic halo – but any feeling of resolution is destroyed by Brötzmann's splintered parodies of it. A new theme emerges, heavily distorted in the lower registers, which ascends until stated in its pure, unadulterated form in the treble, to close. If technique is equated with an ability to render a range of emotions with precision, Brötzmann has it in spades.

'Crack In The Sidewalks' shows his appreciation of the performing space and relishing the diverse textures and dynamic contrasts it provides. He starts by placing pauses (cracks?) between the alto's lyrical phrases so they can be filled with the shimmer of reverberation – Brötzmann as Bruckner. He references the familiar tunes – Albert Ayler's 'Prophecy', 'Master' and Don Cherry's 'Brown Rice' (maybe even 'Sentimental Journey') – but in snatches, like dim memories, or heavily modified as in a dream. A lush tone is set against shrieks and gut-bucket blasts that ring out in the echo chamber of the Münster.

At just over eighteen minutes, it takes on an epic quality with a counterpoint of call and response,

and builds into playing of such ferocious intensity that it's difficult to know quite how to respond. There's a directness and an emotional pitch to Brötzmann's music that can be exhilarating but at times frightening, sometimes both. These extremes, which can also be expressed as a single voice, are at the heart of his music. The combined cry of anguish and joy typifies the blues, but arguably the merger of these sentiments also puts Brötzmann in the North European tradition of the Sublime – Edmund Burke's "delightful" terror. (It should come as no surprise that Caspar David Friedrich, the great romantic landscape painter in whose work the forces of nature have an almost palpable presence, is one of Brötzmann's favourite artists, after whom he named his son.)

On 'Move and Separate' Brötzmann takes up the bass clarinet, initially dividing his time between its extremes of register. In the bass he's gruff but in the upper registers, soft and breathy, playing another of those melancholic tunes ('Prophecy') in a manner that suggests a pipe organ. These layers do indeed 'move and separate', as Brötzmann picks out new strata but ultimately, they blur and descend to the depths as a sinewy line of multiphonics and moans.

A Gothic cathedral is a place for music that has a gravity of purpose. Brötzmann dedicates 'Chaos of Human Affairs' to the drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson, with whom he played in Last Exit and toured as a duo, who had passed away just over a week before: "a good friend and one of my favourite colleagues". On tenor, it is 'Our Prayer' – which was performed by the Ayler quartet at the funeral of John Coltrane – played nobly and in a coruscating tone. Gradually, clouds pass over and the sky darkens until the tune is almost lost, but the sun breaks through for two final statements of the theme: first defiant then conciliatory. A moving and fitting lament.

The performance closes with 'The Very Heart of Things', a revealing title as it's actually Ornette Coleman's 'Lonely Woman', a frequent encore. Coleman's plaintive theme is played simple and straight, then repeated with heavy vibrato. It becomes more abrasive, and is eventually warped and fragmented beyond recognition, but Brötzmann closes by playing the tune as he opened. Whether we've ended at the place we began "And know the place for the first time" or somewhere else altogether, I cannot say.

Brötzmann's music can be bleak, but there's a beauty in it. I'm reminded of comments made by the playwright Harold Pinter, in a letter to a friend, about Samuel Beckett:

"The further he goes, the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, dogmas, tracts, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement...He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basin full of breadcrumbs. He's not selling me anything I don't want to buy. He doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not. He hasn't got his hand over his heart.

Well, I'll buy his goods hook, line and sinker because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful."