

Liner Notes for Tobias Meinhart's *Natural Perception* (ENJA, 2015) :

by Ted Panken ((Downbeat, Jazziz, Jazz Times)

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In titling “The Effort,” a swinging, un-xeroxed refraction of *Speak No Evil* era Wayne Shorter that is the fourth selection on Tobias Meinhart’s Enja debut, *Natural Perception*, the leader was inspired by Shorter’s remarks in the 2013 documentary *Zero Gravity*. “He said that music is a struggle, that he works very hard on stage to make the music happen,” said Meinhart, 31, who uncorks a mighty tenor saxophone solo on the track. He elaborated the point with a reference to concert footage in which Shorter “tries to get a high note, not caring whether it came out—he shows his vulnerability to the audience, not hiding behind licks and phrases and trying to impress.”

In the same conversation, Meinhart cited a zen-oriented aphorism from Chilean director-author-Alejandro Jodorowsky to contextualize “Effortless Mind,” a waltz-like creation with a 5/4 vamp on which he (on soprano sax), pianist Yago Vazquez and trumpeter Ingrid Jensen conjure pithy, lucid solos that dance to an inexorable groove from bassist Phil Donkin and drummer Jessie Simpson. “He talks about the empty mind and full heart,” Meinhart said. “For me, this means finding ways not to stop the music from happening—trying to let it flow, sing a melody or find the melodies that are in my head and bring them to paper without over-thinking.”

Struggle and flow coexist in equipoise on a well-wrought program chock-a-block with beautiful melodies and much harmonic meat. Meinhart contributes six originals, reimagines Harry Warren’s 1931 standard “You’re My Everything,” inhabits Bill Frisell’s reflective “Throughout” in rubato duo with Vazquez, and concludes the proceedings with Vazquez’s “Chorale,” on which the soloists swing gracefully, propelled by a brisk 4/4. It could not have been made anywhere else but New York City, where the members of Meinhart’s “American Quintet”—each a “big fish in a small pond” in their respective hometowns—decided to move as a test of mettle.

“They’re all super-solid, amazing musicians, who challenge me a lot, which I love,” Meinhart says. “When we’ve toured, they’ve pushed me to my limits and dragged me to another level. If I lose focus for a second, I’m lost. It’s never boring.”

Meinhart is perhaps too modest about his role in facilitating this intense creative process. “Strong thematic elements occur in Tobias’ tunes that make them easy to play on and extend,” says Jensen. “He’s very clear about what he wants in the tunes, but has the jazz sensibility to allow things to blossom based on where the band takes it, or where the energy of the moment wants to go.”

Herself a native of Vancouver, in the Canadian province of British Columbia, who moved to New York in the mid-’90s after attending Berklee School of Music, Jensen met Meinhart in 2002.

Jensen’s long-standing mentor-mentee relationship and aesthetic affinities with Meinhart position her to offer clear summational remarks about his artistic growth. “Tobias is an interesting combination of someone who is sweet and soft-spoken, but turns into a monster when he puts the horn on his face,” she says. “That’s why he’s been able to put out a record that’s full of great tunes, with a good band—and he’s playing his butt off.”

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