

Interview: Michala Østergaard-Nielsen

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It's a small world. So small, in fact, that musical groups are created even though the members are scattered through the globe. For **Østergaard Art Quartet**, it just means that their improvisational jazz sound is knitted together from various international backgrounds. Their excellent new album, *More Stories from the Village*, proves that chemistry has no geographic boundaries. Drummer/percussionist Michala Østergaard-Nielsen explains how they were able to find one another from different parts of the world.

Q: *How did Østergaard Art Quartet get together?*

A: Østergaard Art Quartet was formed in Autumn 2009. Earlier that year I had played a concert with guitarist Marc Ducret in Copenhagen and we had a very good connection. In the summer I met trumpeter/vocalist Per Jørgensen and trumpet player Kasper Tranberg at a music course for professional musicians in Denmark. We did some nice and funny late-night jams together. After the summer I got the idea to form the band with these three musicians. Our first

concert was at Jazzclub Fasching in Stockholm, Sweden. It worked out very well, and Østergaard Art Quartet became a reality.

Q: *Østergaard Art Quartet has been described as a "super group." Who else is in the group and what are some of their accomplishments?*

A: Østergaard Art Quartet is a collaboration between three countries and four improvisers from Scandinavia and France. French guitarist Marc Ducret is a well-known profile on the improvised jazz scene, recognized all over the world as having a unique way of approaching guitar playing. He has played with great musicians such as Tim Berne and Tom Rainey in the group Big Satan, among others. Jørgensen is a legendary musician in Scandinavia, respected for his original voice and intuitive playing. He has played with musicians such as percussionist Marilyn Mazur. Tranberg is well-respected and established at the Scandinavian and European music-scene for his musicianship and most beautiful tone. He has had his own group with Yuseff Lateef and is also a member of one of Ducret's larger bands.

Q: *The band specializes in free improvisation. What is the recording process like?*

A: We just play. We don't talk that much before playing. On both albums we spent two days in the studio. During the recording of the first album *Stories from the*

Village (released on the Swedish label BoogiePost Recordings, 2011), we spent some time on the second day evaluating the recording. We then agreed to play some solo and duo-takes. But that was it. We didn't talk about the music during the recording of our second album *More Stories from the Village*. All was done in an intuitive fashion.

Q: *When did you learn how to play the drums?*

A: I started playing drums very late. I played classical piano during my childhood, changing into jazz piano in my teenage years, studying three years at a preparation school for the conservatory from the age of 17. The last year at this school I should choose a second-instrument, and I chose the drums. I had my first drum lesson when I was 20-years-old. And it just felt as the right thing for me at a very deep, spiritual level.

Q: *What attracted you to percussive sounds?*

A: First of all, it is as if the drums connect me deeply to the Earth element. Secondly, I try to explore the world of drumming both rhythmically as well as soundwise, being as sensitive and aware as possible. To hear the sound of a particular cymbal in and off itself. And then hearing it together with the bass drum. I listen a lot to the sound of the overtones and to how a low and high register tone played at the same time sounds. And working with time, I try to be as centered as possible. From my point of view,

time has a lot to do with the fact of being centered more than only a metronomic parameter. In general, I work a lot with the act of listening. To become better at listening from a deeper level, to music, to the sounds around us, the room, the space and the silence that is always present.

Q: *What is the jazz scene in Denmark like?*

A: It's a mix. A jazz scene highly influenced by the American jazz tradition because so many great American musicians lived in Copenhagen in the '50s and '60s. It still has a deep impact on the jazz scene in Denmark today. And then there is a scene for the more free improvised and experimental music. This scene has been established more and more during the last years, and it is still growing.

Q: *What artists influenced you the most growing up?*

A: I was influenced by a mix of classical, Scandinavian, and jazz music. As mentioned before, I played a lot of classical piano as a child such as Bach and Chopin. From Bach I got a natural relationship to the concept of counterpoint. From Chopin, a romantic expression I just love so much. I also have a deep relationship to Scandinavian music such as folk songs, church hymns, and psalms. I grew up singing and playing a lot in the church and the Scandinavian "tone" is close to my heart. Being a teenager I started to listen more to jazz music and was inspired by John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and their groups, to name a few. When I started playing the drums I discovered Paul Motian, Tony

Williams, Elvin Jones, Max Roach and the Norwegian drummer Jon Christensen. They were all highly inspirational to me with their personal sound and their approach to the drums.

Q: *How has the quartet evolved creatively between both albums?*

A: We have explored new ways to interact and play together as a group. The creative room we enter when we improvise has become bigger and definitely more strong. Our format with two trumpets, vocal, guitar, and drums is a rare one, and it creates a different sound universe. At the same time, I hope, we offer a personal view of how improvised music can sound.