

BOXED SET



New York City
Miha Gantar (Clean Feed)
by Stuart Broomer

In 2022, Slovenian pianist-composer Miha Gantar launched his recording career in a highly unusual way via the Clean Feed label, in what was for them a new format—a boxed set of five CDs, entitled *Introducing*, housed in a lightweight cardboard box. Each disc, in its own light cardboard sleeve, offered minimal information: personnel, track titles and recording data (all produced by Slovenian drummer-composer Dré Hočevár) with varying personnel, ranging from solo to a duo (with singer Marta Arpini) to trio (with bassist Tijs Klaassen and drummer Tristan Renfrow) to an astonishing quartet (with trumpeter Axel Dörner and drummer-percussionists Gerry Hemingway and Christian Lillinger), concluding with an orchestral composition with Gantar joined by nine winds, two bassists and two drummers. Annotation was non-existent, except for perhaps the best kind: a 200-word endorsement from trumpeter Nate Wooley, a musician of both brilliance and integrity, concluding with “What you hold here is special, as close as an object can come to giving us that kind of insight to the broad expanses within a single musical aesthetic. It is not a purist’s document; it’s too human and intimate for that. In all, the chance to experience Miha Gantar’s ideas all together like this feels right; it provides an insight into a complete mind.”

Clearly, that presentation of the whole musician in an economy format worked. In 2023 Clean Feed then released a companion five-CD Gantar set entitled *Amsterdam*, with a similarly brief and inspired

endorsement, this time by octogenarian bassist Reggie Workman, another musician of rare authority.

New York City, recorded during two weeks in August 2023, is Gantar’s third such set in three years, though there’s nothing larger than a quintet here. Each CD is devoted to a single piece with both an album title and a separate title for the individual work and each highlights a different aspect of the pianist’s music, whether rhythmic, lyrical or expressionist. Regardless, there’s a continuous creative involvement tying the work together.

Disc One, *Ultima*, presents the most immediately familiar format and personnel of these works: a traditional jazz piano trio with the estimable rhythm section of John Hébert (bass) and Eric McPherson (drums), both of whom have served similar roles with pianists Fred Hersch and the late Andrew Hill. Hill might be the best reference here, though, for Gantar takes a similarly dense harmonic approach wedded to a moody lyricism, rhythmic force and complexity, and a compelling spontaneity that makes the most of the accompanists’ simultaneously thick, thoughtful and empathetic support throughout the 33-minute exploration of “Synopsis (1)” and “(2)”.

The leader is seemingly made for the third stream, embodied most clearly here on the second CD, *Transitions*, consisting of an hour-long piece entitled “Parisian Nocturne” and performed with Doorri Na (violin) and three members of the Bergamot Quartet: Sarah Thomas (violin), Amy Huimei Tan (violist) and Irène Han (cello). It’s remarkably subtle work, shifting through myriad moods, its lines at once independent and interwoven, whether spiky, translucent, gritty, flickering or evanescent.

The third disc, *Sanctuary*, provides immediate contrast with Gantar, joined in a duo with tenor saxophonist Zoh Amba with the sole piece, “Exodus”, running to 47 minutes. Amba is the sole collaborator involved in the set to get a co-composer credit, so one assumes collective improvisation. While a kind of reverie stretched to these lengths might weigh on some listener’s patience, the work generally sustains attention. Gantar creates a delicately evolving, reverberating and circular lacework in the middle

and upper registers of the piano, while Amba largely explores a surprisingly lyrical bent, entering and returning during the first 30 minutes with some of the subtlest melodic tenor one might imagine, her sound at times almost oboe dry, its deviations into quietly dissonant multiphonics profoundly moving. Her re-entry around the 30-minute mark is in her more characteristically expressionist voice, with the squawks, honks and runs a striking shift amidst Gantar’s recirculating lines. The saxophonist returns at the piece’s end with the kind of extended hypnotic reverie with which the piece began.

Disc Four is another trio, this one with two percussionists: Kweko Sumbry (drums, hand percussion) and Jeremy Dutton (drums). Curiously, given the surfeit of naming here, the CD is entitled *Angels* and the 47-minute composition “Angles”. Rapid-fire drumming opens the proceedings with Gantar soon joining in with animated upper-register pointillist abstraction and hard-edged middle-register clusters that will initially suggest a kind of Cecil Taylor scattershot. However, the trio gradually evolves into some of the best-developed extended improvisation here, with sustained percussion passages balancing Gantar’s improvisations. Of principal interest is the continuous rhythmic dialogue as it develops among the three musicians, directional shifts occurring with Gantar’s brief withdrawals to allow the drummers to reshape the ground. There’s some brilliant bongo drumming on Sumbry’s part and a Gantar solo that is rich in the harmonic density that characterizes much of his work. The final CD, *Towards Purity*, consists again of a single track, “To My Love”, an abstract, dream-like solo reverie filled with eliding phrases that will range from gently hanging, glassy dissonances to delicate shifts in harmonic direction.

In all, the budget boxed set format presents a broad introduction (even with this being the third such set) of Gantar, an emerging musician exploring multiple paths with an innate creativity and a distinct ability to sustain extended works.

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An Afternoon in Norway: The Kongsberg Concert
Art Pepper (Elemental Music)
Geneva 1980
Art Pepper (Omnivore/Widow’s Taste)
by Mike Shanley



Even as his physical health was deteriorating, Art Pepper’s mind was never short of musical ideas. He embarked on his first European tour in the summer of 1980 and two new releases from that visit prove that the alto saxophonist (who died 43 years ago this month, at age 56) was playing in fine form, spurred by the support of a steady group whose sets drew predominantly on his own compositions. The performances on these two albums took place within a week of each other, and just days after the *Blues for the Fisherman* boxed set (2011) captured two nights at London’s popular Ronnie Scott’s venue. While Milcho Leviev (piano), Tony Dumas (bass) and Carl Burnett (drums) have been heard on some of the live sets, these two documents of nights in Geneva and Norway could arguably stand up with

some of the strongest in the Pepper discography.

An Afternoon in Norway: The Kongsberg Concert offers all the telltale signs of a Pepper set. Recorded on June 29 at the Kongsberg Jazz Festival, he sounds loquacious between tunes, joking about European audiences not understanding him, and getting a laugh in the process, or expounding about his cats (“They’re really what’s happening”). For a guy who wasn’t in the best of health, his alto tone comes with a serious amount of heft. Any traces of laidback, West Coast cool style had been replaced by a bite that was sharpened by the hardships Pepper had endured since his early days. “Y.I. Blues” (also known on other releases as “Untitled 34”) launches the set with a stop-start melody that doesn’t reveal its 12-bar blues structure, since everyone participates in the theme. From there, the leader unleashes 13 choruses, five of them with only bass and drums holding him down. Each one presents a new melodic chapter, sometimes abetted by double-time asides, and he never resorts to rhythmic vamping between ideas.

While there is naturally some crossover in the setlist from *Geneva 1980*, both sets feature plenty of variety. On *An Afternoon in Norway*, “The Trip” (the title track to his 1977 studio album) combines a hypnotic 6/4 groove with an understated, slow-burning alto solo that climaxes with gruff honks. Leviev also digs into the changes of this one. If his solo in the lengthy “Make

a List, Make a Wish” doesn’t have quite the dramatic build that it would a week later, it still manages to sustain the momentum. The quartet also delivers aggressive takes on Duke Ellington/Juan Tizol’s “Caravan” as well as the leader’s “Straight Life” (also the title of his lurid memoir). Coming at the end of the set, the latter track always astounds with the complex, rapid-fire makeup of its theme.

Compared to *Geneva 1980*, the Norway set almost sounds slick, thanks to its studio-quality recording, which captures every note with clarity. Of course, that’s not a criticism of either release. The July 5 performance was recorded by his widow Laurie Pepper (there have been several posthumous live Pepper sets that Laurie has released on her Widow’s Taste imprint), but the lower fidelity is only relative. By the time the quartet reached Geneva, they were thoroughly comfortable with stretching out a tune for upwards of 20 minutes. In fact, the only short tracks on it are a set-closing blues and a version of “I’ll Remember April”, which fades only because Laurie’s recorder ran out of tape. (She apologizes in the liner notes, explaining that she was so wrapped up in the performance that she didn’t notice.) Pepper certainly had the ideas to justify the lengthy solos. “Mambo Koyama” builds in dynamics as he spins a rhythmic web, throwing in some tart, Dolphy-esque interjections at one point, pushed the whole time by Burnett. Leviev’s rollicking piano solo