

Håkon Kornstad

Symphonies in My Head

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A solo outing by Håkon Kornstad is always a special event. **Symphonies in my Head** is his third solo album for Jazzland Recordings and demonstrates his will to expand his territories beyond the borders set in **Single Engine** and **Dwell Time**.

Moments that were briefly hinted at or touched upon in those two remarkable collections are now given fuller treatment. Treated loops underpin much of Kornstad's project, but now we are treated to the saxophone as a percussive instrument, where a pattern of key-presses sounds like a log drum, or notes seem to wander into sounds more in common with bowed or plucked strings.

Following the same process that created **Dwell Time**, Kornstad again follows a path of improvisation rather than strict composition.

"When I made **Dwell Time** I recorded for two days in Sofienberg church, improvising with all my horns, flutes and a loop machine. Afterwards followed some weeks of picking out the best tracks, and then I had my album. Since then I've been touring extensively in Europe, with occasional concerts in USA and Japan, and the ideas that have come up on the road are the framework for the new album - **Symphonies in my Head**.

The title describes what I think is good improvisation: those moments when I manage to let loose, just let the music play itself, almost from the spine. I decided to try to make another album in the exact same way as last time, but with clearer, almost symphonic tunes. And I feel that at least some of the music in my head made it to the recording that day in Sofienberg church in February this year."

The music follows through on this ambition, certainly, with moments of tribal groove, minimalist modular repetition, freeform elegies, eastern mysticism and modern jazz balladry all contributing. The opening pair, *Pearlfisher* and *Damascus* demonstrate Kornstad's growing proficiency and inventiveness with loops in conjunction with extended saxophone techniques, creating percussive drive as well as harmonic beauty. *Sansula* brings in additional sounds with looped celeste and flutonette (Kornstad's name for using a

saxophone mouthpiece on a flute), and manages to create an image of a snake charmer on an ice floe. *ABA* is a spacious, sepia image, with Kornstad's fluid tenor leading the way through, looping back on itself and creating a polyphonic kaleidoscope effect, at once seductive and entrancing. *Aire* breaks out into uses of straight playing alongside extended techniques to weave a tapestry of textures with very clear definition. The piece steadily builds, becoming more orchestrated with each step, using every available trick in Kornstad's arsenal of processing methods (making the phrase "one man band" seem inadequate). The spontaneous pursuit of inherent structures within his improvisations around basic themes continues with *Mandal*, another piece that uses ideas set down by minimalism while avoiding the imposition of strict symmetry, allowing the music to breathe naturally. *Flutter* uses flute to create the basis for the piece, and has a distinctly folksy feel, using techniques familiar to listeners of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, but the piece evolves into a saxophone-driven groove, quite unlike anything Kornstad has presented before. The album's closing track, *Phystre*, returns to the minimalism previously explored (more John Adams than Philip Glass and Steve Reich), a piece that is by turns serene and haunting. The arrival of choral vocals expands the texture of the piece, alongside haunting whistling (almost sounding like a theremin).

"I'm currently attending the Oslo opera school. To years ago I was at the Met in New York, and what I heard blew my socks off. Acoustic high octane music, sung by 4000 people without amplification. I decided almost right away that I wanted to try this, too. And now, two years later I find myself studying this wonderful repertoire. That's why this album contains some well hidden nods in the direction of the upcoming operatic tenor Håkon Kornstad. But first and foremost it's a saxophone album, in the world of **Dwell Time**. My own world."

Ever the explorer, it is no surprise that Kornstad is already forging ahead. **Symphonies in my Head**, while clearly a herald of what he hopes to do (in the live sphere, if not on recordings), and is a palimpsest of works past overwritten by plans for the future, it is an album that stands up for itself on its own terms, looking back while pointing the way forward.