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SAMUEL BLASER

BY KEN WAXMAN

Swiss-born trombonist Samuel Blaser maintains strong North American ties that extend far beyond the musicians on *Spring Rain* (Whirlwind), his newest CD. While the disc, dedicated to late clarinetist Jimmy Giuffre, features all-American backing from keyboardist Russ Lossing, bassist Drew Gress and drummer Gerald Cleaver, one of his frequent trans-Atlantic trips bring him to NYC this month for gigs with other longtime associates like drummer Harris Eisenstadt, bassist Michael Bates and tenor saxophonist Michael Blake—all Canadians. “It’s like a big family,” says Blaser, 33. “I like to draw upon the same members in many of my bands.”

Blaser, who also maintains an as-yet-unrecorded European working trio with French guitarist Marc Ducret and Danish drummer Peter Bruun, has kept up close ties with this continent since the period in the mid-aughts when he lived in Brooklyn while studying, courtesy of a Fulbright Scholarship, for a Master’s degree in music at Pace University. The trombonist doesn’t limit himself to any one style either. In Berlin he writes advanced compositions and plays in new and early music ensembles. Recent CDs reflect this as well. Before *Spring Rain*, the trio album *Fourth Landscape* (Nuscope) consisted of originals by Blaser, French pianist Benoît Delbecq and American drummer Gerry Hemingway while *Mirror to Machaut* (Songlines) featured his original pieces influenced by early Renaissance composers.

Part of a music-loving family, he grew up listening to his family’s record collection, which ranged from opera to Harry Belafonte and Ray Charles. He became fixated on studying the trombone (“it was shiny, it had a slide and it made funny noises,” he recalls). Entering the local conservatory at nine, he graduated with a degree in classical trombone in 2001. Along the way he was introduced to jazz. “I wanted to be a bebopper and spent time transcribing J.J. Johnson solos,” he remembers. “The first records I bought were by Dave Brubeck, [Art Blakey and] the Jazz Messengers and Herbie Hancock.” After graduation he freelanced, learned about section work and phrasing while in the Swiss Jazz School Big Band, attended master classes taught by the likes of Jimmy Heath and did two tours with the Vienna Art Orchestra. Even as far back as when he first played a blues, he was told it sounded like he was playing free. “So gradually I realized that I had more fun playing open music than anything else,” Blaser notes. “But there was no one in Switzerland doing that.” That translated into a desire to become part of the freer New York scene.

In retrospect, he admits, there were some advanced improvisers in Switzerland and later on Blaser established an ongoing relationship with one. For years, via his jazz-fan aunt, he had been hearing about drummer Pierre Favre, now 77, who was playing free jazz in Zurich in the ‘60s. “In 2008 I got in touch with him and said I’d like to play with him,” Blaser recalls. “He said set up a gig, we did at a local museum and we’re still playing together seven years later.”

Canadian clarinetist François Houle and Ducret are two of the musicians for whom Blaser is writing concertos as part of his heightened interest in composition. He’s also composing a chamber piece for two violins. He doesn’t want to limit himself, he explains. Although he was a full-fledge jazzier in the conservatory, once he relocated to the U.S. to study jazz he wanted to play Baroque and new music. *Mirror to Machaut* was an outgrowth of that baroque interest, he explains, but presenting early Renaissance-styled sounds in a unique way. *Spring Rain* is more of the same. He had played Giuffre’s “Four Brothers” in student big bands, but when he later discovered the reedplayer’s other interests, “I went crazy,” he recalls. “I can relate to him because he did all kinds of things.” Although the five compositions by Giuffre and Carla Bley were originally recorded by Giuffre’s trio with pianist Paul Bley and bassist Steve Swallow, Blaser’s instrumentation, arrangements and approach are nothing like the those versions. “There’s no point in playing anything that’s too close to the originals,” he declares. “That’s why I asked Russ to play all the keyboards available in the studio.”

Blaser’s two solo trombone tracks on *Spring Rain* are part of an avenue he plans to pursue further. He already has a new solo trombone CD album ready for release. Plans are to link the 18 compositions and improvisations with a documentary plus drawings. “It’s hard to play solo on a trombone because it’s a monophonic instrument,” he reveals. “It doesn’t have sustain and it can’t play more than one note unless you use multiphonics. If you play for an hour you have to attract the ears of the audience without tiring them.” He has studied advanced technique with a respected trombone teacher in Paris and performed works by Vinko Globokar and Iannis Xenakis plus Luciano Berio’s “Sequenza” for trombone. “I think everybody likes to play ‘Sequenza’ but the piece is known to be the hardest one in the trombone repertoire. It takes time to read the part and memorize it. The plunger is a difficulty, but it wasn’t one for me since jazzers use it more than classical players.”

Blaser stays in touch with his audience and, as part of a pre-order campaign for *Spring Rain* on his website, used t-shirts, album downloads, CDs, autographs and even private solo and band performances as lures. So far, however, no one has come up with the cash for the private concerts. “You have to be a big name,” he laughs.

Big name he may not be, but after nine albums, many concerts—100 in the past two years alone with Ducret and Bruun—and his involvement in different musical styles, he’s busy and fulfilled. “I like playing Baroque trombone; I like to perform with symphony orchestras; and I like jazz and improvisation,” he declares. His attention may sometimes be drawn elsewhere but he insists “I’ll always play jazz and improvised music. I have too much fun playing it to give it up.” ❖

For more information, visit samuelblaser.com. Blaser is at Ibeam Brooklyn Jun. 7th with Michael Blake and 10th, Cornelia Street Café Jun. 14th with Sebastien Ammann and Delroy’s Cafe and Wine Bar Jun. 15th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Samuel Blaser—*Solo Bone* (SLAM, 2007)
- Pierre Favre/Samuel Blaser—*Vol À Voile* (Intakt, 2009)
- Samuel Blaser/Paul Motian—*Consort in Motion* (Kind of Blue, 2010)
- François Houle 5 + 1—*Genera* (Songlines, 2012)
- Samuel Blaser/Benoît Delbecq/Gerry Hemingway—*Fourth Landscape* (Nuscope, 2013)
- Samuel Blaser Quartet—*Spring Rain* (Whirlwind, 2014)

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