

Blaer – Pure

Bob Mulvey 14 October 2023

There is always a keen sense of anticipation when pre-release info arrives from Nik Bärtsch's Ronin Rhythm Records. The label's statement of intent – "artists and their creative music between new minimal, funk and ritual groove music" – offering an inkling of what might unfold, and invariably hitting the proverbial nail on the head. It rarely, if ever, disappoints. The latest release from RRR is the fourth album from Swiss combo Blaer, led by composer and pianist Maja Nydegger. Formed in 2013, Blaer has retained a consistent line-up, with Nils Fischer on bass clarinet, tenor saxophonist Claudio von Arx, Simon Iten on bass, and Philippe Ducommun, who has taken on the drum role for this album and the previous one, *Yellow*.

Pure consists of five longer pieces and three shorter 'interludes', entitled *Gold I – III*. Introductions done, it's time for the headphones to go on and enter the album's opening tune, *Hover*. Ten minutes elapse and it's one of those 'oh yeah!' moments. Across those ten minutes, the band hypnotise by skilfully weaving subtle yet complex metric ambiguities, neatly held within absorbing cyclical and rhythmic grooves. It's a wonderfully restrained performance, executed with the smooth precision of a Swiss watch, only broken mid-way through by Maja Nydegger's dynamic piano break...

The above live rendition, recorded earlier this year at the Cully Jazz Festival, varies slightly from the studio take, but more than gives the essence of the album version. The video also demonstrates that the band's regular touring schedule has coalesced and honed their sound, whilst demonstrating their ability to deliver the tracks with the same fidelity on stage.

Previously unfamiliar with Blaer, a voyage of discovery since receiving *Pure* (via their Bandcamp site) has unearthed an impressive and immersive back catalogue. 2020's *Yellow* is simply stunning. Although Blaer were new to me, not all the band were unknown, as I had previously come across Maja Nydegger as part of the excellent AKKU Quintet.

Returning to 2023 and with a pervading template employed, the quintet set about creating a range of fascinating variations. Segueing from the first of the thematically related *Gold* interludes, the title track entices with a metronomic 'single repeating drum' beat. Lasting just over a minute, the first listen begs the question, 'where might this take us?' The answer is it remains with the continuation of that uniform metric, accompanied by an infectious keyboard arpeggio, which in turn lays the foundations for a series of seemingly simple but adroit embellishments.

There's a pervading melancholy to *Pure*, wonderfully captured in the 'two part' *Lotus*. Imagine the scene: a late night jazz club, with a laid-back jazz trio – piano, bass and drums – lightly bustling away on the stage. The audience is appreciative, but then there's a change. Maja Nydegger's piano lifts and drives, the drums and bass busy, and finally the reeds glide elegantly over the top. There's no bombast to the music here, but still, it's powerful stuff indeed. The audience rise to their feet...

The atmospheric *Gold II* links us to *Decay*. Simon Iten plays a repeating motif on double bass while breathy, restrained reeds underpin. Once again, nothing is hurried, giving the piece time to evolve and the space for exploration. Gradually drifting into the picture and flowing across the soundscape is Maja Nydegger's sympathetic piano.

We've now reached the penultimate track, *Utopia*, which rises neatly from *Decay*, and once again the band simply refuse to be hurried. Light cymbals and single notes from the piano form the introduction of this gradually unfolding piece. Again echoing *Lotus*, there's an implied 'partitioning' to the track, and shortly before the mid-point the piano takes the lead, creating a melodic and rhythmic ebb and flow to proceedings. The end section is simply sumptuous with all the instruments freely flowing and intertwining. A chance for the collective to break free, without losing sight of what has gone on before.

The last of the structurally related *Gold* interludes allows the album to drift to a natural conclusion...

Pure is a spontaneous, free-flowing and thoroughly absorbing listen, and whilst drawing from the jazz field, it's refreshingly NOT filled with busy rhythms and jazzy noodling, but rather becalming – succinctly led by Maja Nydegger, pulsed by the rhythm section and cocooned sensuously by the sax and clarinet. A masterclass in less is more.