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The Oscar Peterson Trio

The Berlin Concert [DVD]

(Inakustik)

US release date: 13 March 2007

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by Will Layman

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Oscar Peterson is undoubtedly a superb jazz pianist. Some count him as a great—an artist who started in the shadow of his idol, Art Tatum, and eventually rose nearly as high. Others will only acknowledge his technical virtuosity and his general Tatum-osity, but see him as less than original or important.

The Peterson-doubters have strong evidence for their case in this recording of the pianist's trio in concert in 1985. While they also might be hard-pressed not to enjoy the stunning chops of Peterson at full strength, there is no doubt that this show—at the Philharmonie in Berlin, Germany—is somewhat shallow. Though Peterson would suffer a stroke in 1993 that would permanently weaken his left hand as a jazz pianist, in this concert his hands are evenly matched. The playing is rollicking, bluesy, rippling, exciting—but also formulaic.

Peterson is a big man, and his hands seem to be absolutely *huge*. His playing is also most impressive when it goes for immensity. When he plays fast and loud, there is simply a thrill to the proceedings. It's a rollercoaster ride—the drummer's sticks bouncing off the snare and ride cymbal, the bassist's left hand strutting the fingerboard, and Peterson's gold bracelet jiggling around his hyperactive right wrist. Your pulse quickens with some velocity and impact.

This film—a straight trio performance in two parts in a polite concert hall—professionally if unspectacularly catches Peterson doing his thing. The camerawork is clear and workmanlike, and the sound is transparent but pushes the piano and bass forward with treble clarity at the expense of the drums. Still, there is little to quibble about with the production details. Ultimately, it's not all that much to look at: three undemonstrative older guys in tuxedos who just happen to be able to *play*. For the most part, they all look dead serious: Martin Drew looking sort of like an accountant behind the kit, Neils-Henning Oersted Pederson rumped and on bass, and Peterson going about his business with concentration only occasional joy.

But it's the music, right? The proceedings begin somewhat mechanically with a "Salute to Bach"—a multi-part suite it seems that does not boil all that much blood until the end. The opening is just what you fear from jazz-classical hybrid—a touch of boring—and the impressionistic ballad section is surprisingly flat. The passages that actually qualify as baroque—fast and multi-noted and filigreed—seem designed to impress more than to please. Only the ending warms entirely: a gutbucket jazz-style blues that finally starts to get pleasantly Petersonian, with the left hand banging out big chords and the right hand playing hungry trilled figures, giant thumb glissandi, and the whole proceeding getting a bit of the barrelhouse feel. You can see, here, that Peterson has broken a sweat. Yeah. The man, though silent, even takes a bow.

What of the straight jazz ballads, then? Are they boring, and you expect pyrotechnics, or do



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they finally expose the humanity under the Robo-Pianist surface? “Who Can I Turn To” is a beautiful tune, but it is played as a kind of ballad breather too, with the solo introduction full of super-fast runs in between statements of the melody. When Peter breaks into straight stride tempo, it’s such a relief to hear him relaxed. The double-time right hand runs are still show-offy, but the gentle left hand stride is bliss. Even when the band comes in (throwing Peterson into a flurry of musical quotations from “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” and the like), you’re thinking—*but no one* can play like this. No doubt that many would like to, though matters of taste might dictate against it.

“Blues Etude”—a million miles-an-hour workout—is so fast that it’s a bit of a blur. NHOP and Drew swing so fast and fluid that it feels mechanical, and Peterson enters with a blur of mad 32nd notes. Then, dramatically, the rhythm section cuts out for a piano solo portion—still at full tempo. It’s utterly *amazing* but it also feels inevitably like a party trick, the fingers flying, the left hand anchoring, the patterns seeming 100% automatic rather than like the true discovery of improvisation.

And this is the question that a set like this poses—a question that jazz skeptics have asked me more than once: is it *truly* improvisation or more like a series of stock riffs, rearranged and reshuffled into something fun, sure, but not exactly profound?

There is little question that Oscar Peterson—particularly when he is the only featured soloist in a trio like this one—relies on a series of brilliant but limited bits in every tune. While he unquestionably translated Art Tatum into a vigorous post-bop mode, the achievement is much more a performer’s wonder than a musician’s gem. No Peterson performance will last as long as Monk’s “Round Midnight” or “Ruby, My Dear”, and Peterson in no way reordered the way pianists think about rhythm or harmony or melody. He just thrills—which is great—but when you hear him quote “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” *again* on “Yours if My Heart Alone” (taken up-tempo again), you realize that the great player is, no question about it, reshuffling his deck.

The second half of the Berlin concert contains more of the same. NHOP’s solo on “Falling in Love with Love” is stunningly fluid and graceful—something to put many bassists to shame. Are these guys even capable of playing something simple, heartfelt, gorgeous? “La Belle Province” relaxes into a jazz waltz of great delicacy, actually. Peterson partly reins in his speed and note-madness. “Nigerian Marketplace” may be even better, with NHOP taking the melody on the introduction and the group digging into an interaction that has an Ahmad Jamal feeling to it—balance and unity trumping virtuosity for a while. It’s here that you can imagine Peterson as an influence, perhaps, on a young Herbie Hancock or as the peer of the great trio pianists of his era—Wynton Kelly or Bill Evans.

But the concert finishes with more Peterson over-the-top-ness—an absurdly jumping “Cakewalk”, a miraculously controlled but note-flurried ballad feature on “My Foolish Things”, then some Ellington played so fast that one wonders why the group bothering choosing a good song, so quickly does it disappear under the chops on display.

Is this churlish? To disparage a performance for being too skillful and too effortlessly swinging? Not really. Jazz *is* a music of skill and virtuosity, but it is also a music of soul and discovery. The Oscar Peterson Trio, in this performance, tries too hard throughout to take our breath away and not hard enough to makes us feel that this music has something to say to our heart. A genuine critique, in fact, and one the great pianist leaves wanting on this recording.

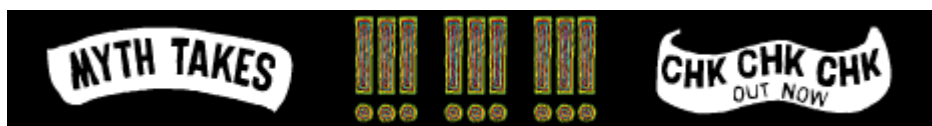


The Oscar Peterson Trio live in Berlin

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