

Transcript: Thomas Gläßer in Conversation with Marlies Debacker

Thomas Gläßer: Marlies Debacker, a pianist from Cologne, will play at this year's Jazzfest Berlin – which this year will also focus on jazz education under the title "(Un-)Learning Jazz". So now let's talk briefly about what knowing and not knowing and learning and unlearning mean for your practice as a musician and as a teacher. You have a whole range of different roles. You're a performer of new music, you're an improviser in improvised music, you're a piano teacher, you're a university teacher, and you're also active as a curator with the Platform of Undocumentable Events in Cologne, which was founded there many years ago by the tuba player Carl Ludwig Hübsch. And I'd like to go through these various different roles with you to see what learning and unlearning and knowing and not knowing mean in these areas. And I'd like to start with the fact that you're at home in two fields: you are now, and maybe you always have been. One is jazz and improvised music, where you've had the majority of your university education, both in Belgium and in Cologne, where you majored in jazz and jazz piano. But then you went further and also trained in contemporary and new music, mainly by taking a Masters in Essen as well as the Darmstadt Summer Courses with the pianist Nicolas Hodges. Can you tell us how these two different fields relate to each other for you and what each of them means for your artistic practice?

Marlies Debacker: Perhaps I should begin by explaining how I ended up here. In particular I got into improvised music and new music purely out of my own interest: it always came very naturally to me. It was clear relatively early on that this was the music I wanted to make. What matters most is that it's today's music: new music that is being composed now and improvised music that is created perhaps even more intensely in that very moment, on stage. That's what I found most interesting. I've always felt a very strong inclination to go in that direction. Early on as a student I started with jazz, though I also had a lot of classical lessons, a classical training, and I continued with classical lessons at university, and even began a complete course – which I then didn't finish because I moved to Cologne. But these parallels, of consistently working on jazz and improvisation but also on the piano repertoire, was a basic principle for me: it was my theme really. And for me it's also part of the instrument itself.

Thomas Gläßer: In both these fields there is a strong sense of tradition, which is well known from the debate in the States between Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis on one side and the modernisers on the other. That shows that on the one hand this is music that attaches great importance to new inventions and the power of innovation, but at the same time it's now also got a pretty long tradition behind it. The first jazz bands began playing in the early 20th century. The first recordings were made in the 10s and 20s of the last century, round about the time when the Second Viennese School, Schönberg and Webern, were freeing themselves from major-minor harmonics in Vienna. Funnily enough, these things happened at almost exactly the same time. In fact, both new music and contemporary jazz have an extremely rich history to look back on. When you say you're interested in the music that's being made now, what role do all these historical treasures play in this music and in contemporary music-making? And how strongly is music anchored in this historical knowledge and repertoire?

Marlies Debacker: I'd always say very strongly. Without such a rich history, the music we have today would not exist. We're always talking about new music, creating music that is developing further, developing naturally. But music's vast history plays an enormous role in that. Both in the way we listen as well as the way we play. And I also believe that the more you know and are aware of what a complicated, complex and rich evolution music like this has grown out of, and what a long period of time it has taken to do that – I think that gives the music even more meaning.

Thomas Gläßer: When you look at your own practice, but also perhaps as an observer of the international music scene: do you have the feeling that there is an increasing overlap between the ways musicians work in jazz and improvised music and in new music? Because I get the impression that a lot of jazz musicians – and especially free improvisers – look quite intently at the material and formal possibilities of contemporary music as a source of inspiration and somehow they absorb ideas or even at times make direct references to certain composers in order to overcome their own patterns. Or do you think they're still a relatively long way apart? Do you get that from your students and the way they approach the teaching that you offer at the university in Cologne, which is partly influenced by contemporary music?

Marlies Debacker: Yes, definitely. But it's hard to give an answer that applies in all cases. It depends entirely on the music and the person and the direction they're taking. However, in general it can be said that there's more and more openness there and curiosity and definitely a framework for exchange. Though it must also be said that the same was true in the 1960s. Whether what's happening now is something new or radically different, I don't know. Of course what is new is that for quite a long time now we've had universities with jazz courses and that these institutions and these programmes are becoming increasingly prominent. New music only recently became something that could be studied in this form, as a Masters, as a specialised subject. And it's relatively new too that jazz courses – depending on the university of course – have started to offer increasing scope for free improvisation and crossing genre boundaries. I consistently see a lot of interest in this in my own courses. For subjects like free improvisation it's definitely possible to not copy, but understand, analyse and keep your ears open for ideas and elements of new music. It's also important to think of new combinations of sounds or instrumentation for chamber music. Things that are incredibly useful in group improvisation and go much further in the direction of sound composition, that don't occur so often in traditional jazz, in the more traditional range of roles. There each instrument usually has a relatively fixed role – that works, of course, but what's most important is to keep your ears open and to see what's happening now, what's being composed now in various different directions and what you can gain from it in terms of inspiration, developing forms, sound composition and instrumentation.

Thomas Gläßer: Do you think that, as a result of this, music itself is becoming more academic? The usual prejudices would be that it is more artificial, more abstract, cooler, less physical, less connected with entertainment, and with a complicated relationship to emotion in music. Or does that seem to be a contradiction?

Marlies Debacker: I can understand why you're asking this and there has been some valid criticism. Particularly the new music scene, which likes to pride itself on being extremely complex music that you have to be able to understand. That's actually a long way from reality. It's difficult to see new music as a genre, and the same goes for improvised music. There are an incredible number of different directions and kinds of music, and I believe very strongly what matters most, despite sometimes complex structures and forms, is to move people. If a work genuinely interests me then it usually moves me as well – and for me that has little in common with things that are cold or

academic. The fact that music is complex doesn't mean it can't move people, even though its structure might be extremely complicated. It can still have an effect and I would even say that that is usually a sign of its quality.

Thomas Gläßer: I was thinking just now about the quality of New Orleans jazz and the early recordings of Louis Armstrong or the force with which musicians like Evan Parker and Peter Brötzmann burst onto the landscape in the 1960s from a perspective that was at least in part truly radically unacademic, where the music is suddenly being driven by powerful instinct and physicality. And for a lot of people that creates a very simple form of accessibility on a level that's more visceral than cerebral. And that's something where I keep on asking myself: how can that be renewed? How can that be renewed through academia? And it would be interesting to hear from you: what role does that kind of level have in your playing? Because you really do think a lot about form and musical detail, you work a lot with composers and it's probably a way of working that is calibrated differently.

Marlies Debacker: It is certainly true that I do think a great deal about form, detailed work and sound work. And when music is being composed specifically for me, then I'm there as part of the composing process, the creative process. Of course, that gives me a great perspective on it, as simultaneously both a performer and an improviser. It's genuinely a paradox. But when I'm improvising, particularly in my solo programme, then I hardly think at all. I have no route planned out. I've got no preordained structure or direction. And I do find the physical aspect extremely important when I'm playing. Really following up impulses and working them through. That's a paradox: one by no means precludes the other. I find that this highly detailed work on the repertoire is like what always happens, actually: if we're really interested in something and we work hard enough on it then a kind of automatic memory process kicks in. I collect so much music, something always sticks. But I would never attempt to reproduce structures from any pieces in the same form. I'm very involved and I work in a very precise way, but when I'm improvising, not at all. It's the eternal paradox: I try to learn as much as I can and then forget as much as I can when I go on stage. But I don't think there's any better way to describe it.

Thomas Gläßer: During your life, you've also had a great deal of piano teaching. The piano is a highly technical instrument. Primarily something that puts an entire

mechanical device at your disposal, with which in my experience a lot of piano students very quickly want to make music based on a score. Their impression of what they are doing is generated from what they produce. At the same time many of them find it difficult to develop their own sound ideas and to discover how to achieve them with the instrument. How does your piano teaching operate between these tensions, between developing sound ideas and using the instrument to achieve them with confidence and learning the repertoire and piano technique on a purely technical level?

Marlies Debacker: That's true. I spent more than ten years studying piano at different music schools and currently I don't do that anymore. But right from the very beginning I've always done improvisations and generated sound ideas. That's always been part of my curriculum. I wouldn't say that generally it's any more difficult on the piano than on other instruments. Perhaps it's even a bit easier for players who are just starting because you've also got this visual dimension with the piano. But developing an inner idea of sound is something that I repeatedly emphasise, both with children and with teenagers, grown ups, schoolchildren and now at the university. To be able to imagine things really strongly, and with children to move on to singing and then playing them, improvising, working with sound – that usually works fantastically well, especially with children. But now, in terms of university study, specifically practicing imagining sounds is something that I have always spent a long time on myself and still do. Training speed. Everyone has an ability to imagine sound. But what's most important is to train to do it at speed, to realise sound ideas immediately. That is a process that can be trained, just like many others. It's like a concentration exercise when you do it every day. An imagined sound: it might be one note. In fact it's best if it is one note, because then you can work very precisely, on timbre, dynamics, the type of stroke – to really train yourself to produce precisely that note that you have imagined. That's something I always argue for very, very strongly in my teaching. The more you do it, the faster the process becomes.

Thomas Gläßer: You also teach free improvisation at the university. You were just talking about what you can train yourself to do. What many people wonder who think about improvisation is whether spontaneity and an improvisational approach and not knowing can also be trained?

Marlies Debacker: Yes, definitely. But I often teach ensembles now too. And in that sort of situation I always find it very, very gratifying to keep probing further and go beyond their comfort zone. Where they get completely away from everything they've ever played before and ideally it's pretty extreme. For example: no one plays a pitch. Most of them have rarely played in that way before, where they've only worked in terms of noise. That's already unfamiliar enough because you really have to be very spontaneous and you have to react because there is absolutely no template. When you're constantly trying to operate outside your comfort zone as much as possible, then you repeatedly force yourself to do new things. And I think that's a really interesting process. Because it's also an attitude to performance that you can practice.

Thomas Gläßer: What role is played here by letting go of sound ideas or letting go of control? As in *écriture automatique* or something similar? Producing things that you've not thought of in advance, that you've not taken from somewhere beforehand, that might be the result of chance or a physical reflex or an intuition – both in your playing and in how you teach?

Marlies Debacker: In groups it's a very big role. If you're really going to talk consistently about free, absolutely free improvisation, then it always ought to be created in the moment. And then if you're truly honest with yourself, when something planned happens – I'm putting this quite extremely now, but: that's not improvised any more, is it, in that moment? So in my playing, it plays a very, very big role.

Thomas Gläßer: Can you explain for example how you will prepare for the concert at Jazzfest?

Marlies Debacker: Like all my concerts. I spend a very long time sitting at the instrument. I think a great deal and I record a lot. Over and over, to train my sense of time. Of course there are *longeurs* that over the years you have a very good awareness of. And at the same time I work a lot on the repertoire. Play a couple more solo concerts and also improvise in different configurations. But my preparation is often very much to do with sound, focussing in loving detail on the instrument. At the same time I improvise every day.

Thomas Gläßer: What is the most important thing that you try to give your students?

Marlies Debacker: In the context of improvised music I find over and over that you can never prepare what is going to happen on stage and what you will play. But you can prepare your own approach to playing. And that's something you can develop further, you can shape it, practice it and rehearse it.

Thomas Gläßer: There are lots more things I could ask you, but I'm going to say thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Thank you for letting us take such a close look at many questions.

Marlies Debacker: Thank you too!

Thomas Gläßer: See you soon at Jazzfest Berlin!