

**Lucas Niggli ZOOM: Liner Notes to topical CD “Spawn of Speed“  
by Frank von Niederhäusern**

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The concept of art is old, familiar and has proven itself. Whoever reaches the limits of linguistic abstraction when describing complex musical works preferentially uses a vocabulary that is normally reserved for the criticism of the fine arts. How often are musicians compared to painters, sculptors or photographers? And how numerous are the compositions that emerge from «a wide palette of expressive possibilities» and are accordingly «assembled finely» or «richly applied.» And this with an «individual ductus.»

Lucas Niggli, an artistic fabulist not only behind the drums, takes up this language-oriented projection with a playful wink of the eye. He calls his first own formation Zoom and brings a technical terminology into play that - in the foreground - has more to do with sight than hearing. And yet his choice of names testifies to neither speechlessness nor creative arbitrariness. «Focussing has become a central concern of mine,» says Niggli, thus placing the present compositions in relationship to his musical development.

Having grown up in the carefree «anything goes» of the late 70's and early 80's, he has joyfully devoted himself to postmodern music styles. From the lively juxtapositions of his instrumental training, of madrigal choir, big band and rock combo, Niggli grew to have not only a wide interest in music, he intensively lived and savored styles without limits: as an impetuous avantgardist with the trio Kieloor Entartet, as a pulsing drummer in jazz combos, later as an interpreter of contemporary compositions. On the side of Fred Frith, Werner Lüdi, Stephan Wittwer (among others), he explored the ways of playing free improvisation. In drummer Pierre Favre's formations, he expanded the expressive means of percussion. And with the trio Steamboat Switzerland, he combines the complexity of contemporary music with the energy of rock. That Lucas Niggli not only has developed through this wide and disparate commitment, but rather has created his own languages and dialects - all this testifies for, among other things, his work with and for his trio Zoom.

What is valid for optics, for photography also holds true for Niggli's current compositions: whoever zooms, whoever focuses makes the world neither smaller nor larger, rather more diverse and more transparent. But not simpler. In contrast to contemporary zapping, which cultivates syntactic juxtaposition, zooming is a paradigmatic process of movement which makes that lying behind or within evident; thus, it creates tension. Such fields of tension are that out of which Zoom originated and which have deeply characterized the trio. Niggli's cooperation in extremely diverse projects and formations and his encounter with numerous musicians of the most differing achievements gave him the desire to create his own formation. «I am not a classical sideman. I always get involved in the substantial questions of conceptual work,» he says. «Therefore it was time to create my own platform, in order to implement my ideas as best as possible.» The choice of a small formation resulted from his need to create clear, transparent structures. Moreover, as a percussionist Niggli searched for a harmony and a melody instrument. No bass, rather two tenor players, who provide - along with his bass-drums - a dark, earthy group sound. Searching for appropriate musicians, Niggli let himself be lead by the principle that he gives the highest priority: perfect group chemistry. With the Swiss guitarist Philipp Schaufelberger, Niggli has an internal musical elective affinity; he practically chose himself. Niggli first got to know the German trombonist Nils Wogram a few years ago, and yet, «I immediately had the impression that he speaks the same language as I do: it was love at the first listen.» A love, of course, with a lot of friction. Whoever sees the trio on stage gets to know three basically different musical personalities: the essential lyricist Schaufelberger, the sensitive trench jumper Wogram and the joyful pedant Niggli. An optimal combination, hence, to adopt fields of tension, those given from the very beginning as well as those originating continuously.

Conceived as a «working band,» Zoom presumes dialectical approaches, personnel-wise as well as stylistic and formal. The aim, however, is not a synthesis in a classical sense, but rather selective focussing. «Zoom is in itself a jazz band with clear stylistic leanings,» Niggli emphasizes. «But free improvisation, rock and contemporary music play an equally important role.» Logically his compositions shuttle between formulas and free space, notation and improvisation, complex density and lightness, the drawing board and the stage.

Although not easily recognizable when heard, these multiple ways of working can be illustrated by looking into the origin and development of individual pieces. «Oxygène Beats» - a collection more or less of diverse «light» rhythms - originated from playing the drums. From improvisations, Niggli filtered out rhythmic as well as tonal material and processed it later. Similarly, «Hoax» is put together from «heard» material: during practicing, seven quarters variations arose that the trio now uses as a scaffold for improvisations. In contrast to this, 'Superblues' is a meandering suite from the drawing board. The rhythmic 9-7-5-3 pattern from «Spawn of Speed» is a constructed row that slowly matured into the present piece. But regardless of all the work on the drawing board and assembly, the present pieces became Niggli's compositions first in rehearsal, then on stage and finally in the recording studio. «The way Philipp and Nils play is so individual and committed that I don't have to write everything out for them,» Niggli says. «I deliver the basic ideas and well formed building blocks, more or less. Via the work in the collective, the pieces find their own identity.»

In the collection «Poems & Theorems,» Niggli has summarized a series of additional building blocks. Formulaic theorems (like the twelve-tone-all-interval row from «Brain Ballad») or poetic capriccios like the surprised crib song «Sch!» When they perform live, this material is used as modules, thus combined in differing ways or integrated in other pieces. It all depends. For Lucas Niggli is not in the least a superior dramatist. «My demands upon music are high. Just so that we can get the notes to ring, we need more than precision and concentration. First when we climb up into the rush of playing does the concert become a feast.» In other words: everyone can zap - to zoom is an art.