



Steve Coleman

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Moers Returns to Cutting Edge

When veteran envelope-pusher Anthony Braxton hit the stage with his sextet at the Moers Festival in May, a palpable spirit of triumph circulated in the festival's big top (a literal circus tent). Braxton has made a dramatic new presence on the scene of late, but a more site-specific connection played out in Moers. This was his first appearance at this festival in more than three decades. Braxton's adventurous spirit, and the work of many other artists, reflected and benefited from the associative influence of this festival during its 1970s heyday.

Through the festival and Moers Music record label, this German institution—founded in 1972—has factored into jazz history, although its reputation has been less bold in the last couple of decades. A burst of energy and focus hit Moers with the arrival of new artistic director Reiner Michalke, who took

over the reins from founding director Burkhard Hennen in 2005. Michalke set out to revitalize the festival and reclaim its earlier prominence on the map of jazz festival culture.

A sense of rebirth pervaded this year's festival, which ran from May 25–28. Michalke's inspired mélange leaned toward music from left field and experimental camps, but with enough blasts of structure and controlled energies to avoid the aftertaste of heady musical overdose. The exciting and balanced event was by turns brainy, noisy (as with Keiji Haino and Merzbow), visceral, lyrical (the fine Australian pianist Andrea Keller's band) and even raucously fun-loving—thanks to Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra and the visual-aided concept pop of Japanese group Cornelius.

All of this could not have happened in a more pleasant setting. Moers sits in a lovely spot

in the western Ruhr Valley area of Germany, close to Düsseldorf. The rambling woodsy expanse of the Freizeitpark surrounds the festival's central Hotel Van der Valk. A massive fringe event with campers meandering among vendors and ad hoc drum circles into the wee hours skirts the festival site.

Given Braxton's current emphasis on the free-flowing interactions in his "Ghost Trance Music" mode, it's tempting to read his performances as microcosmic festivals unto themselves. Braxton is presumably the "+ 1" in his Sextet + 1, which sounds bigger than it is because of the diversity of the voices and ranges in instrumentation, including tuba, violin and electronics, along with impressive stylist Taylor Ho Bynum on trumpet. With this thrilling hour-long musical conversation, weaving in and out of written parts and free zones, the leader became a strong individualist and a humble facilitator for the whole. Chains of command within the septet shifted, along with the balance of freedom and the taut structure of thorny, Braxtonian unison lines.

Apart from Braxton, the festival's most memorable moments included the captivatingly subtle improvisational savvy of the GRH Trio (pianist George Graewe, cellist Ernst Reijseger and drummer Gerry Hemingway, with guest Earl Howard) and an encounter

with Steve Coleman's ongoing investigation into cross talk between his complex math jazz and hip-hop, mixing his Five Elements with Opus Akoben. Other successful artistic partnerships took flight here: extended-vocalist Mike Patton got along famously with Austrian electronics guru/guitarist Christian Fennesz, and the subculture of rocking, venturesome bari sax-based trios Zu and The Thing earned a double dose of spotlights.

Some of the finest music in Moers came from Scandinavia, particularly in the thrilling, all-improvised set by Norwegian singer Sidsel Endresen and the duo Humcrush (keyboardist Ståle Storløkken and drummer Thomas Strønen). From Finland, Mikko Innanen & Innkvisitio supplied ample intensity and humor. Though Innanen is an impressive, flexible saxophonist, the deliciously quirky and chops-fueled keyboardist Seppo Kantonen stole the scene. He sounds like Joe Zawinul from another planet.

Free improvisational morning sessions involved cross-cultural improvisers—this year, from Beijing, Berlin and Oslo. Catching a dynamic duet between We Wei improvising masterfully on the multireed sheng, alongside ever-sensitive drummer Hemingway one morning in the Moers Neue Rathaus, it was clear that we weren't in Manhattan—or anywhere American—any more. —Josef Woodard