

Nik Bärtsch's Ronin - Rea (2004)

Written by bluesever
Thursday, 07 April 2016 15:54 -

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01. Modul 27 [10:05] 02. Modul 22 [16:37] 03. Modul 18 [6:45] 04. Modul 26 [18:14] 05. Modul 23 [12:31] Nik Bärtsch - Electric Piano [Fender Rhodes] Kaspar Rast - Drums Bjorn Meyer - Bass Andi Pupato - Percussion + Thomy Geiger - Tenor Sax (track: 4) Michael Gassmann - Trumpet (track: 4) Sha - Bass Clarinet (tracks: 1, 4)

I aim to review all the Nik Bartsch albums in my possession with the hope of better coming to terms with them (their strengths and weaknesses - moments of brilliance and tediousness) myself.

All his albums have many musical qualities which I feel would appeal to many listeners despite also having uncompromising aspects which might prove infuriating too.

With the progression of the artist and the style, especially notable with the move to ECM, some of the infuriating aspects of the developing but (quite formidably fully formed early on) style are tempered to produce an ever more beautiful and satisfying progression of releases. Still, we are talking about nine releases within a ten year period so that is lots of music and deserves a proper survey. . .

Bartsch's music is generally tightly played, complex, cyclical, minimal and groove-based - and all the pieces are referred to as Moduls.

This particular collection, Rea, often requires (like most extremely minimal music) that the

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listener suspend normal requirements such as arrangement changes, extended or memorable melodies, chord progressions etc and surrender to the web it weaves and the groove it maintains.

Modul 27 - static 4/4 groove on one spot harmonically with periodic pointilistic cow bell (every 5) and wood block hits overlaying other cycles. Electric piano notes then add another series of cyclic points less simple in their periodicity. Here and there are jazzy electric piano chords. Later sustained bass clarinet sevenths are introduced. A low key and rather unexciting first cut. 2/5

Modul 22 - shakers playing a repeated shuffling 3 beat pattern overlaid with minimal drones (produced by bowed percussion?). Then a 12/8 groove starts up with the shakers continuing across the new texture and with a shifting 4 to 3 focus. A bass guitar solo is added which sounds quite improvised. Suddenly rising chord changes are introduced within the basic texture. Suddenly a bell like sustained texture is introduced and the piece begins to build in drama with new rhythmic elements added and dramatic low register piano interjections. 3/5 for the rather slow-moving early sections of the piece. 4/5 when it gets moving along for its final third.

Modul 18 - a single slowly repeated note. Suddenly this becomes the backdrop to a glacial slowly unfolding ambient moodscape led by the piano playing shifting chords in cycles of 9. Very beautiful, nocturnal and captivating. 4/5

Modul 26 - Slow starting but hypnotic from the outset, soon a fantastic 9 beat groove emerges. This piece most reminds me of the Steve Reich of Music for 18 Musicians. Textural elements come out and then sink beneath the surface texture as they do with the Reich piece and this creates a level of mesmerising interest. Towards the end untuned percussion/drums playing it's beautiful supporting cyclical patterns are left solo to conclude the piece. 4/5

Modul 23 - a 5 beat pattern dominated overlaid with 6 beat and other cycles. It could literally carry on forever like this and you would move into nirvana on the back of the groove. 5/5

Scarcely does one encounter such singlemindedness of vision and intent and Bartsch is undoubtedly a true artist working with a group of impeccable musicians.

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My only complaint with this album Rea is that I am not convinced it is necessary to endure so much stasis to be rewarded with the moments of brilliance brought through in this collection and some of the compositions I feel could work across shorter time frames. This album I feel is quite a slow starter in that respect but of course when the musical machines that Bartsch vivifies generate their mesmeric magic there is nothing quite like this music. ---Neil C, amazon.com

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