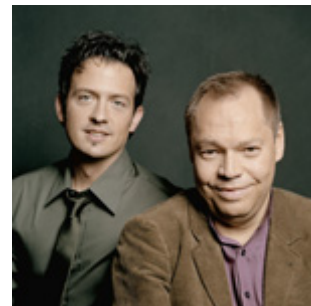


THOMAS QUASTHOFF “WATCH WHAT HAPPENS” – THE JAZZ ALBUM



It is not often in the world of art that something completely new comes along, something that has never previously existed in this form. In music, especially, all limits seem to have been exhausted long ago. More than other genres, this particular art form has shown an increasing tendency to degenerate to the level of an accessory. From classical music to techno, rapid consumability, collectibility and exchangeability have now become indications of quality. Records function like shares, rising and falling in the charts. Not many musicians have the stature to break out of this vicious circle and, by presenting new artistic ideas and forms, to create a counterpoint of lasting value.

A CD like Thomas Quasthoff's jazz album does not come about overnight. Nor is it the result of a month's or even six months' work. Rather, it represents the culmination of a process that stretches back over a period of several years and starts with the artist defining his or her own personal position. Quasthoff has always felt a close affinity with jazz, and yet he first had to answer his own question as to what he could express through jazz that had not previously been conveyed in this form. Why else would he want to record a jazz album?

Much has been said and written about Thomas Quasthoff's life. His is a personal and artistic "Passion" story that gives many people incredible strength because it has a happy ending. Here is an artist who refuses to accept ostensible limitations, transcending them and achieving international recognition. The present CD offers twofold proof of his unbridled vitality, for not only does Quasthoff once again cross an arbitrarily imposed demarcation line between genres, but he also retells his own life from a new and different perspective. All the songs included in the present release are closely related to his own experiences and points of view. It is well worth our while, not just to abandon ourselves to this unique voice in its new surroundings of a jazz band and jazz orchestra, but also to observe how he interprets the words to give tangible form to the narrative that this album recounts.

Is this jazz album really a jazz album? The very term "jazz" has given rise to such lively debate since the 1950s that no one-dimensional answer is possible. Quasthoff, the producer Till Brönner, the arranger Alan Broadbent and all the others involved in this release are far too concerned with the music as such to seek a simplistic answer. Over-hasty attempts to pigeon-hole this recording is left to others. Here are two musicians who prefer to set their own standards rather than heed conventions and vague terminologies.

Thomas Quasthoff is one of the best-known bass-baritones currently before the public, while Till Brönner is one of the most celebrated jazz trumpeters outside the United States. The chemistry between these two musicians alone produces countless links reflecting the expectations of their respective fans. And yet anyone who has taken a detailed interest in their two careers also knows that their success as artists rests on the fact that they have both sought repeatedly to open up new horizons.

"Whenever I sing jazz," Quasthoff insists, "it sounds like jazz, not like classical music in the guise of jazz." His voice is not conjuring up the song cycles of Schubert or Strauss. Quasthoff remains entirely himself. He can be recognized in every single note that he sings. Precisely because he takes jazz seriously without attempting to imitate the great vocalists of jazz history, and because he explores vocal territory in which classical audiences are not used to hearing him, he does justice to the view of jazz allowing a maximum of personal freedom. Jazz purists may complain that this recording lacks an element of improvisation, but does improvisation really consist in no more than a sequence of solo digressions and outbursts? Or is it not, rather, the expression of a spontaneous ability to make the most of each element in the artistic process, whether it be notes, words or harmonies? This recording contains an incredible amount of jazz without falling unconditionally into the parameters of a conventional jazz album.

The album derives its sense of excitement not least from the contrast between the distinct personalities of



Thomas Quasthoff and Till Brönner, and yet these differences generally find expression in tiny interchanges whose impact is thus all the greater. Both artists are perfectionists, both are obsessed with the sheer beauty of the sounds they produce. And yet these qualities mesh at completely different points. Both men work on the smallest detail until it is fully in place. For Brönner it is far from easy to provide a channel for Quasthoff's virtually boundless range of expression, while Quasthoff, for his part, enjoys responding to each bar in turn and making an entirely new contribution to a song or sequence, or even to a word or individual sound. Every shift of colour, however slight, opens up a whole series of new perspectives – all the more so in that the semantic and conceptual meanings of a number stem less from the sung word itself than from the patina that overlays Quasthoff's intonation.

None of the songs contained in the present release was specially written for this context, and yet the way in which they have been put together by Quasthoff and Brönner attests to a very real wealth of invention on the part of the project's two protagonists. In their complexity and their integration these songs constitute an entirely new work of art, a self-contained song cycle that is both intoxicatingly beautiful and unbearably intense.

Wolf Kampmann