

*Music from All Corners of the World*  
*Asavari*

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*Jazz Podium* February 2008



Short melodic fragments emerge from the harp, the tar contributes graceful, finely wrought lines, the horse-head fiddle fills in the sound painting with melancholic harmony chords, and hovering above the instrumental textures soars a high humming voice with slight vibrato. The ensemble *Asavari* begins its journey through musical worlds from occident to orient as far as distant Mongolia in the composition “Pilgrimage” with pastel colors and a distinctive harmonious sound.

“World Music” has not established itself as a definable category of instrumental or vocal occurrences. Just the opposite: the notion resists categorization in the attempt to fuse musical elements or playing traditions of most divergent cultural horizons. How free and open spirited such an encounter can be is proven by *Asavari*, formed around multi-instrumentalist Gernot Blume from Bingen, and percussionist Julie Spencer. At the occasion of their premiere-concert in the Museum at the River in Bingen, the two internationally renowned artists teamed up with Enkhjargal Dandarvaanchig, a Mongolian master on the morin khuur, a horse-head fiddle, and Jamal Samavati, a Persian virtuoso on tar and setar, long necked lutes that due to their enchanting sound became the favorites of mystics and Sufis.

Two musical worlds based on completely different tonal foundations are confronted in the dialogues between contrabass and tar or morin khuur. No talk of “melting.” On the one side there is the occidental formation of harmonies, on the other side there are modal scales, and nonetheless the instruments work together. On the fiddle’s two strings and with fingers simultaneously under and over the horsehair strings, Dandarvaanchig magically produces diverse timbres from a dark, rough desert blues to “smeared” and free

sounding tone clusters. The instrumental play is accentuated by acrobatics with larynx and throat, resulting in over- and undertone singing, the ability to jump effortlessly from pressed high register sounds to rough-sounding vocal depths. Despite all the exotic cleverness, the final result sounds nonetheless familiar and adds itself exquisitely to the Persian art music, which defines its aesthetic concept in the unfurling of a mode's melodic beauty, the surrounding and the varied repetitions of a central pitch. These sound paintings are complemented by the diverse array of Gernot Blume's instruments, and the percussion of Julie Spencer.

At a rehearsal meeting in Bingen, Blume, Spencer, Samavari and Dandarvaanchig spoke about *Asavari* and their concept of world music.

KM: What's the vision behind *Asavari*?

Blume: Julie and I studied at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. The special thing about the institute is its curricula offerings in world music. We got to know Indian, African, Javanese, and Indonesian music. That's why the philosophy of world music is at the very beginning of my work. That's also how the multi-instrumentalism developed. Then I got together with Julie. That means this idea pursues me since we've known each other and is at the center of our musical work.

KM: What do you mean with multi-instrumentalism?

Blume: Julie and I are both pianists and we sing. Then it splits up: she with marimba, percussion, tabla, and similar things, and I with harp, guitars, accordion, bass, nickelharpa, and many more.

KM: Your times of study are long in the past. Why only now the formation *Asavari*, in the year 2007?

Blume: after our studies there were at first a few other stops on the road, but we worked in the United States with two ensembles that also embraced the world music idea, but still always rather Western oriented. The musicians were experienced in foreign cultures, yet their music was predominantly Western. But I carried even then the thought within me to create a kind of music that really should come from all corners of the world. For instance, we played together with (composer/bassist) Glen Moore from the ensemble Oregon. He was definitely a kind of role model, brought jazz and contemporary music with him, but still a Western person. Four years ago, we left America, and it became clear very quickly because of logistics that they had to be put on the backburner. Here in Germany, I decided to use the new phase of life as an opportunity to rethink the idea once more from the ground up. I heard Epi (Enkh Jargal Dandarvaanchig from Mongolia) with his horse-head fiddle and singing at an encore of an Irish Folk Festival. I thought – that would be great...

KM: Was it the horse-head fiddle or the overtone- and undertone-singing?

Blume: Both. And I realized that he could integrate himself into a Western musical context, without losing his independence. These sounds were so fresh and reached people out of the blue, without them having to know much about it. I am interested in this incredible immediacy of his world of sound. But that was already two years ago.

KM: And Jamal Samavati?

Blume: Through a student of his I got to know Jamal. I knew him by reputation already when we lived in Portland because I had been an advisor for a Persian music organization. So I met with Jamal, who was enthusiastic about the piano and the tar working together, but also because of the fact that I knew the modes of his music. After these encounters I spoke with Julie, that the four of us should really play together. That would be great. And then we met for the first time all together in April of 2007.

KM: What is special about the combination of such exotic sounding instruments like the two-stringed horse-head fiddle as well as the Persian long-necked lutes tar and setar with European instruments like the harp, the bass, and the piano? What is intriguing for a composer about this combination?

Blume: For me it's the seeming contradiction, because each instrument sounds so different and yet harmonizes with the others. The softness of the horse-head fiddle and the sharp brilliance of the tar, that's diversity in unity. Then I'm also interested in the modal foundation of both systems.

KM: With respect to the key word "modal," I'm wondering why *Asavari* has not incorporated very much modern jazz into its music yet, given the fact that you wrote a dissertation on Keith Jarrett's improvisations and have published internationally several musicological essays on the work of this pianist?

Blume: One reason was simply the instrumentation at the debut concert in the museum in Bingen. We didn't have a piano available for example. But also the group is new, and for Julie and me it was clear that at first we wanted to come toward the other two musicians.

KM: Does that mean that now the pendulum can swing back (toward new western music, jazz...)?

Blume: Definitely. I know that Epi and Jamal are interested in that. In duets with Jamal for example it already works, when I use wild chord structures from the modal components of his scales. Epi on the other hand is familiar with Western music practices. That's his strength, with which he can go beyond the scalar basis of his own culture. I developed in Portland an idea that I call "harmodal." That's the concept of taking scales of Persian or other non-Western musics, and building chord structures from them, which consist only of tones contained within such a mode, but they create harmonic structures that produce tension with Western major or minor tonalities. Jamal could play a

traditional Persian piece of music, and I can add different chord sequences with a selection of these tones, to which he in turn reacts from within his system.

KM: Is it possible that this music sounds so familiar in spite of its foreignness because both Mongolian and Persian music are so melodic?

Blume: Yes, that's very obviously also a point of connection between these cultures. It's completely different than if you go to Burma or Indonesia.

KM: Julie, how can you function within this concept? Your playing is predominantly percussive.

Spencer: I come to this band not primarily as a percussionist, but as a composer.

KM: Nonetheless, this music features polyrhythmic structures.

Spencer: Certainly. But when you play this music, the pieces have to be partially arranged apart from the improvisation. That's my strength, because I have experience with music from around the world. A friend once said that you have to learn in order to forget again right away. The experience has to be internalized, and then come spontaneously from the gut. When I compose I write what internally has already grown musically. It's like with cooking. I cook without a recipe and the result is what my eye, my tongue, and my experience with exotic cuisine has given me. I feel that I'm a kind of meeting point in this group. Things come toward me, and then what comes out is surprising. And yet each musician has a feeling for the connection of structures, that tell him, right now is the moment for this action, for that entrance, or for the end.

KM: How can Epi bring his music into the band?

Dandarvaanchig: It's the mood of the music that reflects the width of the Mongolian landscape, the fragrance of the flowers and the lightness of the butterflies. I can maintain this tradition also in the *Asavari* concept. Nonetheless, it's new music when we play together.

KM: Wind and width are legends that the songs are based on. Another question is: how can you produce magically such a diversity of sounds from two strings?

Dandarvaanchig: I had to develop a completely unique fingering technique that I can't explain - you can only see it - in order to play European chords and therefore improvise freely.

Blume: Our music springs from the experience of Epi's sounds, not from the theory. The sound is the lighting spark in our ensemble.

KM: What can Jamal contribute to the *Asavari* music?

Samavati: Persian music is based on radif, a collection of old melodies. This radif is our raw material. In this group I get in touch with other cultures. And that influences me. I absorb these melodies instead of radif. The special thing with *Asavari* is that it is like building a cocoon from which butterflies hatch – with their own genetic information plus the other colors. But this cocoon also means shelter and trust.

KM: Is it the contrast of moods, for example, between the horse-head fiddle and the tar or of both to the harp, for example, that's intriguing?

Samavati: Of course. Apart from that we have a lot of freedom, but it is a disciplined freedom. You can build on the contrasts or you can build a bridge on which you meet.

KM: That's like with free jazz, which drifts apart and comes together again.

Samavati: Exactly right. It's as Julie says, that you follow the subconscious and let it flow.

KM: Which projects are there in the near future for this group?

Blume: a lot of things in the works. Jamal has an invitation to Iran for us, and there is a Mongolian festival. Apart from that I'm still in touch with the Andisheh Center of Persian Arts in Portland (USA). And the group is still new.

P.S.: later Julie Spencer calls and says enthusiastically that the musicians incorporated more jazz elements in their improvisations during the rehearsal after the interview. They observed how well this music could be transferred to the sound world of their instrument array and how well it fits into the group concept.

Text and photo: Klaus Mümper