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Irmin Schmidt NOCTURNE

PROG

"A masterpiece"

THE GUARDIAN

"Irmin Schmidt is still pushing boundaries and making extraordinary music."

UNCUT

8/10

KCW

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ELECTRONICS

"Magic aplenty..

Schmidt's rare genius seems to be entering a new phase"

PROG

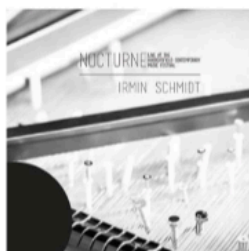
IRMIN SCHMIDT

Nocturne MUTE

Mesmeric live recording from Can's keyboard maestro.

Having studied with avant-garde titans Stockhausen, Ligeti and Cage, Irmin Schmidt could have enjoyed a career in the rarefied circles of contemporary classical music and academia had he not diverted his musicality into Can.

Recorded live at the octogenarian's appearance at last year's Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, this album, featuring three compositions for prepared piano and tape (as it still might quaintly be called) provides a glimpse of how things might have turned out had he not followed a very different calling.



The gently exotic timbral pathways of *Klavierstücke II* and the title track are joined by field recordings in which insect chatter and the low drone of a passing plane combine into an intimate environment that's oddly luxuriant.

The shift from interior perspectives towards more expansive landscapes comes with *Yonder* wherein solemn piano is joined by cascading church bells. Their presence bring a profound intensity invoking Schmidt's childhood experiences in post-war Germany where the only thing left standing was a church tower sounding on the hour. A masterpiece. **SS**



Age 83, Can's keyboardist **Irmin Schmidt** is still pushing boundaries and making extraordinary music. **Nocturne (Mute Records)**, recorded at the Huddersfield contemporary music festival last year, sees him playing delicate melodies on a prepared piano. Bolts and screws are placed in the strings to create gamelan-style percussive effects and odd harmonics. As each lengthy piece progresses, Schmidt starts to layer tons of real-time effects on the instrument until it resembles a noisy, rumbling piece of junkyard percussion.

John Lewis

Fri 12 Jun 2020
08.30 BST

UNCUT

IRMIN SCHMIDT Nocturne (Live At The Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival) MUTE

8/10

*Unprepared prepared: Can
founder's latest piano work*



2018's 5 *Klavierstücke* was recorded using a process of instant composition, so tracking the follow-up at a live concert seems

like a natural progression. In St Paul's church in Huddersfield, Schmidt – who knew John Cage and even performed some of his prepared piano works – plays one piece from *Klavierstücke* (“II”), complete with sound effects from rustling reeds, and two new pieces, “Nocturne” and “Yonder”. The titles suggest beauty and fragility, but the reality is much darker; “Nocturne” is sparse and eerie, while the 22-minute “Yonder”, Schmidt interacting with manipulated recordings of a church bell, is wonderfully clamorous.

TOMPINNOCK

KCWLONDON

LONDON'S MONTHLY NEWS & GLOBAL VIEWS

Irmin Schmidt – Nocturne (Mute)

Performed live at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival last year, the pianist and former Can member plays three improvised pieces on a partly prepared piano with pre-recorded soundscapes. The result is pensive and meditative disturbed only by audience clapping.

ELECTRONIC SOUND



Irmin Schmidt

Nocturne (Live At The Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival)

MUTE/SPOON

Magic aplenty on solo treated piano live work

Irmin Schmidt marks his 83rd birthday with a live document of his astonishing performance at last year's Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

These three lengthy pieces compellingly affirm Schmidt's ongoing creative journey is still in rude health as he brilliantly evokes last century's seminal experimental music on the instrument he started on – the piano. Sounding like he's breaking new ground for himself as, when he was studying under Stockhausen, Cage or Ligeti in the early 60s, he was undergoing the classical training that served him in orchestral and soundtrack work before forming Can in 1968.

While we can all affectionately revisit his old band's recordings, Schmidt hadn't been captured experimenting on piano (prepared how John Cage taught him) until 2018's spatially-atmospheric '5 Klavierstücke'. Documenting his first British solo piano concert, 'Nocturne' starts with 18-minute 'Klavierstück II' (which is double its original length on '5 Klavierstücke'), before premiering the previously-unheard 'Nocturne' and 'Yonder'.

Against pre-recorded ambience, Schmidt blends bell-like dissonance with his sparse, glacial motifs to eerily time-stopping effect yet, despite such minimal ingredients, each piece exudes a distinctive mood. Reflective and angular, the darkly foreboding, 'Klavierstück II' swells over luminescent micro-drones and intensifying bells before dripping water plip-plops through the 14-minute 'Nocturne', creating old school public urinal ambience around Schmidt's mercurial flourishes before settling into pastoral, still edgy rumination.

At 22 minutes, 'Yonder' is the set's stunningly dramatic magnum opus, church bells ringing into a dense, beautiful cacophony under which he sends deep, sonorous piano chords and crashing melodic shards. Experienced rather than listened to, the piece was composed after Schmidt watched Notre Dame burn on live TV, and it brought back childhood war-time memories of an omnipresent surviving church tower ringing out every hour over bombed-out ruins. As an unsettlingly evocative eulogy for a ruined city, 'Yonder' chimes perfectly with these beleaguered times.

Proudly unfettered, Schmidt's rare genius seems to be entering another new phase. Luckily, it was at the top of his game that evening the tapes were rolling in Huddersfield.

Kris Needs

Brief Encounters



The Can maestro, **Irmin Schmidt**, pulls up a chair and presses the button on our quick-fire question machine

We exist in incredibly strange times, how are you coping with it all?

"I live in the countryside, so I'm not affected too much by all of these horrible things and I cope by writing music."

Did you always know that music would be your calling?

"More or less, yes. I sang in churches and I thought I would become a singer. It felt clear to me that I would become a musician. Later, I became a conductor and then a composer and then the rest is known..."

Your career path appeared quite straightforward then?

"It was clear to me that I would have a conductor's career and I was quite confident that it would be a successful one."

Do you recall a moment when your thinking might have changed?

"At the time when I founded Can, there was a change in my thinking and my being a conductor, but it didn't happen from one day to the next, it was a deep development. For me, it was a big change but a logical development."

Your performance at last year's Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival was your first solo piano concert in the UK, what took so long?

"For the past few years, I've been making music on prepared piano. I discovered the charm of preparing a piano when I was a young pianist and I discovered Cage. I was performing his compositions and also conducting his work, so finally one day I met him. He taught me a lot about how to prepare a piano, a very exciting experience."

Why the Huddersfield festival for such a debut?

"It just happened. I had several concerts planned, in France for example, but there was a strike. I had to do it somewhere and HCMF offered."

How was it for you?

"I was very happy with it, that's why I put it on a record! It went well, in part, because the audience was great. After the first five minutes, I had to look into the audience because I couldn't hear anything, I thought, 'Did they leave?'.

As a performer you reflect a lot from the audience. This extreme concentration on what I was performing was very inspiring."

The works are accompanied by pre-recorded soundscapes...

"On 'Klavierstück II', I started purely on the prepared piano, but then I had the idea to use these wonderful sounds outside my house – the reeds around the pond, the bamboo beside the terrace, an airplane flying over – we, Gareth Jones and I, left them as they were, they were not treated. There is no rule, the soundscape sounds are part of the composition, they are not an effect or addition to the music."

'Yonder' is inspired by church bells, a sound that has deeply touched you since childhood. What is it about church bells that, er, chimes with you?

"The sound brings back very personal memories for me. Bells in many cultures play an important role and relate to religion, or whatever you want to call it. For me, there is a mystery in the sound. The Western church bells are totally different to Asian bells. They reflect something of the culture, this mystery fascinates me."

The album has several minutes of applause at the end, like it's part of the experience. Is that how you see it?

"The response of the audience was part of the concert, so it should be there because if you don't feel that reaction then you wouldn't know the dialogue that happened that night."



UNCUT

IRMIN SCHMIDT

It's a kind of zen thing...

With a new solo recording and a trove of unreleased live CAN material in the works, IRMIN SCHMIDT pushes pause on his forward-looking endeavours to reflect on 60 years as a true innovator. To discuss: fallen comrades, "evil" jazz and magic. "Music is an adventure every time," he tells Tom Pinnock

Photo by DIANE ZILLMER

WITH a screwdriver in his hand and assorted screws between his teeth, Irmin Schmidt is deep in concentration. He's remodelling the piano in Huddersfield's St Paul's Concert Hall by "preparing" it – inserting all manner of items between its strings. It is a method invented by John Cage that Schmidt intends to use during a concert he is playing here later tonight. Adjusting a piece of felt by a minute amount, he strikes a key, producing a muffled, bittersweet tone. "That's very Debussy," he says, breaking into a smile. "I will remember that and use it tonight."

Prepared piano, backed by manipulated field recordings, might be very different from the pulsing rhythmic inventiveness of Can, but Schmidt is still following the questing route dug by the visionary group that he formed in Cologne in 1968. Looking back at performances from throughout his long career – in Can, as a solo artist or otherwise – he considers their improvisatory nature essential to his way of doing things.

"If you take the risk to go on stage without knowing what you are going to play, then of course a lot is going to go wrong," he says. "But if it succeeds, then it's very good."

Irmin Schmidt in 2018: "If you take a risk, then a lot can go wrong. But if it succeeds, then it's very good"

IRMIN SCHMIDT

Now in his eighties, Schmidt has travelled from his home in the South of France to perform in this converted church for one of Europe's most revered experimental festivals. His first album of prepared piano, *5 Klavierstücke*, came out in 2018 – but here he'll be performing brand new pieces, still based around prepared piano and manipulated field recordings. The results, recorded live by Can's long-time sound engineer René Tinner, comprise a new album, *Nocturne*, released on Schmidt's 83rd birthday: May 29.

"It looks quite relaxed when I'm doing this," says Schmidt, resting in a hotel bar once the piano wrangling ceases after four-and-a-half hours. "But it's work that requires a lot of concentration. Everything you do – the overtones, the colours – they have to interact. It's like creating a new kind of instrument."

This year marks 50 years since Damo Suzuki joined Can on vocals, completing their most acclaimed lineup, resulting in albums such as 1971's *Tago Mago* and the following year's *Ege Bamyasi*. "Every second year I have a kind of jubilee," says Schmidt of the anniversary, wryly. "Sixty years married, all kinds..."

Yet he remains a keen custodian of the band's work, especially now that he's the only surviving member of the core quartet that anchored the group throughout their long career; drummer Jaki Liebezeit and bassist/tape artist Holger Czukay both passed away in 2017, while guitarist Michael Karoli died in 2001, aged just 53. "It's hard almost to talk about them not being around any more," says Schmidt, "because they were some of the people I've been closest to in my life, especially Michael. But Jaki too... I got really sick coming back from his funeral without knowing why. I miss them. They were the most important musicians in my life."

BRIGANS LATER



"CLASSICAL,
ART AND POP
ARE ALL THE
SAME TO ME"

IRMIN SCHMIDT



The keyboardist is currently working on restoring and releasing a set of Can's live recordings, including full improvised sets and possibly radio sessions, and he and Tinner reveal some of its treasures to *Uncut*. Schmidt also finds time to tell us about Hendrix, Beefheart and Stravinsky, recall how he made his musical mentor cry with some "evil" jazz, and muse on other, more esoteric matters.

"Well, any good music," he says, eyes twinkling behind his spectacles, "is magic."

UNCUT: Being the last remaining member of the core four in Can, does it put more pressure on you to look after the work?

SCHMIDT: It's no pressure – in fact, it's precious! It's an obligation, maybe, but I feel quite OK with that. It's a good obligation, definitely.

You have some Can archival live releases on the way, which is very exciting news. What can we expect to hear?

Spoon is planning with Mute to release a series of live records that were never released before. Parts of them were on obscure bootlegs. Andy Hall, a fan of ours, collected whatever he could get hold of in the '70s, and he recorded quite a lot too. Even if the quality of the recordings is not so good, there are now possibilities to improve it in the mastering. Especially in the UK, people knew us from live performances much more than they knew us from records – our performances made part of our fame. Documentation of our live appearances is missing from our releases, so I'm quite happy that this gap will be filled.

So how much stuff is going to come out?

I don't know yet. We have four concerts at least. I don't

"It's work that requires a lot of concentration": preparing his piano, November 21, 2019



left. Then there are some radio sessions too, funny ones, with Damo.

Was it freeing, that period when it was just the four of you?

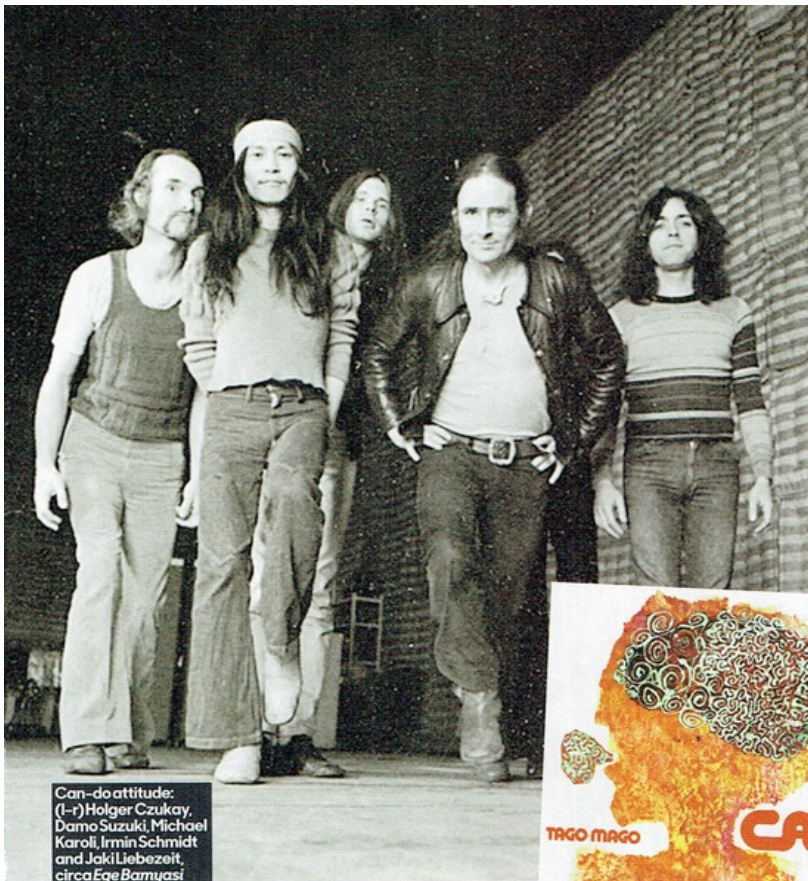
We found out that singing isn't that important. There are some wonderful things with Damo, but they were very badly recorded. It was really an endeavour. Our concerts were normally two sets with an intermission in between and every set was at least an hour, sometimes an hour and a half. So on what we'll release there will at least be a total of one set of a concert, so you can hear how we build it up, come down and go back. Because they have a real architecture, these sets, the good ones.

Considering your background as a respected classical musician and conductor, contacting Holger Czukay and forming Can in 1968 seems a very brave idea...

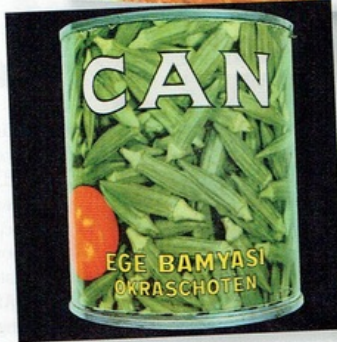
For me, it's less brave than totally natural. All these changes I have made – from classical and Fluxus and classical contemporary to Can and then from Can to writing an opera, *Gormenghast*, and now doing this – I don't see a difference for me. It's all contemporary music: I don't differentiate between classical, art and pop music. It's my kind of art and I have to express it, and from time to time change the way I am expressing myself. But it's still my emotions, my memory, my art. Of course, it's an adventure every time, but without that element it wouldn't be important to do it.

Talking of new adventures, what's different about these latest pieces?

They are totally different to *Klavierstücke*, absolutely different. They're both very much based on the field recordings that accompany them, but on *Klavierstücke* it was a little lake and reeds – now it's not sounds from nature at all! It's also quite a different style, because whenever you open up a new field like I did with *Klavierstücke*, which was something totally new in my work, then you start again from the beginning. Everything you have to say, you can say it again in a totally new and different way.



Can-do attitude: (l-r) Holger Czukay, Damo Suzuki, Michael Karoli, Irmin Schmidt and Jaki Liebeck, circa Ege Bamyasi



want to have single pieces from hundreds of concerts, because the real impression of how it was is if you hear, say, an hour and a half of one session, because then there is this dramaturgy, this architecture, of making an hour's music as one thing, which we sometimes succeeded to do. Sometimes it was totally different from anything we had done before, sometimes we would quote our existing songs.

Do these concerts come from different periods of Can?

The best I found were between 1974 and '75, when it was only us four, without any singer, after Damo had

"CAN WERE NEVER THE SAME"

René Tinner, the group's sound engineer, on their upcoming live release



W HEN I started to work with Can in 1973 I was 20. I was into the music that was around, from the Stones to The Beatles – English pop really – so I didn't understand what these guys were about. Because they never rehearsed, and no-one ever came in with a song and said, 'Let's do this...' The thing that attracted me was that they had their own studio, in their converted cinema. I didn't get to experience the castle; they had already moved out of there. When I started working with them they had an eight-channel

desk, which somebody built for them. Until they got hold of a multitrack recorder later, everything was mixed as it was performed. But strangely enough, some of those records sound better than the so-called high-quality records later on. "It was a democracy. There were always lots of discussions, but it was never about money. With other bands there were always discussions about money, but with Can that was never an issue. "For this upcoming live stuff, we listened to more than 60 concerts. There were a few we had to ditch because the quality was bad – there was never a feed from the mixing desk; it was all done with

a stereo pair of microphones in the hall somewhere. Some concerts were better than I remembered them. Now we have more than four hours of the best stuff, which we have just had mastered, but how much will be released I don't know. "It was never the same, each concert was totally different. And they were long concerts, two hours, three hours, depending on how they felt and on the response from the audience. I must pay tribute to Jaki Liebeck, because of the energy he put out at every concert. I couldn't name any other drummer who played like him. He never played wrong. It was always perfect."



And then there were four: (l-r) Liebeck, Schmidt, Karoli, Czukay



"At my age, you have a different relation to time", Schmidt in 2018



spend a lot of time in the studio. Whatever I do, René is always doing sound engineering – ever since he came to Can in '73, we have worked together. I spent some weeks with René recently listening to hours and hours of live tapes. Sometimes I just sit at the piano and play.

I've heard about a more esoteric side to you, talk of magic back in the Can days. Do you still dabble?

At the time it was nice to talk about that, but the time has gone. But it can happen that on a midsummer night I'm sitting on the terrace listening to the silence of the valley, and it's totally magic – it has nothing to do with any kind of esoteric blah-blah, but you can call it magic. It's absolutely wonderful and it's rich and you can dive into the silence. It's the same with music – that can be magic, can't it?

Yeah, and the music you've made still casts a spell – it seems like Can especially are more popular than ever now.

Yes. That's what I meant by contemporary art music. It's not pop in the sense of fashion. What we did was really trying to nail down the moment – if you are lucky, it can last. If you write a book, it could be something nice and entertaining, but five years later it has no interest any more. Obviously, that's not the case with what we did. Can's music tells something about the historical moment, and it even tells it very precisely; but it's consistent, so it can last. ☉

Nocturne is released on May 29 by Mute

DIANE ZILLMER

Twombly is nearer to what I'm doing at the moment than any other music.

Klavierstücke was recorded at your home studio. What's a normal day like for you in rural France?

I have a piano in my bedroom and one in the studio, and the studio is also a library with maybe 3,000 books. They are good for the acoustics! I read a lot; it's one of my favourite occupations. Sometimes I take a walk through the valley, or I have a swim in summer daily. I have to make sure there is enough wood for the fireplace or do the shopping. I cook a lot, too. And I

"WITH CAN, WE TRIED TO NAIL DOWN THE MOMENT"
IRMIN SCHMIDT

"THEY WENT THROUGH THE NIGHT"

Duncan Fallowell, lyricist for Can and Irmin Schmidt, recalls his early experiences with the group

LEFT university at 21 and got a pop column in *The Spectator* – I wanted



somebody to pay for me to go to Germany to investigate this band I'd discovered called Can. I'd tripped to them in my last term at Oxford, and I just had to meet them.

What struck me about their music was it had all the visceral thrill of heavy beat music, say, the Stones or The Velvet Underground, but they also obviously had an intense intellectual dimension. I just smelt it in the music – that they came out of the conservatoire rather than the streets.

"So I went to Cologne and Holger Czukay picked me up in a beaten-up Volkswagen Beetle. They played me some early tapes of *Tago Mago*, and I watched them in the studio. I instinctively knew not to jabber like an idiot. Michael [Karoli] paid me a great compliment after I'd spent

seven or eight hours with them for the first time – he said, 'You were OK. You were invisible, you're in.' And that was it, I could then just be there, I was on the inside. And I still am, in a way.

"I ended up being in the studio a lot with them, just sitting quietly in the corner, smoking a joint. I was as much part of the furniture as the speakers or the mixing desk. It's a wonderful experience sitting in a studio of that sort, where you don't have to watch the clock. It was much more studio as workshop.

"They would often play through the night, and we'd then go back

to Irmin's flat on the outskirts of Cologne for some sort of breakfast, maybe crash out or not – I was only there for a few days at a time, and I was very young, and you have the drugs to manage these eccentric schedules.

"I later gave titles to a lot of the tracks and albums they did, and I did a lot of lyrical work with Irmin. They're like family to me, and I love them dearly. Irmin's more than a brother – he's a soulmate."

Duncan Fallowell is currently working on a memoir of his experiences in the 1970s