

And All That Jazz

Carlos Mariá Solare went to Weimar to meet Manfred Bründl, soloist and professor of Germany's only autonomous jazz department.

MENTION THE BEAUTIFUL GERMAN city of Weimar and all kinds of musical and literary associations are conjured up. Johann Sebastian Bach was leader of the court orchestra here for a time. Franz Liszt lived here, too – from 1842 to 1861 – being appointed permanent Kapellmeister in 1848. The poets Goethe and Schiller were residents and – from 1889 to 1894 – so was Richard Strauss. You're never allowed to forget any of these famous figures when in the city: everything seems to be named after one or other of them. Weimar was also the site of the short-lived German Republic in the 1920s.

Given its history, you'd be forgiven for not immediately thinking of jazz in connection with the city. But such a state of

affairs is most certainly going to change in the immediate future. In the two years since Manfred Bründl's appointment as professor of jazz double bass and electric bass at the Franz Liszt Music Academy, fresh musical winds have been blowing through this beautiful Thuringian town.

Bründl and I meet at the Residenz-Café (affectionately known by locals as the 'Resi') and soon he waxes eloquently about his work at the Academy's Jazz department. It's the only one of its kind in Germany and Bründl is its dean.

'Although many other German colleges – like Berlin, Cologne, Freiburg and Hamburg – have jazz teachers, we are the only autonomous jazz department,' he explains. 'This gives us enormous advantages since we are free to plan our syllabus in the way in which

we think best. We also have a budget that enables us to afford professorships for all the principal subjects and instruments, as opposed to *Lehrbeauftragte* [teachers hired by the lesson]. We are a young faculty and get along very well with each other and the infrastructure at the Academy is exemplary: each room is equipped with keyboard, mixing console and computer which enables teacher and student to produce their own recordings to the highest standards. Indeed, a CD production is a required part of the syllabus,' Bründl points out, later enthusiastically demonstrating the computer programme Band in the Box.

The Department of Jazz and Popular Music (to give it its full name) concerns itself mainly with improvised music. Tradition-conscious Bründl sees himself, surprisingly perhaps at first, as part of a tradition reaching back to those masters – Weimar-sters – of improvisation, Liszt and Bach. Exchange with the classical departments of the Academy is actively encouraged and, as Bründl points out, some teachers in the jazz department come from a classical background: 'Professor Schizhik, our piano teacher, has just given a recital at the Munich Festival. But even within the jazz people we've got a wide spectrum – luckily. Not everybody comes from mainstream or Be-Bop! Crossover projects are always strongly encouraged, be it with classical music or with areas of world music like Pakistani or Indian folklore. We don't want our students to go through the world wearing eye-flaps; they must have as multi-faceted an education as possible. That's why we also have courses on the history of jazz in our syllabus.'

Bründl's own musical education encompassed both the jazz and the classical worlds. Born in 1959 into a musical family in the Bavarian city of Regensburg, at the age of 13 he was recruited for the bass section of his school orchestra.

Two years later he picked up the electric bass – working with the Regensburg jazz musician Richard Wiedamanin – and by the time he finished school had decided to become a professional jazz musician. In those days the only music college in Europe that offered a degree in jazz was in

'We don't want our students to go through the world wearing eye-flaps; they must have as multi-faceted an education as possible.'

Graz, Austria. There, Bründl studied classical bass with Professor Krawagna (a member of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra as well as Ludwig Streicher's assistant) and jazz with Wayne Darling, graduating in both fields in 1985.

By this time he was already active on the German jazz scene, where he worked with the likes of Albert Mangelsdorff and Heinz Sauer, both of them representative members of the 'Frankfurter Schule'. Bründl's first LP, *Metal Blossoms*, was cut in 1984 as a member of the Heinz-Sauer-Quartett while he was still officially a student. A number of world-wide tours, sponsored by the Goethe Institute followed. Bründl looks back fondly on those times: 'Nowadays it has become much more difficult to get engagements at the more prestigious jazz centres; unions can keep foreign musicians from appearing at festivals in America or

England. German unions are less strict and this puts German musicians at a disadvantage since we often cannot appear at our own festivals.'

In spite of these restrictions, at one time Bründl was giving up to 120 concerts a year. In 1989 he started teaching (jazz and classic) at both the University and the Conservatoire in Mainz. He still commutes to Mainz twice a month from Weimar.

'Now I have just four bass students in Mainz, plus some ensemble work,' he says, 'and I can combine them quite well with my work in Weimar, where I teach eight students. I started in Weimar as a substitute in October 1996, was made a professor in January 1997 and became a dean a month later. I don't think I can complain!'

Being a dean of the relatively young jazz department involves huge volumes of paper work, though, and Bründl bemoans the fact that he hardly has any time left for his own playing or composing, not to mention his family.

'Just now it is very time-consuming,' he sighs, 'because I am concerned with building up partnerships with foreign academies. I want to establish a common system of credits that will enable students to spend one or two terms in, say, Rotterdam, London or Helsinki. Nor do I take just European academies into consideration: contacts are being made with American universities like Miami, the jazz department of which has some 200 students.'

With 60 students, Bründl's own department is quite small by comparison; it has to turn down at least 90 of the 100 students who apply for admission every term.

'I am very concerned with giving my students an all-round formation,' Bründl adds. 'Meditation and breathing exercises are as much a part of it as is the relationship of music to other arts. It is just not enough for me to have them slave away at the double bass. I learn a lot comparing notes with colleagues and not just bass players; cellist Gerhard Mantel's book, *Practising the Cello*, has been a great source of inspiration' (Mantel is a professor at the Frankfurt academy). Bründl is adamant that his students should learn to work on their own as soon as possible and

sees it as his mission to provide them with the wherewithal. His own bass method, with the working title *A New Approach to Playing the Double- and Electric Bass*, has been many years in the writing. As soon as Bründl gets round to putting the finishing touches to it, the method will be published by Schott in Mainz.

Composing and arranging are also an important part of the Academy's syllabus. Aspiring students are even expected to play a piece of their own at the admission examinations. Bründl sees it that students get plenty of

Bründl is adamant that his students should learn to work on their own as soon as possible and sees it as his mission to provide them with the wherewithal.

public exposure; examinations regularly take the form of concerts at one of the many jazz cellars in Weimar: 'This way they can try out their compositional and improvisatory skills before an audience but without the pressure of the real thing; later, in real life, you have just one chance and, if you don't make it, you will hardly have a second one.'

For his own compositions, Bründl has set himself very high stakes. Not for him the 'usual jazz standard, consisting of 16 or 32 bars, which are then repeated; if the double bass gets a look-in at all it is near the end of the improvisatory section, just before the percussion break; then you repeat the theme and that's it. A whole concert following this recipe can be deadly. There is also the danger of falling back on the same patterns again and again, thus creating all-purpose improvisations that could fit every theme without being actually born of it.'

For his latest CD, *Farblichklänge [Sounds of Coloured Light]*, Bründl turned to the expressionist poetry of Gottfried Benn for inspiration: 'It is, if you will, a kind of song cycle,' Bründl explains. 'In it I have collaborated with both jazz and classical musicians (the other bass player, Michinori Bunya, is a former prize-winner of the Munich competition, on the jury of which he now serves) and, for that reason, most of it was actually written down, the improvised bits being agreed beforehand. The CD also includes a composition by Teppo Hauta-aho, *Kadenza*, for solo double bass, which has become part of the instrument's classical repertoire.'

Such a many-sided vision sums up Bründl's whole approach to music and his life in Weimar. With the town busy preparing for its role as Cultural Capital of Europe next year (coinciding with Goethe's 250th birthday), the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and, not least, its jazz department is looking forward to contributing significantly to the celebrations. Bründl is confident that by then his duties as dean will have settled down enough to allow him and his quartet – percussionist Jo Thönes, saxophonist Hugh Read and Achim Kaufmann on piano – to participate actively in the musical life of one of Germany's most historically musical cities. **DB**

