

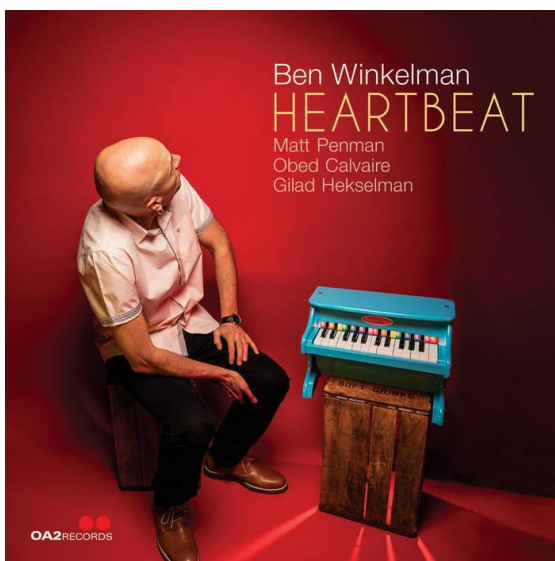


BEN WINKELMAN: HEARTBEAT

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: OA2 Records

Personnel: Ben Winkelman (piano, rhodes), Gilad Hekselman (guitar), Matt Penman (bass), Obed Calvaire (drums).



I reviewed Ben Winkelman's fifth album *Balance* for *The Australian* in May, 2019, and drew attention to the challenge which his music presents to the listener. It has been a pleasure to return to that album, and compare it to Winkelman's sixth album *Heartbeat*. Even if the latest album in many ways offers us more of the same, I feel it has given me a more sophisticated understanding of how to listen to Winkelman's music.

To illustrate the way in which that music can be heard I refer to a review of *Heartbeat*, published in a recent edition of the Music Trust's *Loudmouth*, by Chris Cody, an Australian jazz pianist and composer who spent many years in Paris, and is now based in Sydney. He described elements of the music in *Praise*, the opening track on *Heartbeat*, as follows:

African syncopated rhythms, odd time signatures or meter... uneven phrase lengths, different beat groupings in 9/4, tempo changes, and harmonic shifts up a step...

In other words, a challenge. Nonetheless, I hasten to add, I still found that track attractive and satisfying. There is an overweening complexity at the heart of Winkelman's music based on, for example, the absence often of straight-ahead time-feels; a liking for odd time signatures; inner rhythmic structures within the compositions which are articulated by all musicians with breathtaking virtuosity; and the approach of double bassist Matt Penman, a virtuosic proponent of the "broken time" approach of many contemporary double bassists.



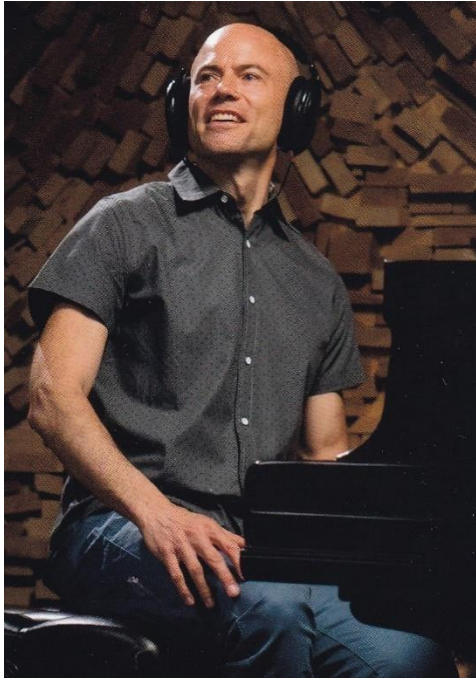
Matt Penman, pictured during the recording of "Heartbeat": a virtuosic proponent of the "broken time" approach of many contemporary double bassists... PHOTO CREDIT ANNA YATSKEVICH

Still, the listener's task I feel is not to be overawed but to come to the music – to look past such complexity, and allow oneself to connect with the music's inner beauty, which is substantial. In a sense Winkelman's music is beyond analysis – I feel it's best to allow it to sink into one's soul. A reviewer who wishes the music to be other than what it is, is in the wrong business.

While *Balance* was somewhat dark, I feel that *Heartbeat* has a more melodic, optimistic feel about it. Winkelman wrote the nine compositions on *Heartbeat* during the first months of the Covid pandemic when New York was notoriously the worst affected city in the United States. No doubt this was an anxious time, but it was also simultaneously a period of hope and optimism for Winkelman, as he and his wife were awaiting the arrival of their first child.

Winkelman is accompanied once again by the two excellent musicians who played so well on *Balance*: New Zealand expatriate bassist Matt Penman, and US drummer Obed Calvaire. On *Heartbeat* they are joined by Israeli guitarist Gilad Hekselman.

Needless to say all musicians on this album play with typical New York brilliance and intensity. The album includes nine of Winkelman's splendid compositions, with Hekselman playing on only the first three tracks and the last two, so that the four tracks which contain Winkelman's ongoing explorations of the trio format – they provide for me most of the album's interest - are grouped together, giving the album a strong symmetry.



Winkelman: While “Balance” was somewhat dark, “Heartbeat” has a more melodic, optimistic feel about it... PHOTO CREDIT ANNA YATSKEVICH



US drummer Obed Calvaire: playing with typical New York brilliance and intensity... PHOTO CREDIT ANNA YATSKEVICH

The four trio numbers are: *Wandering*, a lovely treatment of the slow ballad in 3/4; *Isolation*, perhaps the most abstract piece on the album, with a pulse which is exceedingly difficult to decipher, even if it is in 4/4, given that this is the most extreme example of Penman's "broken time" approach on the bass; *The Wonky Waltz*, the outcome of the pianist's quirky sense of humour but expedited in 5/4 courtesy of his extraordinary virtuosity at the keyboard; and *The Plague*, another moody ballad, this time in slow 4/4. Needless to say, the strong time in Winkelman's playing effectively ameliorates those passages where the pulse appears to be ambiguous.



Israeli guitarist Gilad Hekselman: playing on only the first three tracks and the last two... PHOTO CREDIT ANNA YATSKEVICH

Winkelman, born in Oregon but raised in Melbourne, moved to New York in 2010. I have no idea of how he now rates in the pecking order of brilliant jazz pianists that no doubt are everywhere in New York. But I would be surprised if there is any pianist active in the Big Apple who is more accomplished than Winkelman, nor more interesting in the ways he is redefining the art of the jazz piano trio.

I can vouch for the fact that each time you listen to Winkelman he unerringly takes you to another place where you haven't been before. What more do we ask of jazz improvisation?

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, Review of Ben Winkelman Trio album "Balance", The Weekend Australian, May 4, 2019 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-21>