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EIVIND BUENE

PERSONAL BEST

A nest can be a refuge, especially the one made for you by someone else. When Eivind Buene sings Brahms, as he already did with Schubert, the musical setting feels familiar. Anyone acquainted with classical music has likely been here before, perhaps even often enough that the nest—admittedly existentially unsettling—which Brahms constructed near the end of his life with the *Four Serious Songs*, may have become a kind of home, a part of one's own biography, one's own identity. Is this a new retro comfort? Or kitsch, if kitsch means relying on the tried–and–true emotional registers without taking risks?

It's been not too long, yet still three-quarters of a century, since New Music declared a "zero hour" to escape the horror of both personal and collective pasts. This impulse, originating mainly in Germany, was so absolute—and perhaps so fascinating in its absoluteness—that it swept even the northernmost edges of Europe along with it. Concepts like "homeland" and "tradition" became as heavily burdened as melodies, tonal structures, or surrendering control over one's emotions. The inherited nest was contaminated, down to the last intricately woven twig. Much time has passed since then. The collective trauma has lost some of its grip over generations, and New Music itself has aged. It now has a past and a history. Lives have been lived in this time.

Trio Accanto was founded in 1994 by a pianist, a saxophonist, and a percussionist who commissioned new works for this unusual instrumentation in contemporary music. Since then, the trio has premiered around 40 compositions. When pianist Yukiko Sugawara stepped down, she was succeeded by Nicolas Hodges; starting in 2025, Stefan Wirth has taken over his role. Despite these personnel changes, Accanto has forged its own identity, shaped as much by its members as by its shared repertoire. In *Personal Best*, Eivind Buene invites saxophonist Marcus Weiss, percussionist Christian Dierstein, and Nicolas Hodges to reflect on their individual histories—musically and verbally. As they put vinyl records on during this six-part trio portrait from 2021, their voices play from conversations with the composer, one after another. Having previously guided the computer assistant Siri through orchestral history in *A Posthuman Guide to the Orchestra* (2018), Buene now has the trio's members speak for themselves: about early dreams of composing, boarding schools, the practice of practice, the courage to make mistakes, and their own bodies.

These three original-sound collages, in which Eivind Buene transforms key moments from each performer's story, is woven into the live music, electronically transformed with live electronics from the Experimentalstudio in Freiburg. In *Christian's Collage*, meditative bell sounds gradually blend with piano. *Marcus' Collage* is dominated by an expansive saxophone solo, featuring the fragile multiphonics he masters so well, while *Nic's Collage* resonates with the raw anger of the postwar avant-garde. The passage of individual and collective time is not just central to this Trio—it's a thematic core. For instance, the live use of turntables serves both as playback device and theatrical prop. The vinyl record alone signifies a journey into the past. Eivind Buene refers to this as "telescopic listening." The focus shifts from the present into the recent or even more distant past.

In *Personal Best*, we witness a trio that has written more history than it is likely to write in the future. This isn't a judgment, just a matter of arithmetic. It can look back on decades of musical and performer history. When

Eivind Buene began to look not only forward toward a radically new future in his work, but also back, he was still in his mid-thirties: “From 2009 to 2012, I was composing, but mostly engaged in developing new and different ideas. I read a lot of critical theory and art theory, which became very important to me. Theorists like Hal Foster inspired me, especially his book *Return of the Real*. During that time, I became increasingly interested in media archaeology. I opened myself up to the past, but with a critical eye and particular attention to outdated technologies—including the orchestra, a Fender Rhodes, the Minimoog synthesizer from the late 1960s, or the vinyl record.” (*Interview with Torsten Möller, SWR, 2020*).

This form of musical archaeology has nothing to do with academic research. These artistic inquiries, both self-directed and outward-looking, have more the character of personal affirmations in which social conditions may also be reflected. They explore the relationships between performers, works, and historical moments, and bring them to the concert stage. There, the performers do not merely act as conveyors of an artistic message, they become performers of themselves. Reality TV in the 1990s may have provided trashy models for this, but parallels also exist in the autobiographical novels of Karl Ove Knausgård or documentary theatre. Eivind Buene is not alone in his approach within the music world. Composers such as Georges Aperghis (*Situations, une convivialité musicale*, 2013; *Lauf des Lebens*, 2020) or Lars Petter Hagen (*The Neue Vokalsolisten Notebook*, 2011) have developed concepts in which musicians are more than highly skilled yet replaceable interpreters. These works make individuals—with their bodies, instruments, voices, thoughts, and shared histories—the subject of the art. This is a reality-based art, far from time-less, as it draws no clear line between the score and the actual human being interpreting it. Eivind Buene himself calls it *embodied history*.

In his adaptations of *Four Serious Songs* by Johannes Brahms, it is the composer himself who continues the Romantic song tradition using his own voice and body. As in *Schubert Lounge* (2012), where he accompanied himself on a Fender Rhodes, Buene also takes the stage as a singer in *Serious Songs*. In doing so, he weaves his own story—and that of the 20th century—into the songs. He sings like a pop musician or singer–songwriter, playing with the aura of authentic self-taught expression and the microphone that paved the way for pop vocalism. The piano accompaniment is left to Nicolas Hodges.

As an arranger, Buene sometimes stays close to the original structure, but often keeps only a loose connection. It is primarily the pop aesthetic that drives the divergence from the original. In covering the Four *Serious Songs*, the stark contrasts Brahms composed disappear. Not coincidentally, the word “composing” (Komponieren) means “putting together.” The *Serious Songs*, sung in English, follow a much smoother flow—seemingly born of improvisation—gliding past many of the abrupt mood shifts of the original.

Just as *Personal Best* partly blurs, and partly only appears to blur, the distinction between interpreter and private individual (after all, the Trio itself is a form of staging), and just as the pop singing in *Serious Songs* suggests maximum authenticity: both examples reveal how Eivind Buene plays with the “fourth wall” that separates art from everyday life on stage. He does so not ironically or with deconstructive coldness, but likely out of a desire to overcome alienation. The path that led to *Serious Songs* began with reflections on chamber music—music that, before the invention of the phonograph, could only be heard when someone played it: sometimes on the big stage, but more often at home or in intimate settings. When Buene’s Schubert and now Brahms arrangements bypass the authority of the professional song interpreter, he brings back imperfection and vulnerability to art music—paired, however, with pop’s commercially successful and proven promises of authenticity. He walks a fine line between kitsch and experiment. His adaptations satisfy longing—and question it openly on stage. How new does a nest need to be? And what experiments can it withstand? Both *Serious Songs* and *Personal best* could be fruitfully accompanied by Adorno’s sharpest aphorisms. After all, Adorno also left many questions unanswered when he ended his essay *Vers une musique informelle* with the sentence: “The aim of every artistic utopia today is to make things in ignorance of what they are.”

Martina Seeber



CHRISTIAN DIERSTEIN EIVIND BUENE MARCUS WEISS NICOLAS HODGES

EIVIND BUENE

Eivind Buene studied at the Norwegian Academy of Music from 1992 to 1998, and the following two years he was composer in residence with the Oslo Sinfonietta. He is living and working in Oslo and is currently professor of composition at the Norwegian Academy of Music. Buene has collaborated with a wide array of international ensembles, orchestras and festivals, with commissions from among others Ensemble Intercontemporain, Donaueschinger Musiktage, Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Musikfabrik and Berliner Philharmoniker. He has an extensive discography, including Possible Cities/Essential Landscapes, that was awarded a Norwegian Grammy.

Apart from writing music for soloists, ensembles and orchestras, Buene has also engaged in collaborations with improvising musicians, in the cross-section between classical notation and improvisation. In the project *Schubert Lounge* he regularly performs his renderings of Schubert songs re–imagined as singer/songwriter-performances, with Buene as a singer with a Fender Rhodes and different ensembles. In addition to music, Buene has written critique and essays, and he made his literary debut with the novel *Enmannsorkester* in 2010. He has published five novels and two collections of essays, and is also exploring hybrid forms between music and text in large–scale orchestral works such as *Blue Mountain, for two actors and orchestra* (2014), *A Posthuman Guide to the Orchestra* (2018) and *I dag og i morgen* (2023).

TRIO ACCANTO

Trio Accanto was formed in 1994. This group of three internationally prominent soloists bound together by a unique approach to chamber music has been praised for its "mastery" and "world-class interpretations". The scoring of saxophone, piano and percussion is common in jazz, but was a rarity in classical music (leading to the description "a jazz trio that does not play jazz") until Trio Accanto turned this situation around, stimulating more than one hundred composers to write new works over the years. Major figures such as Mark Andre, Georges Aperghis, Aldo Clementi, Michael Finnissy, Beat Furrer, Vinko Globokar, Georg Friedrich Haas, Toshio Hosokawa, Evan Johnson, Helmut Lachenmann, Misato Mochizuki, Brice Pauset, Rolf Riehm, Wolfgang Rihm, Rebecca Saunders, Salvatore Sciarrino, Martin Smolka, Christian Wolff and Walter Zimmermann have contributed to the trio's repertoire, along with a substantial list of younger composers from around the world.

Trio Accanto has performed at festivals in Donaueschingen, Witten, Darmstadt, Hanover, Cologne, Munich, Freiburg, Huddersfield, Basel and Saarbrücken, as well as at Eclat (Stuttgart), Munich Biennale, Maerzmusik (Berlin), Salzburg Festival, Wien Modern, Tage für Neue Musik (Zurich), and further afield in Madrid, Seville, Chicago, Viitasaari (Finland) and at the Takefu Festival (Japan).

The trio's CD recordings have appeared on Kairos, HatHut, Edition Zeitklang, Assai, Verso and Wergo. Their series of recordings on Wergo include *Funambules* (2016), featuring music by Aperghis, Riehm, Schöllhorn and Prins, *Songs and Poems* (2018), featuring music by Clementi, Dohmen, Rihm, Thomalla and Zimmermann, *Other stories* (2020) featuring music by Finnissy, Kuwabara, Lachenmann, Schüttler and Smolka, a disc of music by Christian Wolff (2021), featuring the half–hour *Trio IX—Accanto*, along with a group of recent *Exercises*, and finally *Out into the open* (2026), featuring music by Furrer, Pauset, Mochizuki and Saunders. In 2022 the trio also released Evan Johnson's *Plan and section of the same reservoir* on the label Another Timbre, recorded after a series of performances in Autumn 2021.

SWR EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO

The EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO considers itself as gateway between compositional idea and technical realisation, inviting composers and musicians to realise their works in a creative discourse with the specialized equip–ment and the team of the EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO; music information scientists, sound designers, sound–engineers and sound–directors. Apart from creating new works together with the composers, the EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO also performs as an ensemble and is regularly invited worldwide. After 50 years of presence in the international new music business, it has established itself as leading ensemble for performing ambitious compositions with live–electronics and gives concerts regularly at almost all important festivals, as well as many well–known music theatres.

Outstanding compositions in music history that were created at the EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO were created there by well–known composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono, whereas Nono produced almost all works of his late period in close relationship with the studio and its team there. Since its first performance 1984, his "tragedia dell'ascolto" *Prometeo* has been realized through the EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO more than 90 times, and can be called a milestone in music history of the 20th century that points the way. Other Outstanding music figures who can look back on a long term relationship with the EXPERIMENTALSTUDIO are Mauricio Pollini, Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Gidon Kremer, Carolin and Jörg Widmann, Irvin Arditti and Roberto Fabbriciani.

The recent generation of composers is represented by names such as Mark Andre, Chaya Czernowin, José María Sánchez-Verdú and Georg Friedrich Haas. Joachim Haas has been director of the Experimentalstudio since 2022.

MUSICIANS

Eivind Buene;
Vocals

Trio Accanto:
Marcus Weiss;
Saxophones and voice
Nicolas Hodges;
Piano and voice
Christian Dierstein;
Percussion and voice

SWR Experimentalstudio;
Michael Acker, sound direction

CREDITS

Recorded in Schlossbergsaal, Swr Studio, Freiburg, 19.—23. February 2024
Producer:
Vegard Landaas
Excecutive Producer:
Eivind Buene
Balance Engineer:
Daniel Miska and Roland Schneider
Live electronics and mix (*Personal Best*): Michael Acker
Editing and mix (*Serious Songs*): Manuel Braun
Mastering:
Thomas Wolden
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Eivind Buene [1973]

1—6: PERSONAL BEST

1. Christian's Collage 04:26
2. I Saw Him Bring People to Tears 05:23
3. Marcus' Collage 03:56
4. The Body is Not a Mistake 03:40
5. Nic's Collage 04:14
6. It's Already Quite a Long Time 05:11

7—13: SERIOUS SONGS

7. We Try 04:07
8. Interlude I 01:34
9. Under the Sun 02:35
10. Interlude II 01:19
11. O Death 03:41
12. Interlude III 02:43
13. Riddles, Mirrors, Silent Rooms 02:57