



Photo Credit: Ken Weiss

CHRISTOPH
IRNIGER
INTERVIEW
EMOTION
IN MUSIC -
SEEKING THE
PERFECT LINE
BY KEN WEISS

Saxophonist/clarinetist Christoph Irniger (born October 30, 1979 in Zurich, Switzerland) studied at the Zurich University of Arts Music Pedagogy and at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts Performance Jazz in the early to mid noughts. In the following years, he regularly spent time absorbing the Jazz scenes of Berlin and New York and taking lessons from leading artists such as Dave Liebman, Mark Turner and Ari Hoenig. In addition to teaching at Zurich's School of Music, he has collaborated with musicians such as Nasheet Waits, Dave Douglas, Dan Weiss, Ohad Talmor, Nils Wogram, Christian Weber and Ziv Ravitz. The Swiss-based Irniger leads a trio with bassist Raffaele Bossard and drummer Ziv Ravitz, which has just released a new recording Octopus on Intakt Records, and a quintet called Pilgrim, which released one of 2014's strongest recordings (Italian Circus Story, Intakt Records). This interview took place on May 29, 2015 at the Princeton Public Library. I found Irniger to be very serious about his art and his burning desire to create a spot for his music was very evident. He was staying in Brooklyn for a couple months at the time, something he tries to do often in order to immerse himself into the American Jazz scene and draw inspiration from it. He's certainly someone to check out if you are not familiar with his work.

Cadence: You've made a number of very strong recordings on European labels. How difficult has it been for you to build a reputation in America while living in Switzerland?

Christoph Irniger: My reputation in America is actually not [large] because I'm not playing here much. We're still fighting with this issue of getting the possibility to play here, the permission to work here which is not given without the necessary work visa, so my goal is meeting and playing with a lot of people here. Yeah, my records are out in America so I hope it gets a little easier to play here at one point or I will have to get this visa which is a really difficult process.

Cadence: You've been able to spend time in New York since your early career but you don't often play in the States. How have you been able to travel to New York so often and what contacts have you made?

Irniger: I'm pretty lucky that my grandparents, when they died, gave me some money and I didn't spend it when I was a teenager, as my cousins did,

so I have the opportunity to come to New York, spend time and play as much as I can and soak up all the energy of this city. I would say this is my musical home. I've made some contacts here, musicians who I really like. People like Ohad Talmor who has introduced me to a lot of really great people and musicians like drummer Jeff Davis, Michael Bates and Jesse Stacken.

Cadence: *Do you come to New York to inspire yourself to write?*

Irniger: Actually, Ohad Talmor asked me, "What do you want?" This question may sound really simple but I think it's the reason why I'm here because I have the feeling that sometimes when I just stay too long in Zurich or one place where everything is familiar for me, that I lose my focus or I just burn out in a way. For that reason, New York was always a good spot to come back to and really search for what I want in music and it turns out to be actually also what I really want in life because all is connected in the end.

Cadence: *And what is it that you want in life?*

Irniger: It's a path. I can't really say but it's not only the music, it's also my family which is really important and life itself. For me, it doesn't work to be a jack of all trades, I want to try to really focus on something specific that I might really develop a message. That's what I'm looking for. It definitely lies in music and it lies somewhere between composition and improvisation.

Cadence: *Nasheet Waits is one American artist who you do play with. He's in No Reduce, your collaborative quartet, along with two other Swiss musicians. He's one of the busiest drummers on the scene, how did you get Waits into that band?*

Irniger: This was first an idea between three Swiss guys who were friends and in New York and we decided to record something but we needed a drummer and we decided to ask Nasheet because he is a really important musician to all three of us. He's on some of the most important recordings for me. We just asked him to do the recording, which is always easy because you pay the musician. We did the recording at his recording studio and he liked the recording so we started to tour. We've had three tours so far.

Cadence: *You've been staying in Brooklyn for the past month. What Jazz shows have you caught during that time that have impressed you?*

Irniger: I saw the Kris Davis Quartet with Tony Malaby, Michael Formanek and Tom Rainey at Cornelia Street Café. They just improvised from the beginning and it was a blast. I also liked Michael Formanek's Resonator with Chris Speed, Tyshawn Sorey, Loren Stillman and Angelica Sanchez.

Cadence: *What do you find most odd about American culture?*

Irniger: That's a good question because there's a lot different and often when something is different the first thing you think is that it's stupid, but on the other hand, it's just different. Every culture has its good things and its bad things. Maybe this is totally stupid but there are things here that are just not really effective like how they spread the mail. They have these little mail carts that they wheel along and they are just totally inefficient, and when it rains, everything gets wet. It's really funny, I have to take a picture. Also, what I don't really get is that you hear firefighters all the time, or ambulances. In Switzerland, I never hear the ambulance. We're living next to the firefighters in Brooklyn and three to four times a day they go out and come back and not-

ing happened. I don't know, I just don't get the process there.

Cadence: *What strikes you as being different regarding Jazz in America versus Jazz in Switzerland, or perhaps Europe in general?*

Irrniger: I would say that how musicians play Jazz in New York is less focused on the detail, they just jump in. It's more "no risk, no fun" kind of vibe. Often I go to a session [in New York] and everybody brings their music and they just throw down what they just wrote that morning and say, "Let's try it. One, two, three, let's go!" In Switzerland, it's more like, "Maybe I have a piece here and maybe we could try it?" And then we explain it for half an hour and then maybe we practice a part then but we don't play it because it's not finished. The way music is approached in New York is just much more relaxed and it doesn't have to be perfect all the time. I think in Switzerland, nobody is throwing out something which is not finished. I really like the approach that I've learned here and that's really the thing I want to take over to Switzerland. Whenever I come here, I realize that I have to just jump into the music.

Cadence: *What is the current state of creative improvisational Jazz in Switzerland?*

Irrniger: There are a lot of things happening. I can mainly talk about Zurich but there are a lot of different scenes in the different cities but we're not well connected, especially with the French part. In Zurich, there's a good younger movement going on around some people like alto player Tobias Meier. He has his own label called Wide Ear Records where he releases records of young Swiss artists. There are a lot of good people living in Zurich such as bassist Christian Weber, viola player Frantz Loriot, who lived in Brooklyn for a long time, drummer Lucas Niggli, who makes his own festival and series. I also run my own series. We also have Intakt Records and the Unerhoert Jazz Festival and the Taktlos Jazz Festival.

Cadence: *In our communications leading up to this interview, you described yourself as a only child in a middleclass family, raised by a patent attorney and a psychologist who always took good care of you and that going out into the world was very intense for you. Would you talk about that?*

Irrniger: I think it's difficult to say if habits and the way you feel are really coming from your childhood, but I remember as late teenager leaving the protected family life was quite a trip for me and I was very emotional about new things that occur in my life. I don't have these barriers that other people have about emotions. So emotions, whether they're good or bad, for me are always really intense which is a great thing on one hand but it can also be a pain in the ass.

Cadence: *In America, often when one announces their intentions of seeking a career in music, their family is alarmed and fear that it's not a sustainable career financially. Is it different in Switzerland?*

Irrniger: As far as I know, most of my friends who are musicians didn't have problems with that. In my case, I've always had the support from my family. They've been really proud. In my family there's always been a solid financial background so there's never been the thinking that you must have a job where you make a lot of money. I'm very thankful for that. I know that this is not for granted.

Interview Christoph Irrniger



Photo Credit: Ken Weiss

Cadence: *You get State support also?*

Irrniger: Yes, that's really a positive in Switzerland that we get this, but it doesn't say that you have a lot of gigs. You still have to work for that.

Cadence: *You've had the opportunity to study with many great artists including Dave Liebman, Mark Turner, Ari Hoenig, Enrico Rava, Kurt Rosenwinkel and Nils Wogram. Comment on a few of your teachers and what areas of music and life lessons they've helped you with.*

Irrniger: I studied at the Jazz school in Lucerne and I played in the workshop of Nils Wogram where we played his music. I practiced his music ahead of time for the first lesson and thought I was prepared enough for it, but after we played for ten minutes, he stopped and said, "Man, you should really practice this stuff." That was the first lesson. Nils expected us to be prepared right from the beginning. I knew then that it was now starting to get real. That was a really good lesson about discipline and that at some point the joking stops. At some point music is a serious thing and you should take it seriously. If you are going to do it, you have to do it right. Maybe this is kind of a German approach? He's a good friend of mine. We have kids of the same age and we spend a lot of time together. Kurt Rosenwinkel taught me the same thing – that music is a serious study. We started by just playing standards and he didn't say a lot, but he did say, "As soon as somebody is counting, there's some kind of seriousness here." I had just one lesson with Mark Turner and it was just great to meet him because he was such an important musician for me. [Over the course of] three years, the most solos I transcribed were by him. I really checked him out intensely. I spent two hours at his home in Brooklyn and I had lasagna afterwards with him. I would name Ari Hoenig as my last really important teacher. After school I was always going around with the same question of where to find my spot in the music. How can I find my spot in the music? If music is really complicated and fast and tight, the spot is smaller than if you play slow or if it's free improvised, but where can I find my spot to play and also tell the band where I want to go? I read your interview of Pierre Favre and he says about Tony Malaby that he has this strength to build a line and nobody can turn it the other way because it's so strong and clear and I think this was my question that I asked other people. Ari Hoenig helped me with the rhythmical aspect of where is my spot. It was really important for me, not only for playing really tight and rhythmical clear music, but also to play free improvised music.

Cadence: *It's interesting that you sought out American drummer Ari Hoenig since the Swiss are best known for their excellent drummers.*

Irrniger: After my schooling, I didn't seek out Swiss Jazz musicians as a place to get more lessons. I see Switzerland, and all those musicians, as a place where I can play and get the information by playing, but here in New York, there are certain guys who have something that I can't get by playing because I'm not part of the scene, so I have to go and ask them about that. Ari Hoenig is just a master of this rhythmically tight playing with all those metrical modulations in rhythm which I find really interesting.

Cadence: *So when you're choosing a teacher are you going to them with the goal of improving a specific segment of your playing or just experiencing*

what they have to teach you?

Irrniger: When I go to a musician there is always something specific. If you don't have the right questions it might not really serve you. Sometimes it's also nice to get to know somebody, but if you don't have a question, the energy can turn down.

Cadence: There's not a lot of information about you on the Internet, at least not in English, but I did find a good quote of yours. You said, "As a musician, you don't need to constantly try to reinvent yourself. If things are right, the music will reinvent the musician." Would you elaborate on that?

Irrniger: I believe that the music is really strong, that it's there, and it's on me to search for the music, and hopefully, I will find it. If it's not happening, I just didn't find the music, but the music is there. If you play with the right people, the music is there, you just have to search for it.

Cadence: You also have an interesting concept regarding Jazz and improvisation and how they act as a mirror of how you can or should communicate in society.

Irrniger: Jazz is a kind of mirror of society and that's what's really nice about it. If you improvise together, it's like in life. You can go together the same way or you can decide not to with your companion. You can try to make it easy for someone who plays with you or you can try to make it difficult. You can be nice, you can be rude. It's just like how we communicate in society.

Cadence: On your website and your emails, you include your logo which appears to be a black owl. What's the significance of the bird?

Irrniger: Well, that's what I'm asking myself every day, if I should leave it or I keep it. It's an owl, it's not a bird, which would be a bit much, there is a Bird already. But it's an owl which is kind of sweet. I'm in the middle of the process trying to find out what this owl is for so I can't really say anything about that! [Laughs] It was actually the idea of a graphic lady, a designer.

Cadence: Maybe you'll put your face on the owl?

Irrniger: [Laughs] Yeah, maybe.

Cadence: One of the striking features of your compositions is that they are not of the typical theme and variation format. The listener is taken on a journey, there's a story going on. How do you hear music?

Irrniger: I actually hear music as different melodies, so it's not only the melody itself, it's also the bass, the rhythm, and the harmony. They are all kind of melodies for me, and I try to mix this up so that they really appear as outstanding melodies which could work for themselves. There's such a rich tradition of songs. There's so many great songs in the Jazz tradition, and also in rock and pop, so for my music, I try to find other ways than that melody and accompaniment. I try to find other ways to mix it up and to have everybody play melodies which have the same value. So if you listen to my compositions, there are compositions with melody but there are also a lot of compositions where you can't really say which is the melody, or you hear different melodies.

Cadence: Although you're classified as an avant-garde Jazz player, your recordings with your quintet and trio exposes music that's all-inclusive. It's steeped in the Jazz tradition but also includes rock, classical and folk elements.

Irrniger: I see myself basically as a Jazz musician but my roots are in the

music of the '90s because that's when I was a teenager. All the pop and the rock of the '90s, like Nirvana, AC/DC and Michael Jackson, are really deep in my personal way of dealing with Jazz. And I see Jazz as not a music with a certain type of sound or aesthetic. I see it more as a way of doing music. So Jazz for me, is the music that [pauses to consult his Swiss-to-English app on his cellphone] assimilates the music of its time. Jazz is more of how to play music, not what music.

Cadence: *Your recordings tend to be centered on inspirational themes such as a New Zealand volcano and Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal. You just released a new trio recording called Octopus [Intakt Records, 2015], what's the impetus behind that?*

Irniger: It's actually totally boring. I was showing the piece to a saxophone friend of mine and he said I should call it "Octopus" and that's how I named that song. And because I liked that word so much, I just named the recording Octopus so there is actually no deep story behind this.

Cadence: *In the Octopus liner notes, you state that, "I try to make the band sound more like a pop band." How and why is that?*

Irniger: I mean the saxophone trio is a really raw format. If you think about Saxophone Colossus by [Sonny] Rollins, it's really raw. It has this really earthy quality with these three instruments. I try to find a way to let it sound a little more round, a little more together as one. Not that I don't like the other trios, I adore saxophone trios, but for my trio, I search to do it more round, and it happens also because I use these three instruments, as I said before, as melody instruments. It's not that the bass player plays a bassline and I'm playing the melody and the drummer is playing a rhythm, I try to get everybody to play a melody so that we fit together. We have kind of a counterpoint in a Classical sense, so that it comes together.

Cadence: *I included your quintet recording Italian Circus Story [Intakt Records] in my 2014 Top Ten CD list. What's the inspiration attached to that recording and what does the title mean?*

Irniger: The title was inspired by a recording called Four Stories by American saxophone player Matt Renzi, who lives in Italy. It's a free improvised CD, which I really adore, and that's why I call it "Italian Story." And "Circus" came from a concert I saw of Loren Stillman and his band Bad Touch, which was one of my favorite concerts of last year, it blew me away totally. I wrote the piece "Italian Circus Story" the day after Loren Stillman played and it was kind of these emotions that came up from that concert. I felt they were kind of circus emotion. I can't tell why, but the word circus came to my mind to describe these emotions. It has some magic behind it and the melody line behind it from Matt Renzi. The piece "Italian Circus Story" became kind of the heart of the recording so we named the album Italian Circus Story.

Cadence: *Each member of your quintet, which you've named Pilgrim, comes from a different section of Switzerland which is significant because Swiss Jazz musicians have traditionally been greatly influenced by their closest neighboring country, be it Germany, France or Italy. Do you find that still to be the case?*

Irniger: Mentally, we are influenced for sure by our big neighbors but

Switzerland is so small, if you are a Jazz musician, you meet each other. There are not so many Jazz schools, 4 or 5, so you meet. I try to find musicians where I can do anything. Play totally improvised, play rhythmically complex things, play simple things, play with great energy, but also people who can take responsibility for each other and for the band. These are my friends and they can do this.

Cadence: You've been recording for Patrik Landolt's Intakt Records label for a number of years. That label really does an excellent job of releasing high quality music that's packaged with great care. Would you talk about your experience with Intakt Records?

Irrniger: I'm really happy that I'm part of the Intakt family especially when you live in Zurich, you see those people a lot. It's not only the label, it's also the Unerhoert Jazz Festival, which is kind of the same people. It's a great opportunity for me to be part of this really international label which has a great network.

Cadence: You're also in a metal band called Cowboys From Hell where you play electronically altered tenor sax. How is it artistically for you to play in that setting?

Irrniger: It was a really important band for me. It's with really close friends of mine but, at the moment, we have a break that started when our bass player went on travel for a year and now we're just out of ideas. It's a little pity but it was always really fun for me to play with that group, and it still will be fun. That band needs a lot of time to get along with all those effects used in it.

Cadence: I thought it would be interesting to get your perspective, as a Swiss national, on important recordings. What are the top ten Jazz records that changed your life?

Irrniger: I'll give you my top ten recordings which really changed my mind and way of playing and writing. There are a lot of recordings which are practically as important as these but these really changed my life. The first is Maceo Parker's Life on Planet Groove which came just before I was totally into techno and hip-hop, although techno now, for me, is the most awful music. I listened to this in high school and Maceo Parker was a big influence for me on the saxophone because it was the blues scale and with the blues scale it started for me to go into Jazz. I had a teacher who gave me this record and also "Watermelon Man" to play, and taught me the six notes of the blues scale to improvise over it. I was just blasted away, wow! I also started to listen to other music such as the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan and classical rock and pop music.

The second one would be Tower of Power. This was my great love. I won't name one record, I would say all their records until 1975 with the classical lineup which has this really dry quality, dry funk music. For me, the way they deal with substructures in music rhythmically, you always hear the sixteenth notes there. The connection between the bass, the drums, and the Hammond organ. I really love the Hammond organ. Those solos, they freak me out, and the guitar, how this it's all together. You always hear the big structures with the quarter notes and also the small structures – you hear the sixteenth notes everywhere. This is still a way that I am thinking on music, to see the really big structure – the whole song, or maybe the whole album or concert – and

then also the sixteenth notes or triplets.

The third is John Coltrane, all his work, although maybe I would pick out The Classic Quartet – Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings. I've loved that very much. As I've said, I'm really an emotional guy and this music is so intense. At one point I had to stop listening to it because it was too intense for me. I just get really emotional when I listen to music. I would say that Coltrane is just more intense than Monk. I love Monk, but Coltrane is more intense in his expression. Also, mostly free improvised and high energetic music is sometimes so intense that I have to take breaks from it. My first hero before Coltrane came was Dexter Gordon. I would say I'm not a guy who knows a lot of music. I didn't listen to everything. People talk about Carla Bley but her music didn't cross my path so far. She's an example of someone I know I need to check out still, but what I know, I know really well. When I listen to someone's music, I really enter it deeply, I listen to it non-stop.

The next important work is by Mark Turner. I investigated him during my days in Jazz school. His recording Mark Turner with Joshua Redman drew me to what I would call a more contemporary Jazz language. The main record of his that inspired me was Dharma Days, especially the first song which was a blues. Nasheet plays on this. From that point on, I was really into Mark Turner, so much so that when I graduated Jazz school, my teacher said, "OK, now you have to burn all your Mark Turner CDs. Now you have to look for your original language." I was too much into him, but it's good to have a hero.

Bobo Stenson's Cantando changed my understanding of band playing and interaction. Before my interest was in doing a great solo and having great comping in the group, like the way Mark Turner and Kurt Rosenwinkel and those cats play in that kind of contemporary, straight-ahead Jazz theme. Stenson released me to the whole world of open understanding of playing music together. This recording opened me to understanding how to go to totally improvised music coming from a straight-ahead thing.

Brad Mehldau's Art of the Trio recordings changed my way of harmonically thinking. He can create his own world harmonically over a piece and sometime takes a really huge melody line from one point to another. For instance, he plays "Solar" where he goes away for the form for about 3 or 4 choruses and comes back after a while. This has helped my understanding in the playing melodies and developing own harmonies.

Keith Jarrett's Fort Yawuh and the complete works by his American quartet are really important to me. The spirit of that group and their way of playing in such a "no risk, no fun" mode is really freeing. I tend to be a perfectionist with my compositions but in the end, I just want to play and it should be more of a, 'Let's jump into the pool' setting. That's what I learned in New York.

Of course Miles Davis, his complete work. It sounds really simple but it's really important to me, especially his quintet with Shorter, DeJohnette, Holland and either Corea or Jarrett on Rhodes. How this group is able to play with the music, how the soloists take over the solos, is really important for [my group] Pilgrim. We had once a little crisis in Pilgrim. We played three concerts on the last tour and it was just not happening. We then happen to listen to a bootleg recording of the Miles Davis Quintet and how they took over their

solos - the energy was just up and up, and I just said to the guys, 'See guys, that's how we should play. That's how we should take over from each other. That's how we should be responsible for each and every one.' After that, the next few concerts were gorgeous.

Thelonious Monk teaches the importance of the melody. The harmonies on the piano. It's four fingers so it's four melodies basically, and if you cut the melody down, it's all motifs, it's patterns, and Monk is really strong in that. Even when he solos, he just plays the song always, and the song is a certain kind of a melody. It's always about the song.

The tenth recording is Footprints Live by the Wayne Shorter Quartet but it is really all of that band's work that has influenced me. The way that quartet deals with interplay is just on another level. It's a perfect line between composition and improvisation. Shorter sometimes just plays two notes to guide the music. Perez is so masterful at playfulness, there's the strong bass of Patitucci and the energy from Blade. What a band! I just read a very good quote by Wayne Shorter who says: "I think the future is based on anyone's behavior. How much someone knows, and is dedicated to -- not their music or their instrument, but their mission."

These are ten recordings but actually I must add an eleventh recording because I just have to mention Tony Malaby's Tamarindo group because this group is just blasting me away all the time. It's one of my favorite groups. It's an all-star band with William Parker and Nasheet.

Cadence: The last questions are from other musicians who have given me questions to ask you.

Ziv Ravitz (drums) asked – "Taking into account the current challenging state of the music business, what does a band leader need to be and do in order to sustain his band. How do you deal with gaining acceptance and accessibility for your music without compromising your musical integrity?"

Irniger: This is a difficult but timely question. Recently, I've been really stressed about this. I think I've learned something during this trip to New York from Ohad Talmor. He said, "You should put the cart behind the horses and not the horses behind the cart." He meant that it's important to relax and do the best that you can. It's really hard to get chances to play. That's just a fact. In New York, perhaps there's more places to play but they don't earn any money. In Switzerland, we have pretty good bread but unfortunately, we don't have much possibilities to play. I recently tried to arrange concerts, to get in touch with people by sitting at the computer for five hours, but I ended up totally missing playing my music. I want to focus on my music and I don't have a plan [on how to deal with the business side of it]. I think you should just go your way with the music and not stress about the business too much.

Nils Wogram (trombone) asked – "What is your main "strategy" to distinguish your playing from all the other great Jazz tenor players today?"

Irniger: It's a good question although it's difficult to say. You can be original in your playing and original in your composition and the main goal, for me, would be to write compositions that support my playing. It's a difficult thing to do but I think I'm in a good way there. I really want to bring composition and improvisation together so it gets original.

Nils Wogram also said – “Please criticize a tendency in jazz today and say why you don't like it.”

Irniger: [Pauses] I think there is a tendency, not only for me, but other musicians, to want to do everything. Like I said earlier, if you are a jack-of-all-trades, you are a master of none. It doesn't serve anybody if you do hundreds of groups and projects where you just throw out records and just play a few concerts. It's much better if you focus on less things and work on that and find your original language.

Nils Wogram also asked – “What is your vision of Jazz of the future? What is your ultimate goal in musical expression?”

Irniger: I came to New York now to find out about this question of my future. My goal is to find the perfect mixture or line between composition and improvisation. Between inside and outside, between everything. I don't like music which you can put into a drawer. I want to find the perfect line between the drawers, which is hopefully an original language. I just read a very good quote about that by Wayne Shorter who says: "I think the future is based on anyone's behavior. How much someone knows, and is dedicated to -- not their music or their instrument, but their mission."



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