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# CHRISTOPH IRNIGER - SAXOPHONE

## Interview by Ludwig vanTrikt

*Cadence: Ken Weiss, MD last interviewed you for our October 2015 issue and of course there have been some major shifts in the world? Please delve into how COVID affected your musical and personal life?*

C.I.: Since 2015 there have been a few shifts in both my musical and personal life, such as birth of my 3rd child or moving to the house where my wife grew up in Zurich, as also heavy touring (including the US) with my band Pilgrim and of course Covid, which was a big game changer in many ways.

What concerns myself as a musician, Covid helped to move forward: Since there was nothing to do for almost half a year, I started researching and to further my education in composition, what I always wanted, but never had time to. My effort resulted in a new repertoire for Pilgrim, as also in a collaboration with the Swiss Jazz Orchestra and my debut as Big Band composer.

On the business side I think it caused many issues, which the scene is still suffering from. In general there is less money for non-commercial culture, which affected many jazz initiatives, media and clubs. The possibilities and money to earn are/is less than before and the liability is worse due to this economic uncertainty. Sometimes concerts are not confirmed until shortly before the tour or got cancelled very short term, so it definitively got tougher on the market.

That said, the scene might has become also more agile and sometimes possibilities show up on different occasions. I don't want to complain. Luckily as bandleader, who is interested in many fields, I am used to be vigilant and try to catch trains when they come.

*Cadence: Jazz has always had a history of musicians returning back to school for further education (I think of Max Roach and Tony Williams); what kinds of musical ideas were expanded by you formally retooling?*

C.I.: I'd say you never leave school as a serious artist. Being able to perform on a high level needs daily training and as a bandleader you have to work on you vision constantly.

One thing I was very extensively working on my instrument in the last year was the phrasing, since I had the feeling it felt kind of sticky and I wanted it to be more fluid. So I was searching for instrumentalists that have the feeling I searched for (like Wayne Shorter or Dayna Stephens), played along and transcribed solos. Imitating is always a good plan to start on something new.

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Another field I am constantly working on is composition. It's like a muscle, which you can train to get stronger and it was always very important to me, beyond composing itself, but also for developing a personal language on the instrument and of course a vision as artist.

Something I found very interesting is the idea of voice leading. My compositions are built mostly out of single lines, such as a melody and a bass line and harmonies evolve out of these lines (voices) played together. So you have recognizable melodies and harmonical richness at the same time, which gives the improviser or the improvisers (depending on how many are playing at the same time) more options to create worlds between relaxation and tension or openness and density.

Guillermo Klein told me to analyze, study and re-write Bach Chorals, which I still do and helps a lot for understanding, hearing and having new ideas.

***Cadence: I want to double back on the expansion of your orchestral language but in the mean time let's talk about the viability of the cd format. This interview is taking place while you have a 2025 CD on the Intakt label; "HUMAN INTELLIGENCE LIVE" (Intakt CD 434). Please explain why you continue to release your music on disc? Do you see a monetary return by such recordings?***

C.I.: No, I honestly don't see a monetary return. The value of a CD for me as a musician is on one hand emotional and on the other promotional. It is first a documentation of my work, something to hold in my hand, which delivers the music together with a nice artwork and tells a story. The economic value lies more in connection with the promotion, since I think a release on a physical carrier makes a band still more relevant for media and promoters.

***Cadence: Just to clarify for all of the recordings you have done on Intakt even taking in account new digital formats and streaming services; you have never seen any kind of monetary reward from your music? What about also the idea of selling disc at your concerts also. I double down on this because it calls into the whole notion of the value of recording especially in light of your PILGRIM band being one of the most active groups in Europe?***

C.I.: The income of physical and digital outcome on the market goes to the label until break even. The reward after that is peanuts. I do sell CDs on concerts not bad, but this goes back to the production, which is for most of the part supported out of public and private cultural funds and by people who are enthusiasts and work for a low income, such as the musicians, producers, etc. If you do the numbers without that support, there would be never a chance to be economic in terms of money.

The reward you get is the reputation and promotion on the other hand, which can create a momentum and helps to get gigs, where you can see monetary reward in turn.

For me it was never different, since I started. The place I am working in is the laboratory. It's where new paths are explored, which lead to new ideas. It's like

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in science the research department, which needs support and is not primarily economic, but essential for the development of the achievements of its time. Not for nothing it is called "non-commercial culture".

**Cadence:** *Glancing at your 2025 Tour schedule it appears fairly healthy in summary what are work opportunities like in Europe for Pilgrim and your more expansive work with the Swiss Jazz Orchestra?*

C.I.: We only played 6 concerts around the release, which is on contrary a bit disappointing. Between around ten years, the band was able to play almost a lot. Over the last two years we have been a bit less busy and this year is until now, as said, really hard actually. But I do have other bands and projects, like my Trio and the work with the Swiss Jazz Orchestra. This is not regular work, but continuing this June with two gigs in Geneva and Basel, for which I am currently writing a new suite.

**Cadence:** *You mentioned that you have some new additions to your family since your last cadence interview. How do artist like yourself (who are fortunate to tour frequently) able to balance and maintain healthy relationships in terms of being a husband and father?*

C.I.: Above all, I am very lucky to have a wonderful wife who has my back so that I can live out my passion. But a lot of it also has to do with planning and prioritizing. On the one hand, we have a joint agenda that we always go through together. By looking for a job as a saxophone teacher early on, I have also opted for a model that allows me to choose the projects and only do what appeals to me artistically. In this way, I have and have always had plenty of time for both, my own bands & projects, as well as my family.

**Cadence:** *Let's talk more in depth about your recording that is out during the time of this interview "Human Intelligence Live" (Intakt CD 434/ 2025) and why this is so a standout recording in terms of some of the major compositional themes and the challenges of doing a "live" recording?*

C.I.: The album is a complete live concert at Red Horn District in Bad Meinberg (Germany) from November 29, 2023. It is the complete set from beginning to the end. There are no changes in the order of the pieces and only minimalistic edits. The only thing missing is the encore. There was no plan of recording the concert, but since the club gave us the opportunity at the soundcheck we told them to do so. We did not have the intension to do a record, but after being very happy of what we heard, we decided to release it. That said, there were actually no „challenges“ doing that live recording. It came together really organically, thru the lucky coincidence of a great location with great gear and a superb engineer, as well as a great musical performance.

In relation to the music of the band, it makes totally sense to present a live album every now and then. The listener can hear how things evolve, how composition melts into improvisation (and vice versa), how the music processes thru different stages of emotions, which is in fact where the power of

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this band lies. Since the setlist was built on the spot, you even notice sometimes musicians deciding differently, going different ways and finding each other again. There are doubts and questions, leading into resolution and common energy. The path is not always straight and needs rethinking or reflexion sometimes, but because of the trust, common idea and subordination of the ego of everyone, the music can develop always.

So it's more about how we play, then what we play. The main idea is to show how the band works and let the listener be part of the process, independent of the (but of course original) compositional material. So there was no intent in the choice of the content for the set. Of course we always played the 3 new songs on that tour. The rest was a spontaneous compilation out of standard repertoire of the band, mainly of newer compositions from a pool of about 20 pieces. So there are some of the main themes of „Ghost Cat“ (Intakt Records, 2023) and the piece „Back in the Game“, which came out first on „Italian Circus Story“ (Intakt Records, 2014). There were also a lot of pieces from „Crosswinds“ (Intakt Records, 2019) in the pool, but were not played that night.

*Cadence: You have repeated some of the compositions from prior recordings on this disc; with the cost of buying music being so expensive what separates (makes this version of these tunes) this release and this version of this music from their prior renditions and thus necessary to purchase?*

C.I.: I think I answered the question partly already. Besides the main idea of letting the listener be part of the process in evolving a common energy, there was a very different intension when producing especially the „Ghost Cat“ record. There we wanted really to keep the songs as songs, which you can listen at home, even as background. The improvs are not overbearing and the dynamic range is smaller. The stories are told in a straight way, from beginning to the end, with less of the surprising turning points you have at the gig. The choice of the compositional material had much more importance, than on the live recording.

And of course there is a huge tradition in Jazz to record different versions of a song. Monk played only around 70 compositions during his whole life I think?!

*Cadence: Since your last interview with Cadence I imagine that you have been to the USA I wondered what your impressions are of our jazz scene; and some of the artists of note in your view?*

C.I.: Jazz has become a global language over the years but of course, like for many others, the US and above all the New York jazz scene has been the main influence for me as a saxophone player. All of the saxophone players I was checking out probably had their center of life in New York at some point in their lives. So for me it was essential to stay in this city whenever I could when my life was a bit more flexible (without family, etc.). It's where a lot of the music is coming from and where the musicians carry the legacy. Playing with some of these cats, like Nasheet Waits, Loren Stillman or Ohad Talmor, listening to legends like Lee Konitz or Bill Frisell, institutions like Ari Hoenig Mondays

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at Smalls or Wayne Krantz Wednesdays at the 55 bar, were life changing events to me. And of course it's also just the incredible amount of great musicians from all over the world in this place. You can just play sessions every day on a high level. If you ask me about some artists of note, there are so many like Dayna Stephens, Loren Stillman, Steve Lehman, Mark Turner, Chris Speed, Kris Davis, Joel Ross, Walter Smith III, Immanuel Wilkins or Guillermo Klein.

What concerns me as composer, my vision or artist in general I think the influences are much broader and more based on contemporary art, sounds and experiences of life in general, not bound to a certain place.

***Cadence: You are a prolific composer so please give us a glimpse into how you write; both for Pilgrim and the larger Orchestra settings you are able to mount sometimes? Also do you use any of the new technology that some jazz artists have begun to use including AI?***

C.I.: My writing is an ongoing process which starts in being open for anything all the time. I am constantly hunting and gathering and make notes and scratches, even if it seems to be nothing in the first moment - not only on a musical or/and technical level, but also in every aspect of what life in general gives you. This is often not even conscious or needs extra time, which is really important for the next phase, where I dive into these notes and try to organize them, take the time to define or decide which way to go, what should be said and what not. Of course I did study composition and constantly exercising it, like my instrument, since it is a muscle which can be worked on and make constant progress.

When it comes to bring it on paper, the main idea comes mostly from this pool. I guess I mostly start with a melody and later go into harmonies. There are even a lot of compositions, where I wrote only single lines, such as a melody and a bass line and no cords. My compositions are built mostly out of voice leading - inspired by Bach corals for example - where harmonies evolve out of different lines (voices) played together. So you have recognizable melodies and harmonical richness at the same time, which gives the improviser(s) more options to create worlds between relaxation and tension or openness and density.

This leads especially to an idea of Pilgrim for example, which is to have the possibility to create, design and shape within the musical context in any moment. The idea is to play a song or express an common idea, without being in a cage of a sacred form.

Of course this is a bit different in the orchestral context, where the composition is much more defined and detailed. But the process is the same: It all starts with melodies, sometimes several at the same time, which evolve or give ideas for a harmonical world. Of course there is also a lot of knowledge and constant learning involved, such as analyzing scores from both classical and jazz works, which gives the tools for orchestration, instrument theory, etc.

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Regarding tools, I use the saxophone, the piano and notation software. I never used AI so far.

**Cadence:** *How does a viewer who looks at your YouTube video "Back in the Game" directed by Kohei Yamaguchi (which is tied into your new recording) gather a meaning from what appears to be random images with a dancer? This raises the larger question of how does an instrumental music like jazz convey meaning outside of a obvious title or lyrics?*

C.I.: Your question make my mind come up with an thought: I was very much into Bob Dylan, when I was a late teenager. It meant to me a lot and I still have very deep memories about that time, without understanding most of the lyrics. I was not even trying to understand the words, since the music had apparently all I needed. What got to me was the mood and I think I was able to connect with the stories thru that. This is very personal and I think the meaning of music, especially without vocals of course, IS something very personal. It also has a lot to do with experiences, stages of life, where or with who you listen to music, what it triggers in you or with what you connect or assimilate to it. That said. Kohei is a great film maker, with whom I worked in the past. I never met him and just sent him the song with a few notes. It was a deliberate decision to give him complete freedom and to see what he himself associates with the music and come up with. In addition to the fact that he has created something of his own, he also comes from a different culture and thus links the stories with images of foreign places (Japan). I find this combination of different artistic levels incredibly exciting and inspiring and for me it multiplies the emotional value enormously, especially since there is - for me - a perfect match of mood and story in both music and image here.

**Cadence:** *Cadence magazine has interviewed you during a few major shifts in world events from the COVID crisis to now America's second Trump term. Are you starting to detect a new attitude towards America that might affect your music and touring or visiting our country?*

C.I.: It has always been a challenge to tour in the US, since it needs a lot of work and money to get a working visa. I was thinking about renewing my visa, but decided against it lately to wait and see how the music business develops. I love to tour abroad and playing in the US was one of my personal highlights, but it must be sustainable in terms of finances and the environment. That has nothing to do with an attitude and is also not affecting my music or my wishes to go back, especially to New York.

There are many musicians who are explicitly political, which is more than I can say for myself. I'm interested in society and working in a community, bringing people together, regardless of where on the world, their age, nationality, religion, political views, etc. I find it difficult to change the world at large. But in my environment, my neighborhood, my community or wherever I go with my music, with lovers of jazz, good music, culture and art in general, or simply people who are looking for exchange in some form, doing good and connecting people is within the scope of my possibilities by being a musician.