



WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT REEDS, BRASS AND SYNCOPATION?

The ICP Orchestra are known for their seamless blend of composition and improvisation with a humorous touch. Kurt Gottschalk hangs with the band for three days in Philadelphia. Photos by Ryan Collerd.

Misha Mengelberg signing-in, Philadelphia, PA, April 2011.

The April Fools' tradition dates back at least to the 14th century, when it was cited in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer references it there in the *Nun's Priest Tale*, in which it's said to have occurred "since March began, thirty days and two." There's some question as to the accuracy of the text (modern scholars believe it should read "since March was gone," and that Chaucer was referring to May 2nd, 32 days after the end of March), but in the past it's been assumed he meant the day after March 31. On whichever date it was meant to have taken place, the tale concerns a rooster which has a dream prophesying his own death. He is convinced by one of his hens it's just indi-

gestion and goes back to sleep. The next day, however, a sly fox convinces him to show off his vocal talents, and as he crows the fox catches him in his teeth and runs off with him. The barnyard denizens run after them to try to save the rooster but the fox is too quick. Eventually, the rooster tells the fox that he should stop long enough to tell the other animals to give up the chase and with the same downfall of pride that almost undid the rooster himself, the fox stops and opens his mouth to yell to his pursuers, giving the rooster opportunity to escape.

References to April Fools' Day, or All Fools' Day, have recurred through British, French and Flemish poetry and news

accounts in the centuries since Chaucer. In 1969 a story aired on Dutch television stating that a new device would detect TV license fee evaders. A government official was quoted as saying that it was likely to be effective, since people would be unwilling to wrap their sets in aluminum foil. The next day there was a run on foil at stores across the country, despite the fact that there was no such thing as a TV license.

1969 was also a productive year for the then-fledgling Instant Composers Pool and its record label, also bearing the name "ICP." Two years prior, drummer Han Bennink and saxophonist Willem Breuker had a record pressed as the New Acoustic Swing

Top: Tristan Honsinger leads Thomas Heberer, Mary Oliver and Walter Weirbos.
Bottom: Ab Baars sightseeing.

Duo, solidifying the loose conglomeration that had been working as the Instant Composers Pool into an identifiable thing, a product with covers individually drawn by Bennink and bearing the serial number ICP-001. The first appearance of the Instant Composers Pool as a performing ensemble on record came the following year, a trio with Bennink, pianist Misha Mengelberg (who co-founded with Bennink and Breuker the ICP) and saxophonist John Tchicai. In 1969, the label released ICP-004 by the duo of Bennink and British guitarist Derek Bailey, a pairing that would carry on for the next four decades. That year also saw a number of recordings which would eventually be released on the label. Sessions by quartets, quintets, sextets and septets all under the ICP name were recorded, with Bennink as the only constant member. Breuker meanwhile recorded an outdoor concert with three barrel organs in a Gunter Hampel-led sextet with Anthony Braxton, Arjen Gorter, Jeanne Lee and Steve McCall.

The ICP Orchestra began to take shape in the early '80s with a series of repertory projects dedicated to three of Mengelberg's dearest inspirations: pianist/composers Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk and Herbie Nichols. Since then, the evolving Orchestra has taken on the mantle of cultural ambassadors, bringing their distinctive take on the radical developments in improvised music in the 1960s and '70s to stages around the world. With respect to their blend of improvisation and composition, the trumpeter Dave Douglas has memorably compared the group to "a herd of elephants. Each one doing its own thing, seemingly oblivious to the others. And without any cue they all start running in one direction. Without any signal, again they stop."

More than forty years after the ICP's founding, on April Fools' Day 2011, the ICP Orchestra are about to begin a three-night stint in a 100-year-old church in Philadelphia's Center City. Bassist Ernst Glerum and trumpeter Thomas Heberer are the first to arrive at the church, having just made the train ride down from New York. The previous night's gig at Le Poisson Rouge had been a draining success, with musician friends like Peter Evans, Mark Helias and George Lewis in the audience. Glerum sits down at the grand piano and begins playing some gentle jazz chords before he's even taken off his coat and backpack. The rest file in several minutes later, all except Mengelberg, as Glerum steps it up to a livelier rag. Violinist Mary Oliver helpfully

begins collecting and wiping off music stands. Bennink walks in and out of the room through various doorways as though he were acting in a slow-paced comedy sketch.

Indeed, there's a fair bit of laughter heard as each musician sets up his or her instruments. Referential asides are bandied about in English and Dutch. Bennink takes a seat in the front row, the drum set having not yet arrived, and watches the proceedings, laughing regularly. Glerum works over a borrowed bass, tuning and testing its voice. "It sounds very funny," he said, peering up at his bandmates. Oliver gives a soft coyote howl as Bennink looks on, laughing again.

Within half an hour, all except Mengelberg are in formation and ready to run through charts. Cellist Tristan Honsinger has brought a complex piece bearing the title "Double Ostrich Conundrum" which the band has played only once before, or perhaps only rehearsed, depending on which band member you ask, as usual. Honsinger breaks it down into short sections and calls up subgroups to play individual parts. The three clarinets (Ab Baars, Toby Delius and Michael Moore) play a brief and beautiful section reminiscent of Hindemith. Then Honsinger, Heberer and Oliver follow with a fractured fragment. Baars and Delius switch to tenors to play a fanfare with Wolter Wierbos's trombone, then Delius and Moore (on alto) join Oliver for a bit of Ellingtonia. After that, a sadly sweet string trio plays for a moment—each of these sections lasted less than a minute. One, in fact, Honsinger specifies as lasting about two seconds in duration. (Oliver: "Is it a gliss?" Honsinger: "It's a gliss.") They execute a double reverse glissando and then move on to the next section, but Oliver soon stops them.

"We're playing in different tempos," she says. "It's OK, though," the drummer pronounces from his seat in the audience. "I like it."

In about a half hour they are close to nailing it—pastiche doesn't come easy—and they move on to the final page. The last of the three sections involves Honsinger cuing the ensemble with an exaggerated walk, knees reaching high, arms crossed in front of him, hands moving like the beaks of squawking geese. As he executes this maneuver, he explains the musical meanings of each gesture. Sticking his tongue out would be a cue to play, he said, and it will only happen in pairs for duets within the piece. Vigorous stomping means stop.

"And when I walk like this," he adds, returning to his rubber-legged march, "it's

'deet, bop beep,' very musical but not too much."

Having played all the elements, if not the entire piece, they break. Mengelberg will arrive shortly before showtime. "Double Ostrich Conundrum" will be included in that night's set list being made by Delius. The set list used to be Mengelberg's task, and for a while Bennink took it over, but now the assignment rotates somewhat haphazardly.

They take the stage that night without Mengelberg as well, opening with his "Kraal Kraal Locht" before taking on the Ostrich conundrum. When Honsinger leaves his chair to begin the ostrich-walk cuing, it seems in a way unplanned, as if he might have suddenly broken into a strolling conduction no matter what piece they were playing. It comes off like a magic trick—and magic tricks, of course, require practice.

They carry on with Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo" and Ab Baars' "Brigade" before swinging into Mengelberg's "Off to the Races," a great piece pitting the strings and trombonist Wierbos against the rest of the horns in a scrimmage of tonalities. Then they play "Rollo III" from Mengelberg's wonderful series of "Rollo" pieces and close with another bit of Ellingtonia in Juan Tizol's "Caravan," with Bennink embodying the whole of the song with his drums-against-horn accents. If the band is tired from the previous night's concert, it's only the showmanship and not the music that has suffered.

Or maybe it's simply the case that the members of the ICP Orchestra aren't actually that funny. And for that matter they're not Dutch, either, not most of them. Let's set the facts straight. They are, maybe, about one quarter funny—and one third American, for the love of Pete, which is not even to mention the Brits and Germans in the band, or the fact that the ensemble's leader is Ukrainian by birth.

"I hate humor," Mengelberg confides during lunch in downtown Philly. "But when things are humorless, with a small voice I say 'is there nobody to make a small joke out of all this rubbish?'"

Mengelberg is settled into a booth at a Ruby Tuesday's restaurant, having just asked the waitress that the blend of '80s and contemporary synthesized pop be turned down. Already there was something funny about the scene.

"That is our sense of humor," he explains with a stern look. "The Dutch think when somebody falls on the floor in a clumsy way and breaks his nose, that's funny. My friends in the orchestra like that type of humor."





Han Bennink at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Michael Moore unwinds after the gig.



(Asked about what sort of movies he likes if he hates humor, he responds, “Buñuel is funny.”)

As he speaks, Mengelberg reacts to every sound in the restaurant, mimicking or darting his eyes in the direction of its source or responding with a smile or a laugh. He is as quick to change topics in the discussion as he is to refocus anytime a question is put to him. Asked about what sort of music he listens to when he’s at home, he responds matter-of-factly: “I don’t like music.” He then howls and barks a little. “I’m in favor of good coffee,” he adds, “but this is dishwater.”

A conversation with Mengelberg can reflect the absurdist tendencies that have long been cited as his early influences. His participation in Fluxus experiments goes back about as far as his musical performances, although certainly his love for Thelonious Monk has been more apparent than Jean Arp or Marcel Duchamp. His surreal leaps of abstract logic can be willfully befuddling. He has an odd way of not needing other people to be in on the joke. Over salad and crab cakes, Mengelberg crafts a plan to play Carnegie Hall, enlisting this journalist, our photographer and someone he met at the hotel bar the previous night (despite his not being present at lunch or even being familiar with the band) as the people who will make it happen. When the restaurant server returns to check on the table, he explains the plan to her and drafts her onto the production team as well. He sets forth specific details, playing with the irrationality of the situation.

Mengelberg also has a way of separating himself from the band, speaking of “those stupid people who call themselves part of a pool” with a feigned exasperation. “They are completely untrustworthy, but only in certain aspects,” he says of his ensemble, as is “my wife, of course, and the manager. She will, if not necessary, speak the truth.”

That manager, Susanna von Canon, sits next to him, squeezing lemons and mixing the juice with olive oil for the pianist’s salad dressing. She smiles faintly while he holds court.

“It’s completely of no interest that I’m born in the Ukraine,” Mengelberg insists. “I had 2-1/2 years to learn sentences in Russian and then we fled because there was a guy that wanted to confiscate my mother’s harp. She was in the orchestra in Kiev.”

“Nobody’s Dutch,” he insists of his band, allowing, “Wolter Wierbos is Dutch and Ab is also Dutch. It seems to be a Dutch-oriented band. Almost everybody tries to speak Dutch. Han is Dutch as smoked eel.”

The American-born von Canon has lived

in Holland since 1987, and through her former employment with the famed Bimhuis theater in Amsterdam gradually came to be an all-around administrator for the band. She has no official title, she says, but serves as business manager, booking agent and nurse. Under any one of those titles, she is the force that makes the ICP’s tours possible. After lunch, as Mengelberg naps before the second Philly show, she speaks candidly about his well-being—a concern not often far from the lips of the orchestra’s followers.

“He’s had a heart attack and he’s had a stroke, he has bursitis and problems with his arms,” von Canon says. “Misha’s always been somewhere else. Maybe now he’s just a little bit further somewhere else. I truly believe that behind his present frailty and obstacles, he’s sharp as a tack. Sometimes he’s close to what we call reality and sometimes he’s further away, but he always has music.”

Mengelberg’s sense of humor runs in deep and unusual directions. He might speak directly, but leave out crucial details that would make what he’s saying make sense. He makes complex puns using syntax or homonyms crossing between different languages. And, according to von Canon, he reassigns nuances to the words he uses. “OK,” for example, is high praise, and “pretty well OK” is the highest of praise. Speaking of the second night’s concert, which featured guest vocalist Fay Victor, Mengelberg says, “It was a nice concert or what I prefer an ‘OK concert.’ It’s not so incredible, it’s OK.” In that respect, he is apparently pleased; however, when it is suggested that the audience seemed to love it, he says simply, “they have to decide for themselves what something is, the audience. I don’t intervene in their making opinions. They should decide for themselves. If somebody said ‘Your concert was fantastic’ I’d say, ‘Did you listen well enough?’ Nobody dares to say that they did not listen well enough.”

While nobody is presuming to make decisions for Mengelberg, von Canon and members of the band all suggested that the spring tour—which took the band from New York and Baltimore to Chicago, Des Moines, Austin, Houston and Seattle—may have been Mengelberg’s last trip to the US. “I do believe that this is the last tour of that states that Misha will be on, but I could be wrong,” she said. “If Carnegie Hall calls, he’ll be the first one on the plane.”

She has, in fact, been working on a plan for the orchestra to play at Zankel Hall, the refurbished and acoustically pristine room

in the basement of Carnegie Hall. Our luncheon joke, as it turned out, has a layer of truth.

A three-night run in one place is rare for the ICP, and the stay gives the members of the band a chance to explore the city, in specific a field trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Baars, Bennink, Heberer, Moore and Oliver convene in the hotel lobby but alternately walk, hail a cab or take the bus, leaving them scattered around the museum. Almost by instinct, however, they find each other in the museum’s Marcel Duchamp gallery. It’s there that Mary Oliver sits quietly when Bennink suddenly, but without a sound, bounds into the room to grab her and take her next door to a gallery devoted to his countryman, Piet Mondrian.

“My favorite, though, is the Cy Twombly,” Bennink says definitively. “With Mondrian, it’s the clarity. You can also have clarity in expressionist painting, and music of course. I like to have clarity. It’s a very personal thing, but even in improvisation I go for form, a beginning and a nice ending. Clarity, yeah! It should be in balance, nice colors. If you look at an early Mondrian, he did a tree or a portrait, but then he came upon [using only] the form.”

Bennink’s own drawings and calligraphy have graced most of the ICP label’s releases, and he is a dedicated painter as well. Glerum also paints and Wierbos draws, but Bennink is the only member of the band who shows his work in galleries. He has also launched a website for his visual work, or at least hired someone to do it. “I paid 2,500 for the motherfucker,” he says. “It should be there.” (It is, at hanbennink.com.)

The drummer continued to stalk the museum’s halls, Baars, Moore and Oliver contemplatively following behind. He spies a Pollock, an unusually quasi-figurative piece completed in 1943 and titled *Male and Female*, and he approaches it in long strides.

“When they see me playing, they think I make paintings like Jackson Pollock, which I don’t do,” he says. “I have two sides, I guess.”

Having two sides, however, isn’t the Dutch way. Bennink said his musical reputation has hindered him in the Amsterdam art world. “In Holland you’re not allowed to serve two masters,” he says. “It’s too Calvinistic. You aren’t supposed to do two things.”

Bennink continues moving through the museum in giant steps—even on his way to the bathroom he can’t stop reading artist nameplates. He stops briefly by an

Ilya Bolotowsky ("I would steal this one, too.") before positioning himself in front of Manet's 1872 *View in Holland*. The gray painting depicts sailboats in a harbor.

"That's where I live, me and Terrie Ex," he says excitedly. "It's so nicely painted." He leans in close and then leans back, pantomiming brush strokes with arm extended. "You look at it and say 'how is it done?' but the more you go away the more it becomes a ship."

Having covered a small part of the expansive institution, Bennink, Moore and Oliver make their way to the museum café, where they engage in a fast-paced discussion covering musical education, legumes and sex, interspersed with laughter.

"Conservatories are basically built on this system from Bach: repeat, repeat, repeat, and that's fine," Bennink complains. "But jazz players, you recognize them from how they sound, that's the main thing, not to repeat Coltrane."

"They say people were booing Stravinsky, but they were booing the choreography," Oliver responds.

"The French are very rococo," Bennink says decidedly.

Moore, meanwhile, is scooping refried black beans from a cup with a plastic spoon. "Can you get black beans in Holland?" he asks Oliver.

"Yeah, I get them all the time," she replies.

"Are you a bean fan?" Bennink interjects. "Mary too!"

"Yeah, Californians," she says, explaining her and Moore's native home as a dietary determinant.

"What is it with beans?" Bennink asks. "They make you poop! Marcel Duchamp had prostate cancer, so my question is, was he not eating enough beans?"

"My theory is he was not fucking enough," Oliver offers.

"He certainly was obsessed with it enough," Moore says.

"Yeah," Bennink laughed. "Looking at it!"

"I like looking at it," Oliver counters.

"Sure!" Bennink shoots back. "I would rather look at a beautiful woman than a Mondrian!"

"Well that's obvious," Oliver mutters.

The conversation turns back to beans and from there, to bassist Dave Holland's tenure in the Miles Davis group.

"He looked so funny in that band, this 22-year-old hippie with a headband," Moore says with a broad smile.

"What time do we have rehearsal?"

Oliver says suddenly. "Michael, do you want to do the set list?"

Oliver in many ways seems to be the band's den mother. Along with von Canon, she does much to keep the ship on course. She also calls the men on the locker-room humor that sometimes permeates their green rooms, but is just as prone to turn a surprisingly blue comment herself. One wonders how the men might manage without these two women steering.

Along with Honsinger and Moore, Oliver is a part of the American contingent of the group, introduced to the Dutch scene when she was brought to the 1991 October Meeting in Amsterdam by trombonist George Lewis, her teacher at Mills College in Oakland, CA. She applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to study with Mengelberg and, when she didn't get it, took up a residency in Stutengarten, Germany, and traveled between there and Amsterdam. With training in classical performance, she has premiered solo pieces by Brian Ferneyhough and Iannis Xenakis. For her, there's a strong Dutch identity within the ICP.

"I think in Holland there's a strong sense of collectiveness," she remarks, "at least in the improvising community. That's definitely the strength of ICP—everybody's taking responsibility for their own contributions. As an American living in Holland, that's certainly been the story.

"The history of expansion, whether it was colonial or the people that came over here, that's the kind of freedom in the group," she continued. "I'm not a jazz violinist and nobody has ever told me to play like that. You're given this rope to try to find your own way. I didn't have that feeling living in Germany. It's like a small village, Amsterdam. There's this sophistication. ICP is like that. You have that freedom to ride your bike or go wherever you want to go or play at your own tempo."

Tristan Honsinger has spent many more years as a European expatriate. After growing up in Springfield, MA, the cellist moved to Montreal when he was in his twenties and in 1974 relocated to Amsterdam upon hearing some ICP releases as well as records on the German label FMP and Britain's Incus imprint, co-founded by guitarist Derek Bailey. He, too, sees at least a little Dutch personality in the band, as well as influences from across Europe and across media.

"I would say that although the older guys are maybe typically Dutch but also untypically in a way," Honsinger observes. "Han and Misha were influenced not only by music but by writing, visual arts, they're very international.

"When I got there I met Willem Breuker

and other Dutch artists," he continues. "It didn't really appeal to me, but then I saw Misha who was working with this other Fluxus man Wim Schippers, who worked in theater and television. That impressed me very much. They were doing a series in a theater called 'the Mickery.' The night I went they had invited Derek Bailey, it was the first time I saw him. He was playing alone. The next night there was a man reading a text that I think Wim and Misha wrote that meant nothing. They next evening they made smoke in the theater so that the theater manager came out and said 'what are you doing, you're burning down my theater' and then Han and [South African saxophonist] Dudu Pukwana came out of the smoke playing. It was really brilliant and stupid at the same time."

Mengelberg had organized an ensemble and, in those days, was a forceful leader, Honsinger says.

"Misha was like a policeman," he says.

"He would come up and interrupt people while they were playing. I was the first to say 'I'm leaving,' and it fell apart. He was very arrogant and opinionated and provocative, and now he's kind of the opposite. He's kind of given up his control. We all have our little say and Misha seems to have an invisible function. Not taking the lead gives him a special role in the group. He's very frugal."

If the time comes when the band has to face working without Mengelberg's involvement, Honsinger says he could see the band continuing to tour.

"Oh, sure. I don't know if I would enjoy it as much, but it could happen," he says. "I think the band would evolve in a different way, at which point I would say 'why are we doing this?' But I also have questions about why I question."

"There was a time not long ago when Han took the lead and he was very hard on everyone, especially himself," he added.

"But then he kind of gave up too and now we're a leaderless group. He's very Dutch, but not Dutch at all. It's a funny country. It's kind of a mystery how Misha developed this movement. It has a lot to do with the past century of movements, from Dada to Fluxus and these movements of art. I think they took some kind of responsibility to show surreality and what means right-doing and wrong-doing, which for me is the antithesis of dogmatic sensibility. It comes to the point of really not knowing, it goes to the mystery. Misha is very anti-mystic, but I would say he's closer to Sun Ra than he would care to admit."

Having joined in 2003, saxophonist Tobias Delius is the newest member of



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photo of Satomi Matsuzaki by Chris Cameron

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the group. Born in England to Argentinian and German parents, Delius and his family moved to Germany at age 10. In the early 1980s, Delius moved to Holland and four years ago he returned to Germany. "I find it difficult to pinpoint a particular nationality [in the ensemble]," he said. "I think what Han and Misha did was develop a particular method in how to deal with the jazz tradition that was quite specific to them. By the time I came in 1984 it was already very multi-national. If you look at the first ICP records there was Derek Bailey and Dudu Pukwana and Peter Brötzmann. What I loved about the ICP is how nondogmatic the music was. This idea of not being too defined about 'are you playing jazz, are you playing traditional music,' that was quite unusual in Amsterdam."

German by birth, trumpeter Thomas Heberer joined the ICP but has never lived in the Netherlands. For the last three years, he has been based in New York City. He too, says there's something Dutch about the band he joined in 1993, if only among the Dutchmen.

"When you look at improvised music in Europe, the origins of the music in the '60s, you can clearly identify national scenes," he says. "To simplify, the British musicians were always the extremists. It was always about a pure influence, it was absolutely forbidden to quote something or use something. The Germans were similar whereas the French were about incorporating their folk music and their tradition. The Dutch were always about playfulness, mixing circus music, Thelonious Monk and Schoenberg—everything is equal.

"If you compare Ab and Wolter to the way I behave on stage, you can clearly see I came from a different background," he continues. "If you grow up in Germany, you are obsessed with perfection. You don't see too many grinning faces on German musicians." Like Oliver, Heberer said it was left to him to find his place in the band.

"When I joined, nobody was teaching me the rules," he says. "It took me about five years to understand the rules. You weren't necessarily forced to behave right away. Since then Toby and Mary have joined. I saw them struggling so I was not the only one. It feels like being a teenager and growing up."

Heberer, however, speaks with more certainty about the future of the ensemble than do some of his bandmates. "There's no doubt that ICP will continue," he says. "We all know the language. There's still a lot of ground to cover and a lot to record. Michael Moore sometimes goes to the National Archive and finds, like, a Misha Mengelberg opera from 1972 that no one else is going to do. That's kind of the job of the ICP.

"We are like a democracy," he added. "There is no hierarchy. Everybody is respected. There's a particular type of beauty to see this diversity. Economically there is no hierarchy in ICP. Han Bennis earns the same thing that I earn. It goes beyond the idea of music. It presents an ideal view of the world."

If on the first night the orchestra was a little weary, for the second concert the members are cast in the unusual position of being a backing band. Not entirely, of

course, and if they were told that's what they were doing they would probably have taken pains to sabotage the arrangement. Nevertheless, on this night they found themselves in the unusual position of being joined by a guest vocalist.

But if Fay Victor was a guest, she certainly has a talent for making herself at home. Previously, she has eased her way into the full free jazz of New York's longstanding quartet Other Dimensions in Music, smuggling lyrics from old calypso songs into their open improvisations. Here there would be not just songs but a set list largely comprising tunes by Thelonious Monk and Herbie Nichols, two of Mengelberg's favorites.

It wasn't a blind date, however. Victor recorded with Wierbos a decade ago, and the pair did a show with Mengelberg and Glerum last year. "It was the Nichols/Monk connection, we did this program then too," Wierbos says. "It was fantastic orchestration, just piano, bass, trombone and voice, no drums. I like to be the only horn. With Michael I can do that composing on the spot, but with most other horn players it's not a good fit. And Fay fits right in. She never comes in late or says she needs to hear us do this at this spot."

Because it's a more specified set list, it's done this time by committee in the green room shortly before the show. They arrange the order of the vocal pieces (Victor has written lyrics to some of the Monk and Nichols tunes) and assign soloists.

"How about 'Zing, Zang Zaterdag?'" Oliver said. It's one of the charmingly simple vocal pieces Mengelberg has penned, a catchy tune that runs through the days of the week starting with Saturday and counting a ten-day stretch: "But on Monday I've got a headache that lasts until 1:00 in the afternoon / And what then? / Nobody knows."

"Ah, it's Saturday," Bennis replies. "That's a good idea."

"Maybe last," says Moore.

"Yes," Bennis responds quickly. "Always last." Bennis, always the crowd pleaser. Moore busily copies the list. Wierbos, meanwhile, is looking for information about Benjamin Franklin on his smart phone.

"I thought I'd write down the first soloist in most cases," Moore says. "Then if someone wants to come in, they come in."

Glerum leans out the church window to have a cigarette. Bennis, drumming on the small table, says he needs to find an Apple store.

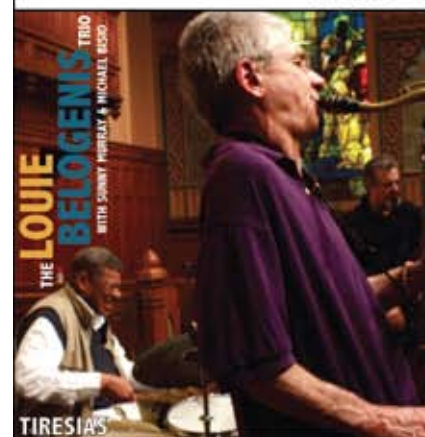
"Is that like a tampon, an iPad?" Wierbos asks without looking up.

Oliver stands and feigns a sigh of disgust. Then, as she walks out of the room, she announces, "If you want to see me do my thing, pull my string!" to howls of laughter and disbelief from the men.

A bottle of wine is opened and Glerum and Wierbos begin a game of "Desert Storm" on their phones.

As the concert gets underway, they are rested and personable, with Bennis as usual the focal point. He takes a solo early on, dampening the snare drum with his foot in a trademark move that always draws laughter from the audience. But it isn't funny per se, it's just efficient. Abrupt stylistic changes aren't funny, they're just a product of clever arrangement. What's funny? One of the lo-

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cal papers leads a preview of the weekend's run of shows by comparing Mengelberg and Bennink not to Duke Ellington and Sonny Greer, not to Thelonious Monk and Max Roach or Cecil Taylor and Andrew Cyrille but to Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis and Laurel and Hardy. All of them. Now that's funny.

The band plays a couple of Mengelberg's pieces and one of Baars' before introducing Victor and "Round Midnight," which at first is played with only Mengelberg and Bennink accompanying before the horns and strings begin to ease in and out again. It is breathtaking. Victor's rousing version of Nichols' "House Party" follows, with a solo by Mengelberg. The rest of the band pulls back—Mengelberg's playing has never been particularly fast or loud—except for Bennink. A smile wrapped across the front half of his head, he only hits the drums harder. During a subsequent version of "Lady Sings the Blues" Wierbos steps up with an eloquent solo. Victor's presence seems to bring out a bit of panache in him, and in fact casts the band in a new light. They are comfortably loose but eminently responsive and one can see how they could easily work as a repertory band with guest soloists. The concert ends with "Zing, Zang Zaterdag," Victor and Mengelberg sharing the piano bench and a microphone. It is a joyous evening.

Maybe some hardened jazz fans, their chins calloused from contemplation, simply don't distinguish between humor and joyfulness. Maybe they don't recognize the difference between *The Pink Panther* and *Being There*. There is, of course, a gospel tradition within jazz. ICP aren't so far from that, if with a secular bent.

Or maybe it is all a joke.

Or maybe not.

Or: What's so funny about reeds, brass and syncopation?

Or: Joi de vivre is not a joke.

Or: Who put the bomp in the bomp bah bomp bah bomp, who put the business in Thelonious Monk?

Or: The tableau of our shared existence is no laughing matter.

Or: How many funny painters are there? (Probably quite a few, but the ICP crew walked past the Jasper Johns and headed straight for the Twombly.)

During a panel discussion led by journalist Kevin Whitehead (who literally wrote the book on jazz from the Netherlands with his *New Dutch Swing*) before the last of the three concerts, Bennink objects to the suggestion that he "puts on a show."

"A show to me is where you play one thing and people laugh at a certain point whether or not anything funny happened," Bennink says. "If you want to call what I do a show, that's fine. But I don't want to go from point A to point B. I don't want to put on a hat and a coat and a feather."

The third night begins with Mengelberg playing solo, a slow, dissonant jazzy thing. Bennink soon enters with pizza box and drum sticks and sits next to him, the co-founders (with Breuker, who left the ICP in 1972 and left the planet in 2010) of one of the major touchstones of European jazz. The pianist and drummer who backed Eric Dolphy on his last concert in 1964. The pair

Oliver describes as "the longest marriage I've known besides my parents."

In short time, Mengelberg finds his way into a blues. Bennink quiets down for a moment then brings the cardboard rhythm back up. Eventually he punctures the box with a drumstick and makes an oversized pinwheel out of it, then picks up his wooden chair and keeps time on it with a stick as he makes his way back to the kit, emptying an entire bag of sticks over it, turning a small table behind the drums upside down then knocking it over, hitting an abruptly loud beat on the snare, crash and bass drums all at once, picking up the plastic bag which had contained his sticks off the floor with one of them and spinning it awkwardly as Mengelberg concludes the obliviously meandering song that has by now essentially become a solo piece with distractions. Then, an arm extended toward his compatriot, Bennink yells loudly "MEEESH-ah!"

OK, so maybe they are funny onstage. Certainly Honsinger is. But for the most part the ICP Orchestra is visually funny. And music isn't about the visual, as any curvacious lounge singer, cutie-pie J-Pop act, corpse-painted black metal band or blinged-out rapper can tell you. So here, then, is the real deal: The ICP is incidentally funny. And incidentally, pretty hilarious. And that is a necessary factor peripheral to the ICP achievement, which in no small part is Misha Mengelberg's achievement, which is not just bringing an absurdist element into the all-too-often all-too-staid jazz tradition, but keeping it there, maintaining a dedication to the spirit of having fun. Without Lester Bowie, the Art Ensemble of Chicago lost its showmanship. Without Sun Ra, the Arkestra lost its spirit, or at least had its joie de vivre eviscerated (a happydectomy?). There's a quality they all share which isn't about the joy of the spiritual but the revelry of the secular. It's not the cry from the mountaintop but the shout from the village. It's not the meat but the potatoes, not the pantomime but the carnival.

Mengelberg, as it happened, didn't finish the tour. He became exhausted, "too pooped to party" as von Cannon put it, and returned home, leaving the rest of the band to perform concerts in Houston, Des Moines, Chicago and Seattle without him. Questions about the future of the band don't need to be asked or answered at the moment, and indeed can't be. Several members speculated that they might bring Mengelberg on tour even if he wasn't able to play; von Canon suggested that a large easy chair might be kept onstage for him. All agreed that Mengelberg is happiest when he's onstage with his orchestra.

And for what it's worth, Mengelberg says he doesn't think the Dutch recognize April Fools' Day. There is historical evidence, however, more than just the TV license incident. In 1960, a Dutch news broadcast reported that the Tower of Pisa had fallen over, shocking viewers and leading to a flood of calls to the station. The moral, of course, is that one shouldn't make false reports about the falling of a giant. *

Kurt Gottschalk lives in New York City. He wrote about Diamanda Galas in STN#49

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