



Since its establishment in 1986, Swedish saxophone quartet Rollin' Phones has become something of an institution inside Sweden and outside it. Since that time Rollin' Phones have roamed through a broad spectrum of music on record and in concert, from classical and jazz standards to world premieres, folk music and imaginative transcriptions. The ensemble has collaborated with artists from other genres, played for Swedish royalty and appeared with symphony orchestras. Over more than three decades it has said goodbye to cherished members and welcomed new ones, forming a diaspora of associated saxophonists that reaches around the world; the recordings on Silent Spring, which themselves traverse more than ten years, involve far more than four musicians.

Furthermore, all three works were written by composers who have, at one time or another, had their own lips around woodwind instruments (in two cases, the saxophone itself). Each work hails from one of the first three decades the ensemble was in existence – two of them for jubilee years – taking the musical pulse of the 80s, 90s and 2000s from Nordic and 'almost Nordic' perspectives. Knowing their instruments so well, all three composers write deeply expressive music that relishes the satisfying blend and possibilities of a saxophone ensemble but also rises above it.

Mark Engebretson (b.1964) is a saxophonist and composer who currently occupies the Professor of Composition chair at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. An American, he lived for a time in Sweden and is married to the former Rollin' Phones soprano saxophonist Susan Fancher. *Internal Bleeding* was written for Fancher to play with her erstwhile colleagues, having returned as a guest to participate in its tenth anniversary concert in Stockholm in 1996.

Engebretson's compositional outlook is clear-headed yet rigorous, driven by melody, timbre and well-balanced formal structures. He describes *Internal Bleeding* as an exercise in 'hyper-expressivity' – an exploration of the full expressive capabilities of the saxophone family across its dynamic range and with as much variation in character and technique as possible.

Despite that, his piece sounds remarkably consistent, like a road movie through various distressed states of mind in which the soprano 'soloist' appears haunted and lonely – bound together with her four colleagues while somehow far removed from them, as though they themselves might be phantoms or memories. After the unbearable fuzz of mental distress and confusion, the music finds peace in the ultimate gesture of clarity: an open octave that falls into place as if by gravity.

The range of techniques in the score reveals the composer's familiarity with the saxophone. They include glissandi, growls, multiphonics, use of the high 'altissimo' register and 'slap tongue' – when the reed is pulled away from the mouthpiece and released to create a slapping or popping effect. The result is a naturalness of expression and gesture that can feel uncannily human. After nearly a quarter of a century, the composer maintains a 'deep fondness' for *Internal Bleeding* and has described it as 'an emblematic presentation of many of my principal artistic aims.'

Jonas Forssell (b.1957) is well known as a saxophone player but even more so as a composer for theatre and opera. He has composed for the opera houses of Stockholm, Drottningholm and Malmö in his native Sweden, has written a concerto for bass clarinet *In the Beginning* and has been the subject of a Composer Weekend at the Stockholm Concert Hall.

Silent Spring, completed in 1985, was technically his very first commissioned work. It was inspired partly by Rachel Carson's novel of the same name, a landmark in literary engagement with environmental science that documented the adverse effects of the indiscriminate use of pesticides – not least their effects on bird life.

From the life-giving breath of its first bars, Forssell's saxophone quartet is filled with the sounds of living organisms and organic patterning. All manner of shimmying dances seems to tighten onto individual notes; one begins to assert itself significantly before powering down and going the same way, migrating onto unifying note that hatches out into fragile chords. These move slowly, one step at a time, as if bound together and seeking refuge; the feeling is of the original material in hibernation. When the dancing patterns re-emerge, their rhythms are fascinatingly displaced.

Much of the music is on a *sotto voce* – the ensemble blended tightly and sensitively – a world away from the stereotype of saxophones as predominantly loud and primary-colored. Elements of solidarity and disparity are reflected everywhere. After an even more remarkable succession of rich single chords pinned into place by the high soprano, the music dips, swoops and throbs before dissolving into nothing but toneless wind; ‘one by one, the birds disappear,’ says Forssell.

Jon Øivind Ness (b.1968) from Norway, who played clarinet in his youth, made his name with a series of arresting works using his system of continuous transposition, whereby chords lead progressively and organically to one another by adopting notes from their immediate predecessors as the ‘dominant’ (the new chord’s root). Ness has long held a fascination with harmony and the fusing of conventional classical harmonic language with that of folk music. He has used irregular intervals and microtones – the notes-between-the-notes – to evoke the sounds of folk music and develop chords that feel rooted in two places at once.

You Got the Silver was written in 2006 for the Rollin' Phones' twentieth birthday concert and first performed by the ensemble the same year at the Great Hall of the Academy of Music in Stockholm. It is an example of Ness' distinctive harmonic ear in action: microtones (in this case, quarter-tones) are used extensively and according to the composer, hold structural weight rather than being called upon to simply add color. Ness makes it even easier for us to hear what he does with those quarter tones given the score's ‘*idée fixe*’: the note ‘E’, which exercises a gravitational pull on the whole discourse. The ‘E’ maintains its stranglehold on the piece, even when it can't really be heard, and returns in the final seconds.

In between, various energy fields surge around that note, initially tightly packed but gradually more expansive as instruments stray far away before slapping back like elastic. Intricate patterns emerge as the ensemble appears to move like an organism, becoming gradually more free, conversational and even argumentative. Repeating sirens call out and knotty figurations climb up and then fall down, making use of the unified timbres of the instruments and capitalizing on the taut blend of the quartet's players. Even when it appears as though the party is getting started and loosening everyone up, that ‘E’ remains constant.

Andrew Mellor

Swedish saxophone quartet Rollin' Phones

Since 1986 the Swedish saxophone quartet Rollin' Phones has been an important part of the Swedish music scene. The group is an "all-round" chamber music ensemble with classical music as a speciality. Its repertoire ranges from the standard pieces and transcriptions for saxophone quartet to works by contemporary composers. Several compositions have been dedicated to the group by both Swedish and international composers and there are continuous efforts to encourage exciting collaborations with other instrumentalists/singers and art forms. Recent collaborations have included percussion, dance and visual art. In addition to chamber music concerts, the quartet performs as guest soloists with symphony and wind orchestras in Sweden and abroad. Rollin'Phones have toured extensively and have participated in festivals all over the world including in Europe, U.S.A, South America and Asia. The members of Swedish saxophone quartet Rollin' Phones are Tove Nylund – soprano saxophone, Kristin Uglar – alto saxophone, Edith Bakker – tenor saxophone and Neta Norén – baritone saxophone

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CD tracks info;

1. Internal bleeding-Mark Engebretson composed in 1996 and performed in Radiohuset studio 2 on November 23, 1996. Quartet members; soprano sax Tove Nylund, alto sax Kristin Uglar, tenor sax Annika Alfsdotter, baritone sax Neta Norén, soprano sax Susan Fancher (guest soloist)
2. Silent spring-Jonas Forssell. Composed in 1985. Recorded March 23, 1999. Quartet members; soprano sax Tove Nylund, alto sax Kristin Uglar, tenor sax Jeanette Balland, baritone sax Neta Norén
3. You got the Sliver-Jon Øivind Ness composed in 2006. Nybrokajen 11, The Great Hall of the Musical Academy, Stockholm, November 17, 2006 broadcast live on the Swedish Radio P2. Quartet members; soprano sax Tove Nylund, alto sax Kristin Uglar, tenor sax Helena Friman, baritone sax Neta Norén

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