

Håkon Kornstad has won acclaim as a saxophonist and vocalist.

ANDREAS ULVO

## HÅKON KORNSTAD

### Operatic Jazzman

**T**enor *Battle*, on the Jazzland label, was one of the more individualistic Norwegian jazz albums of 2015, and it has generated a steady wave of appreciation ever since. That album title might evoke visions of cutting sessions (or Sonny Rollins' *Tenor Madness* LP with John Coltrane) but in this unusual case, the two tenors live under one cranial roof—in the form of Håkon Kornstad.

Kornstad has been well established as a Norwegian tenor saxophonist, going back to his trio from the late '90s and early 2000s. Now welcome Kornstad the supple-toned tenor, as in opera singer, who has devised an artful, ingenious way to merge jazz and operatic content.

Arias by Monteverdi, Strauss, Massenet and other non-jazz composers blend with an enigmatic rightness in arrangements with Kornstad's

jazz-operatic band, with instrumentation that can include harpsichord, harmonium, double bass, drums... and "battling" tenors.

Speaking of his passionate and singular new adventure, the 39-year-old Kornstad recently asserted that, with this band, "We've just taken off the lid of a big pond of things that we can explore. Also, as my voice gets better and more secure, there is so much we can do."

Although his life as an operatic tenor dates back only seven years, his life in jazz goes back to studies at the famed Trondheim conservatory in the late '90s. His resume includes work with Ola Kvernberg, Jon Christensen, Sidsel Endresen and his own electric band, Wibutee. He played with Pat Metheny, then artist-in-residence at the Molde Jazz Festival, in 2001. More recently, he was approached by his idol, Joshua Redman, who was intrigued by Kornstad's extended techniques on the sax. In 2013 the pair performed at London's Wigmore Hall. Kornstad recalled, "On the last [piece] we did, he was playing the notes and I was signing an aria from an opera by Massenet. I don't think he expected that."

Kornstad accidentally fell into the opera universe while in New York in 2009. A friend invited him to the Metropolitan Opera to hear *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. It was the first time he had ever been in an opera house. He got hooked. "It was something that just resonated inside of me," he said. "And then, by coincidence, I met this teacher, a great teacher with whom I am still taking lessons. She said to me, 'You have a great voice material. If you just work a little bit with this, you could actually become an opera singer if you want to.' I was 32, but she said it wasn't too late."

Back in Norway, he got into the Norwegian Opera Academy, and has since sung Strauss and Mozart in Oslo's legendary Opera House. Although he entertains the idea of pursuing work as an official opera singer, he says, "My strength is the combination or the way of dealing with this music and combining it with jazz, being my own musical leader."

It began gradually, as he combined his skills with live looping (a skill heard on his Jazzland albums *Dwell Time* and *Symphonies In My Head*), and adding bits of aria on top. Encouraged by the felicitous blend, he created his present band to pursue the idea further, and by now, as he says, "I think I have now found something that I can work with for the rest of my career."

Kornstad is gradually winning over audiences from the jazz end of the spectrum, but the classical world has come calling, as well, with invitations to create work with orchestra, saxophone and his aria singing, such as a recent engagement at Risør, the Norwegian chamber music festival. "Maybe I am like a musical shepherd's dog," he said with a chuckle. "I try to get the classical guys to like jazz, and the jazz guys to like opera."

—Josef Woodard

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