

Untitled

# Nik Bärtsch: Possibility in Paradox



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By [GENO THACKARA](#) April 24, 2018 [Sign in](#) to view read count

*Despite all the boundaries and borders we have in the world, I love to travel and to share things... often the sense of tradition is enormously inspiring. —  
Nik Bärtsch*

Like the master-less samurai his primary band is named for, [Nik Bärtsch](#) forges a path and follows a code all his own. The pianist's music is best described by his own key phrases "ritual groove music" and "Zen funk," merging Eastern minimalist simplicity and patient trance with the interplay and communal aspect of jazz. It makes for a bundle of seeming contradictions: steadily repetitive and ever-changing, precise yet improvisational, highly cerebral and body-movingly catchy, it develops structures of sometimes breathtaking complexity often built from the simplest of blocks.

The wider world hasn't heard much of Ronin since 2012, a year that made a

turning point as the band slimmed to a quartet and released the cracking [Live](#) (ECM, 2012) to cap off the previous chapter of its life. Nobody would accuse Bärtsch of standing still, but this band has simmered on the back burner behind other endeavors for a while: composing work for other ensembles, teaching a yearly music/aikido workshop, recording [Continuum](#) (ECM, 2016) with Ronin's more formally-focused acoustic counterpart Mobile, and maintaining a regular Monday-night live residency in home city [Zurich](#) that he and his bandmates have managed to keep going (when not on the road) since 2004.

"We never took a break. We're constantly working," Bärtsch explains during a highly pleasant Sunday-evening chat amidst preparations for a long-awaited return to the USA. "Most of the Monday shows of the last few years were played by Ronin, so we could really work on our repertoire and change a few old tracks. We have a wide range now of new tracks that we elaborated very much, and also old ones that we developed." His Swiss-accented English shows the thorough thoughtfulness and deliberation of someone practiced in meditation and martial arts, though some hints of excitement can't help coming through as he describes returning to the studio with producer and ECM label boss Manfred Eicher.

"It was on a good level, experimenting with the new material. We've never had such good preparation—this time we had a really good band flow, all very present, and also a joyful feeling playing the new pieces which are challenging sometimes. In the studio, this helped us a lot to play very relaxed and very together," he recalls. Since there's naturally such a deep connection between music and the physicality of aikido, it's only fitting that the philosophical style provided the title for [Awase](#) (ECM, 2018).

Bärtsch elaborates, "That means the way of blending, melting and moving together so that between your opponent and you, you don't know anymore who moves first. You can also say it's a dance. ... To bring it into our context onstage in a live performance, it also means you have no time to think. Your whole body kind of thinks and analyzes, and you react—not brainy, but like in sports or in all sorts of performance art, in this feeling of staying calm and present."

This has always been a central quality of both bands, of course, which is why the new Ronin unit took time finding a somewhat new chemistry since the abovementioned lineup shift. The versatile [Thomy Jordi](#) has an energetic funk-

rooted feeling on bass distinct from that of the long-serving [Bjorn Meyer](#). More disruptively for music so rhythmically intricate, percussionist [Andi Pupato](#) likewise left on friendly terms, leaving [Kaspar Rast](#) to serve as the sole anchor rather than half of a drum/percussion team.

As the band sees it, the disruption has been a liberation as much as a challenge: "As a quartet, we made a big step. Kaspar often says we somehow came back to jazz—not in the sense of playing more traditionally, but in the sense of having a lot of possibilities to work with the material. To take things away, to leave space, but also to go in and actually improvise more, to make variations and new inventions that respect the piece. This made for a lot of new impact and inspired us with a joyful sense in improvising.

"So this mix in the moment, for us, represents a lot the state where the band actually is with the four personalities," he summarizes. "The arrangements, the whole way of playing, it's changed a lot. Not in a negative or positive sense, but it's just something totally *else*. To have such a group feeling and enjoy so much freedom, it's really a high gift."

It's a gift well earned after so much painstaking work to experiment and find the right forms, especially since it's a process that never ends. After all, the compositions are modular enough to be adapted to quite various contexts—hence their untitled designation as numbered "Modul"s, as many listeners and confused discographers are aware. "The idea of a Modul usually that it has one basic important and clear idea that I brought into a structure and form that makes sense," he says.

"What I've always found interesting is that many of the composers in the past were great improvisers and changed their pieces when they played live. From Bach to maybe Debussy and Stravinsky, they were good interpreters ... and also had the opportunity to improvise. And I thought, when a composer writes a piece, then it should be very clear—should have a clear form, a coherent simple idea that you can understand. But it should also be adaptable, and so some of the Moduls I also try out in different settings—where can I invent something with these motifs that I did not know before? So I think that every piece has a huge potential for different opportunities."

Reinvention stands as one theme of *Awase*—e.g. with a brisker yet sparser smoldering take on the staple "Modul 36"—as well as striking into new territory, illustrated by their first-ever inclusion of a piece from another writer.

Reed player [Sha](#) has developed enough of a rapport that he's become like the [Lyle Mays](#) to Bärtsch's [Pat Metheny](#), or perhaps [Charlie Rouse](#) in relation to Monk. The Sha's Feckel quartet is, let's say, quite a tangential cousin to the tightly refined chamber sound of the Ronin band. Still, the idea behind Modul-ating is to adapt the core of a piece to something new and unexpected, as the group did with a composition from the high-voltage freakout *Feckel for Lovers* (Ronin Rhythm Records, 2015).

It's a perhaps surprising but natural step for Sha's contributions to the band. Since moving from guest to full-time member for their ECM debut [Stoa](#) (2006), he's made the widest contribution to Ronin's textural palette with a range of tones from contrabass to soprano sax. "Feckel is more rock-ish," Bärtsch observes with characteristic understatement, "in a prog sense. I was discussing with him if we should maybe play a piece by him, because he was composing more and more ... and 'A' is such a beautiful piece. I heard it on one of his albums and suggested we should try that, find a certain sound for that with Ronin. Also, it sounds different than my music. When we checked things out, 'A' finally stayed and we learned a lot from this piece about his kind of mantric playing—you basically stay the same all the time, but you have to spiral it up in a way to a certain very intense and clear direction. I think that's the reason it finally stayed and found its way into our repertoire."

One somewhat surprising revelation of our talk is that for all its basket-of-snakes intricacy, the music is primarily guided by feel rather than math. The ensemble navigates changes with shouted cues and relies on naturally instinctive turns, perhaps because a person simply couldn't count their way through fast enough. He elaborates, "It's very intuitive. For example, [*Stoa's*] 'Modul 35' is maybe one of the most clear, simple, and then on the other hand complex pieces. I have no idea how this happened. There was a motif that I found interesting, but the rest all somehow happens through the ear."

"Many people say, how was this constructed? Did you have some mathematical ideas or whatever? Very often, I have no idea in what rhythm I am at the moment. ... It's not important in terms of intellectual abstraction. It has to move. Very often two or three patterns are kind of dancing with each other, and you start to learn the balances of how these rhythms move and how they move together. So it's like a dance style we're developing. Where does the weight go? How do you work with your partner? It's very intuitive work, although I know mv music is often seen as smart or intellectually designed."

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Smart it certainly is, though combining such disparate things is another key to its unique appeal. Bärtsch definitely agrees: "It's a paradox. One of the beautiful situations is that contradiction—the more discipline you have, the more freedom suddenly rises also. The organism is playing and reacting faster than the individual players can think. That's something in this music that is so precise and creates every time new opportunities to improvise. The band is trained on a very high level, and it creates unforeseen moments. This opens us to something really beautiful."

The recent gap in more extensive touring was due to exploring these themes rather than any lack of willingness. "We live on Planet Music," he puts it, reiterating an endless interest in exploring and finding links between different cultures. "I really want to come to the US and meet some of the people, have the opportunity to talk to a lot of music fans, freaks, maniacs, people who write about it. You have so many in the US. ... Despite all the boundaries and borders we have in the world, I love to travel and to share things. I was on a solo tour last autumn where I played in Egypt, Iran and India, and I met so many interesting people—often the sense of tradition is enormously inspiring."

As a result, the time away and the influence of those other places have only left him and the band energized and recharged. The comeback starts with six dates along the US east coast and a promise of more to come. He mentions, "We're also working on a longer autumn tour around October, November. That should go to the west coast and include a few other places we couldn't make this time. So with the new record, it might be for us a bit more normal to organize tours and also maybe play a few festivals up to 2019.

"We're always preparing things long in advance," Bärtsch continues. "When American musicians come to most countries in Europe, especially Switzerland, you can just come and then play here. You don't need a work visa. The other way, for European musicians going there, usually it's a big challenge to create circumstances to make a tour that's reasonable and makes sense. But this time we have a long work visa, so we can plan for the next two or three years. We can come to festivals and organize tours as we like."

With luck the momentum will only continue building in further increments. For now they're happy that the pendulum is swinging back to this quartet and eager to share the results: "We will continue to work on preparing a new

repertoire. But I think for us, it's very important now that Ronin is back as a group and we're very keen on sharing this live. ... I'm really burning to play more places with my colleagues, show the joy and the investment over the last years."

And further down the road? The shape of things to come will have to unfold at its own pace; Bärtsch and company are well aware that there's no shortcut to mastery. "In a way it's comparable to great pop or rock bands that are playing a lot of similar material, developing it every time since they know each other so well. This kind of band feel and group consciousness, like you have in jazz, it's very surprising. ... We develop every time you see us. Of course, on the record now, you hear a certain moment where the process was, but already now we've taken it a lot further. That has to do with this engagement of everybody in playing every week together and developing things over the years."

"You cannot force that," he sums up simply. "It just needs time."