



## Nik Bärtsch's RONIN



"There are two paths a samurai can walk: that of a clan member, and that of a ronin, a lonely warrior. The former is highly esteemed in Japan, the latter is bitterly detested.

The despised warrior without a clan is viewed by clan people as a hungry wolf, roaming through the country, with no ties or obligations, no duties or support, no protection, no respect for people's material well-being. Despite his virtuosity as a swordsman, a lone fighter is unable to withstand gangs or clansmen eager to fight. His readiness to die could be tested any time: not in a great battle between two mighty clans where he might die a famous hero but in trifling rows over a mouthful of rice or a sip of sake. If a ronin wants to survive, he must, wherever he goes, remain extremely careful. He has no social status whatsoever and is not respected by anybody. People treat him with the same level of caution as they would a wild animal that attacks whenever frightened.

Most of these ronin aren't happy with their destiny. They spend most of their time struggling to ingratiate themselves with anybody who would accept them, hoping for a clan in need of warriors. They are cursed with shabby clothes and inadequate food, longing for the honour and security of a clan member.

If only those destitute samurai could view their situation without prejudice! They might see that, at the cost of tolerable poverty, they have acquired a rare treasure: freedom.

They are free to cognise the world, free to discover and fulfil the true purpose of man. They can toughen themselves in the wilderness; they can study budo wherever a master is available; they can visit monasteries and practice meditation.

The price they pay for liberty is the occasional empty stomach, a little poverty and loneliness. But it is not easy to rid yourself from the henchman's crushing burden."

[Translated from: Thomas Preston, Samurai-Geist - Der Weg eines Kriegers in den japanischen Kampfkünsten, Leimen/Heidelberg 1991]

## Phraseology and band organism – about the music

With the zen-funk quintet RONIN founded in 2001, Zurich composer and pianist Nik Bärtsch proceeds with the work on his RITUAL GROOVE MUSIC, together with Kaspar Rast (drums), Björn Meyer (bass), Andi Pupato (percussion) and Sha (bass/contrabass clarinet, alto sax). Their music consistently follows the same aesthetic vision under various instrumental guises: creating the maximum effect by minimal means.

In addition to its tours and performances, for six years RONIN has held a concert every Monday evening at its own club in Zurich - since 2009 at the club EXIL cofounded by Nik Bärtsch. This long-term experiment encourages and demands constant musical evolution –the result of interaction, attentive listening, and critical, even ironic musical and verbal dialogue. On these Mondays the musicians eat and play together. In this way RONIN has, over the years, independently created its own phraseology and proceeded blithely but consistently on its own path as a socio-musical organism. Nik Bärtsch as the band's composer precisely sets down most of the pieces in notation; but in live performances it becomes, at some point, impossible to tell what is composed, interpreted or improvised. The band has to discover the right tension and the suitable dramatic structure for a piece on the spur of the moment. The band-organism thus outwits not only the composition, but it self. In this way RONIN works politely but radical and in the long run on a collective phrasing which cannot be captured in notation. It can only be gained through training and patience, through mutual respect and interest, through the ability to resonate with each other.

Then familiar phrases, curious and vivid turns of phrase, webs of ghost notes and rhythmic punch lines will arise as if by themselves.

Despite the multiplicity of the band's influences, Ronin's music always possesses a strong individuality. They incorporate elements of disparate musical worlds, be they funk, new classical music or sounds from Japanese ritual music. However, these forms are never merely juxtaposed in a post-modernist fashion but instead amalgamated into a coherent new style. Ultimately, these sounds and rhythms are highly idiosyncratic. The music consists of very few phrases and motives, continually combined and layered in new ways.

Ronin thus creates a consistent aesthetic across all levels of musical expression. Composition, phrasing, sound structure, performance, and musical form all combine to form a system of interrelated elements.

(Michel Mettler)

[www.nikbaertsch.com/ronin/](http://www.nikbaertsch.com/ronin/)

[www.myspace.com/nikbaertschcronin](http://www.myspace.com/nikbaertschcronin)

## What the critics are saying...

"Citing James Brown as well as Kurosawa, Bärtsch's "Zen-funk" is minimalism that doesn't risk inscrutability by sticking too long in one groove. Built from repeating piano figures with clarinet, bass, and a double dose of percussion for spring works, these "modules" improvise not note by note but section by unexpected section."

Tom Hull, Village Voice (USA)

"What he's come up with amounts to a whole new musical concept. This is music that throbs with a pulsating dynamism that's almost hypnotic... woven into the rhythmic tapestry is startling imagery that grows from simple beginnings. Bärtsch's mysterious music will be around for a lot longer than the quick fix that majority taste seems to clamour for." Stuart Nicholson, The Observer (UK)

"He may call it "Zen Funk", but the real question is, what the hell is this? The band plays a highly disciplined style of music that relies on interlocking rhythm, groove, and groups of tight, short melodic statements all stacked on top of one another... Bärtsch's melodic ideas are trance-like and hypnotic." Thom Jurek, Allmusic.com (USA)

"Coolly propulsive yet dynamically arresting... Body and mind come together in an intriguing, rhythmically compelling yet contemplative confluence of sensibilities. Part Zen poetry, part club-culture groove, the near-hour of the ultra-disciplined, East-West synthesis of intelligence and passion that is Stoa could just take the world by storm." Michael Tucker, Amazon (UK)

"Swiss pianist Bärtsch may have just made the first post-Ecstasy jazz record. His self-styled 'zen funk' mixes Steve Reich's repetitive minimalism with gently chugging James Brown grooves... Bärtsch draws on Eastern philosophy and John Cage to create simmering, propulsive music that should appeal to clubbers and avant-gardists in equal measure." Kerstan Mackness, Time Out (UK)

"A philosophy is at work here which coherently combines and interlocks different systems of thought, similar to permanently superimposing meters and melodic patterns of the quintet. The minimalism of Steve Reich sups with the hip-shaking of James Brown, the composure of a Japanese tea house soaks in the steamy sweat of an endless trance-like dance... There are many new details to discover in the structure of the walls and the continuous ground tremor of this heart chamber." Joseph Engels, Rondo (Germany)

"It shows the versatility and candour of so-called modern music which does not set its own boundaries but lines up to perhaps cross the existing ones." Hans-Jurgen von Osterhausen, Jazzpodium (Germany)

„Bärtsch's strength is in permanent metamorphosis of instantly captivating motives, wherein one should never feel entirely safe. Particularly the poetic Asian influence itself never leads to an esoteric garden path. For the Stoa album it would hold true: intellectual execution hand in hand with musically-culinary delight." Guido Fischer, Jazzthetik (Germany)

"Cool modules instead of true songs, polyrhythmic funk that is hypnotically tenacious." Rolling Stone (Germany)

"Groove without ego – Swiss musician Nik Bärtsch makes magnificent zen-funk." Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany)

"The motto 'Ritual Groove Music' is not accidental in Nik Bärtsch's music; it reconciles minimal music with funk, Steve Reich with James Brown, Lennie Tristano with Japanese Nô-music." Peter Niklas Wilson, Du – Die Zeitschrift für Kultur (Switzerland)

"A breathtakingly charged submersion. Seldom was the emptiness so alive, the repetition so exciting." Fridtjof Küchemann, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany)

"Twangs as Japanese blades, Bärtsch's precision keeps you wide awake... Recommendable to all – from theoreticians and lovers of tea ceremonies to party goers." Oliver Hochkeppel, Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany)

„This music sounds so contemporary, physical, and topical. An endless sparkling sound surface interfused with beats and yet timeless. A tone puzzle. Bärtsch is already further ahead." Tilman Urbach, Fono Forum (Germany)

"A concentrate of diverse performance forms: the directness of the musicians' agency from Folk tradition, the conciseness of Pop, the freedom of improvisation from Jazz and finally, the formal consciousness of classical music... Thanks to the constancy of the line up the musicians have reached a rhythmical level resembling meticulously engineered clockwork." Ueli Bernays, Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Switzerland),

"Stoa is surprising in material, attractive in evolution, convincing in interpretation." Francisco Cruz, Vibrations (France/Switzerland)

„Asceticism and ecstasy". Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Switzerland)

"Nik Bärtsch, the scientist of groove". Tages Anzeiger Zürich (Switzerland)

"Controlled refusal is the price of an ultimately greater delight". Radio Magazin (Switzerland)

"Bärtsch has managed to discover a style of his own before nonexistent". Jazz'n'More (Switzerland)

## Member Biographies:

Nik Bärtsch (composition, piano, Fender Rhodes)



Born 1971 in Zurich. Pianist, composer and producer. Instruction in piano and percussion from the age 8. 1997 Graduation from the 'Musikhochschule Zürich'. 1989-2001 studies in philosophy, linguistics and musicology at the University of Zurich. 2003-04 stay in Japan. Ongoing work on his RITUAL GROOVE MUSIC as pianist and composer. Leader of zen-funk quintet RONIN (since 2001; with Kaspar Rast, Björn Meyer, Andi Pupato & Sha) and MOBILE (since 1997). Teacher for 'practical aesthetics' at the 'Musikhochschule Zürich/Winterthur' (2000-03). Cofounder of the music club EXIL in Zürich (2009, [www.exil.ch](http://www.exil.ch)).

Interest in the influence and the combination of music and movement, specially in the following body techniques: Aikido, Feldenkrais, Gyrotonic.

Numerous awards from 1999, including the jazz priority award of Swiss Arts Council in 2006.

Large compositions:

- 'Modul 26 for Sextet' for the New York group Bang On A Can (20 minutes, 2010, premiere at Merkin Hall NY).
- 'Orit' for three percussionists (20 minutes, 2008, premiere at the Mehrklang Festival Freiburg 08)
- 'BLUE TRILOGY' with MOBILE (2000-02), three 36 hour multimedia live concerts.
- 'SEE - a life musical space picture' with MOBILE and OOS (6 hours, 2005).
- Openair performance together with the Butoh dancer Imre Thormann and the Gagaku ensemble of the Osaka Gakuin University Japan at the Hiyoshi Shrine in Otsu Japan (2005).
- 'Modul Ritual', New Chamber Funk I, composition for 4 saxophones, piano, rhodes, drums & percussion (70 minutes, written in Japan 2003/04 for the ARTE QUARTETT).
- 'Orchestrated Moduls', New Chamber Funk II, composition for RONIN and the Ensemble für Neue Musik Zurich (2005, 60 Minutes).
- 'Macbeth' by Shakespeare/Müller, (Sophiensäle Berlin 2004), director: Nora Somaini.
- Solo project 'Hishiryo' for prepared piano and percussion (since 2001)

As well as:

- Music for the documentary film projects Photo Suisse (2003-04), Design Suisse (2005-06), and "Swiss View" (2005-10 with the producer Marco Fumasoli) for the Swiss TV SFDRS.
- Various music scores for theatre: 'Titus Andronicus' by Shakespeare/Müller at the Theater Kampnagel in Hamburg (1999); 'Gier' by Sarah Kane (Dresden 2001) and 'Kühltransport' by Maxim Biller (Dresden 2002); 'Medea' by Euripides' (Stadttheater Mönchengladbach 2002), director: Nora Somaini.
- Music score for the CD 'Design Hören' of the architecture magazine 'Hochparterre' & the ITH (2004)
- Various commissions for television including ARD (Germany) and SF (Swiss Television)

Selection of Recordings:

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "LLYRÏA", ECM 2010

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "HOLON", ECM 2008

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "STOA", ECM 2006

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "REA", Ronin Rhythm Records 2004

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "Live", Ronin Rhythm Records 2003

Nik Bärtschs Ronin, "Randori", Ronin Rhythm Records 2002

Nik Bärtschs Mobile, "AER", Ronin Rhythm Records 2004

Nik Bärtschs Mobile, "Ritual Groove Music", Ronin Rhythm Records 2001/2005

Nik Bärtsch, "Hishiryo", Piano Solo, Ronin Rhythm Records 2002

## Kaspar Rast (drums )

Kaspar was born in 1972 in Zurich. He has been playing drums since the age of 6. Trained at the JMS in Zurich and the Drummers Collective in New York. Kaspar's list of concerts and tours covers Europe, Africa and South America. He works in various Swiss musical formations and projects, plays sessions and acts as a studio musician. [www.rast-violins.ch](http://www.rast-violins.ch)

Selection of Recordings:

Rast, Repetto, Li "KUN", Tonus-Music Records 2001

Kaspar Rast, 'Part 52', Tonus-Music Labor Research Result, Tonus-Music Records 2003

## Björn Meyer (bass)

Björn was born and raised in Stockholm. His journey as freelance musician started 1989 with a wide spectrum of musical adventures. Traditional music, soundscapes, grooves and playing-techniques from all over the world have always been major influences on his music and also challenged him to develop a very personal style; always searching for new ways of expressing ideas on the bass. As a composer he also combines styles, traditions and moods to a unique form - a concept he calls "Tripfolk" or Bazaarmusic".

In 1996 Björn moved to Switzerland and since then works as a musician and producer in many national and international projects. Together with harp player Asita Hamidi he leads Bazaarpool - a world open musicians-community and record label. The pool offers a platform for collaborations with artists from all over the world sharing a common vision of traditions and development. Except being a member of Nik Bärtsch's RONIN he also plays with the Anouar Brahem Quartet, Asita Hamidi's Bazaar and the Swedish trio Bazar Blå a.o. As a teacher he leads workshops about bassplaying and modern approaches to "folkmusic" and has taught at the conservatories in Stockholm, Zürich and Luzern. As a teacher he leads workshops about bassplaying and modern approaches to "folkmusic" and has taught at the conservatories in Stockholm, Zürich and Luzern.

CD's:

Anouar Brahem, The astounding eyes of Rita (ECM 2009)

Bazar Blå, LOST, BazaarpoolCD013 (2009)

Bazar Blå, NYSCH, XOUCD/BazaarpoolCD003 (2004)

Bazar Blå, Live, BazaarpoolCD001 (2003)

Bazar Blå, TRIPFOLK, XOUCD 130 (2000)

Bazar Blå, NORDIC CITY, XOUCD 122 (1998)

Asita Hamidi's Bazaar, S.W.E.N BazaarpoolCD014 (2009)

Bazaaris, Watersongs (live), Bazaarpool007 (2006)

Bazaaris, Live, Bazaarpool002 (2004)

Asita Hamidi, BLUE ARK, bazaarpoolCD004 (2005)

## Andi Pupato (percussion)

Andi was born in 1971 in Zurich. He studied percussion in Zurich, later at the Escuela de superación profesional de musica Ignacio Cervantes in Havana, Cuba and with José Luis "Changuito" in Quintana. In 1994, Andi went to Senegal with the Senegalese master drummer Kounta's band 'Dougou-Fana', where he studied traditional African percussion. At present, he works as a percussionist for various national and international bands (with Andreas Vollenweider among others) and is an active studio musician. [www.andipupato.com](http://www.andipupato.com)

Selection of Recordings: Andreas Vollenweider, "VOX", 2004.

## Sha (bass- and contrabass clarinets)

Sha was born in 1983. He plays the saxophone and the bass clarinet. Among his teachers are Don Li, Nik Bärtsch, Sujay Bobade and Bänz Oester. Sha is presently studying at the Jazz School in Lucerne. He is also a member of Mik Keusen's 'Blau' and the leader and composer for his own band 'Banryu'. Sha has worked with Anja Losinger, Walter Grimmer, Michael Gassmann, Philipp Schaufelberger and Claudio Puntin.

### Selection of Recordings:

Sha's Banryu, 'Chessboxing Vol. One (Ronin Rhythm Records 2008)

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