

# Spirits

Jason Kahn // voice, lap slide resonator guitar

Christian Wolfarth // percussion

Spirits -A- (19.09)

Spirits -B- (19.43)

Recorded December 22, 2019 in Zürich at Kunstraum Walcheturm.

Recording, mixing, mastering, liner notes and LP artwork Jason Kahn.

Many thanks to Patrick Huber for allowing us to record in Kunstraum Walcheturm.

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*Spirits* marks the second release of my duo with Christian Wolfarth, though recordings of a trio with Christian, Günter Müller and myself (then on electronics) came out on the CDs *Drumming* (2005, Creative Sources) and *Limmat* (2010, Mikroton). Following this last trio CD, Christian and I didn't play together again until 2016, when we had a series of concerts in Switzerland and a recording session that yielded the CD *Percussion / Voice* (2017, Confront Recordings). On occasion of this CD, we toured the UK in the fall of 2017.

At a concert in September 2018, Christian heard me playing slide resonator guitar with a quartet at the Werkstatt für improvisierte Musik Zürich. He suggested I add the guitar to our duo. To be honest, at first I wasn't sure if this would be a good idea. Up to this point, I'd mainly played the guitar as a soloist. I had no idea of how I could integrate this in Christian's playing. But we tried it out and embarked on a series of concerts across Europe in the fall of 2019.

Up until to the first gig of this tour, I'd been playing the resonator guitar in *Spanish* fashion, tuned down to C in Vestapol. This gig went well, but something bothered me about my playing. I'm a huge fan of the blues and playing in Vestapol tuning automatically puts one in a blues tonality. But playing with Christian in the context of non-idiomatic improvisation the idea of bringing in the idiom of the blues, albeit in its most abstract form, just didn't seem to work for me. I could see how this would distract from the nature of what we were doing. Moving back to standard tuning (in C) put me in more neutral territory, far away from any idiomatic playing.

I also switched to playing lap style, which prior to these concerts I'd not really tried. Playing in this manner also allowed me to approach the guitar from more of a percussionist's standpoint, something second nature for me as the drum set was my first instrument (actually, the guitar was my first instrument but I didn't really pursue this as I did the drums). And finally, laying the guitar flat opened me up to the playing space and the audience. This is important to me because I like to feel vulnerable when vocalizing, to sense the danger of the situation and not be able to hide behind an instrument.

Christian also refined his playing concept, taking only an antique marching snare, one Chinese cymbal and some small objects on tour. The terms *reduction* or *minimal* have often been applied to Christian's approach. I've always found such labels misleading. To me, Christian's practice would be more accurately described as *maximalist*. Getting the most out of one instrument. Maximizing the sounds possible from one cymbal, the rim of a snare drum. At this point, I think if Christian were to only clap his hands he could come up with an infinite variety of ways to apply this in a musical context.

The idea for 2019 was to do a tour and then follow this up with recordings for a new LP. To these ends, we played twelve shows in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and Switzerland. We performed in art spaces, galleries, artists' studios, bars, apartments, clubs, the cellar of a translation agency and a disused factory. Two months after our last date we met to record in Zürich at the Kunstraum Walcheturm, the city's preeminent space for contemporary art practices.

We'd definitely cooled off from the tour by this point. I'd have preferred to have met sooner, but scheduling didn't permit this. I set up my mobile studio in Walcheturm's spacious and resonant main room. Christian arrived with his instruments. We did a brief sound check then recorded four pieces, one after the other with just short breaks in-between. Take number one became A-Side of this record. Take number three is the B-Side.

What you hear on this LP is what we played during the recording session. The recordings were made to multi-track, with stereo microphones in front of Christian's instruments, a vocal microphone and a guitar microphone for myself, and two pairs of stereo room microphones at various distances in front of us. We set up next to each other, as we did for all our concerts. I mixed the recordings but didn't do any editing in the sense of cutting things up and moving different parts around. The flow and sequence of events is intact on these recordings. Mixing only entailed finding a good equilibrium between our instruments and bringing the presence of the room into the overall sound.

I suggested the title of *Spirits*, though at the time I couldn't say why this title would be appropriate for our music. It seems now, having to write these liner notes and forcing myself to give this some more thought, that the idea of

spirits permeates the nature of this music. Which after each performance often felt to me like an incantation, a call to all those spirits of this music that came before us. When I perform, I feel a spiritual kinship to all the musicians who've inspired me and helped me find my own voice through listening to their work.

There is also the spirit of the moment, lost in a timelessness that for me only improvising seems to induce. How can we capture the essence of a space in time and allow ourselves to be swept up in a continuum of spontaneous music, feeling the presence of the audience, distilling all that we've experienced into this one moment? If this sounds dramatic, then I guess that's because it is. In McCoy Tyner's words, so famously quoted in Val Wilmer's book of the same title, *[Music's no plaything. It's] as serious as your life*. There's no hiding in this moment, no room for artifice or craft. There's only listening, feeling the place and time. The spirit of eternity.

Jason Kahn