Composer/Arranger/Conductor/Pianist/Vibraphonist/Educator

biography (by Chris Kelsey, allaboutjazz.com)

Pianist and vibraphone player Karl Berger cites Ornette Coleman as a close friend and mentor; Coleman’s ways of playing jazz are certainly reflected in Berger’s concept, more so than any other vibist one could name. Berger eschews four-mallet technique; his style is all single-line, with little (if any) chordal playing. Berger’s compositions are brief, songlike free-bop heads in the manner of Ornette, with free/modal solo sections sandwiched in between the theme statements. At his best, Berger’s improvisations have much in common with his tunes; they are strongly and logically rhythmic, played over a swinging pulse, and mostly tied to tonal centers. Like Coleman, Berger is not as radical in the hearing as one might expect; both their musics are based on the core elements of swing and coherent melody.

Berger began playing piano in his native Germany at the age of ten. As a young adult, he landed a gig as house pianist for jam sessions at Club 54 in Heidelberg. There he accompanied such visiting American players as Leo Wright, Lex Humphries, and Don Ellis -- learning, in the process, the complexities of modern jazz. Eventually, he took up vibes and in the early ’60s developed an interest in free jazz. Berger earned a Ph.D. in musicology in 1963; two years later, he joined Don Cherry’s Paris-based quintet. The group traveled to New York in 1966 to record Symphony for Improvisers on Blue Note. Berger stayed in the U.S. and recorded his first album under his own name for ESP later that year. From 1967-1971, Berger played educational demonstrations in public schools with pianist Horace Arnold’s group, and led his own ensembles.
In 1972, he and Coleman formed the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, NY (www.creativemusicstudio.org). The school was geared toward encouraging young students to explore their own creative ideas rather than imposing traditional jazz concepts upon them. Teachers at the school at various times included Jack DeJohnette, Sam Rivers, and Anthony Braxton, among many other prominent musicians. In the summer of 1982, Berger led a 28-piece big band at a "Jazz and World Music" concert as part of that year's Kool Jazz Festival in New York. Berger cut back on his teaching, shutting down the CMS facility in the mid-'80s, although workshops, live performances, and other activities have continued into the 21st century, with the latest version of the CMS having attained nonprofit status as part of the Creative Music Foundation. A major endeavor of the foundation has been the CMS Archive Project (undertaken in collaboration with the Columbia University Center of Jazz Studies), including a series of CDs of historic recordings from the studio's heyday whose first volume saw limited-edition release to foundation members in February 2010, followed by a general release through Planet Arts Recordings in April of that year.

In the years immediately following the CMS' initial dissolution, however, Berger became more active as a player, first embarking on a world tour in 1985-1986, during which he served as a guest conductor and composer for the West German Radio Orchestra in Cologne. Berger also participated in percussion festivals in New Delhi and Bombay, and served as a pianist in a duo with the African percussionist Baba Olatunji. Berger continued recording in subsequent years, although not prolifically, working as a sideman on sessions with guitarist John McLaughlin, saxophonist Lee Konitz, and bassist Alan Silva. (He had also played on Carla Bley's late-'60s recording of Escalator Over the Hill.) Of Berger's later recordings as leader, 1987's Transit (with Ed Blackwell and Dave Holland) and 1990's Around -- both on Black Saint -- are well worth seeking out. During the '90s, Berger led several more dates for a variety of labels, and during the new millennium he emerged as an arranger, often working in conjunction with producer/bassist Bill Laswell, for pop/rock and world music artists including such notables as Jeff Buckley, Natalie Merchant, Better Than Ezra, the Cardigans, Shin Terai, and Angélique Kidjo.

[from ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ MUSICIANS]

He's written over 100 compositions and arrangements for classical ensembles, jazz groups, fusion groups, big band, symphony, and commercial recordings (string and horn arrangements, synthesized scores) for SONY/Columbia, CBS, EMI, MCA, Epic, Island Records, Island Pictures, London/Polygram, Virgin, Douglas Music and European Radio + TV Networks. He's done commissions by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Rockefeller Foundation, German Radio: SWF, Radio France, Rai Italy. SWF-Prize 1994.

...He's the winner of 6 Downbeat Critics Polls as jazz soloist. He's recorded for the Blue Note, Milestone, Polygram, Enja, Vogue, Pye, JVC, Black Saint, In&Out, CBS, Knitting Factory labels. He's made appearances at European, Japanese, Brazilian, North- and South American festival and concert venues. He's recorded and performed with Don Cherry, Lee Konitz, John McLaughlin, Gunther Schuller, Mingus Epitaph Orchestra, Dave Brubeck and others. He's been the leader of ensembles and recordings with Dave Holland, Ed Blackwell, Ray Anderson, Carlos Ward, Pharoah Sanders, Blood Ulmer, and many others.

He's director of Creative Music Studio and president of Creative Music Foundation, Inc. Woodstock NY. His residencies include US Universities Ann Arbor, Antioch, Banff, Bard, California Institute for the Arts, Cornish, Dartmouth, Miami, New School, SUNY, Texas Tech, and Wesleyan. His international residencies also include Accra, Dakar, Lagos, Libreville, Manila, Bombay, New Delhi, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Liege, Berlin, Koln, Stuttgart, Paris, and Venice.

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