



BEN STAPP

BY ANNA STEEGMANN

If you love the sweet brassy sound of the tuba and feel that the instrument deserves to be the star of the show, you need to listen to Ben Stapp, tuba player extraordinaire. Stapp has been called one of the most interesting young-generation instrumentalists and praised for his limitless and daring imagination. Asked about his place in the jazz world, he answers: "I'm trying to create a world, not just music. It's not enough for me to write music for the fun of it, the intellectual or spiritual journey, or for honing my craft as a composer and voice. I'm preparing a large canvas so anyone can disappear into an entirely self-sustaining world. The concepts, the literature, the music theory, the ethos, the fiction, the religion, the design, the math all serve the purpose of constructing another world." His considerable body of work shows that his approach is both intellectual and ingenious and that he's in a league of his own.

Stapp (born in 1982) grew up in Sacramento, CA. In elementary school he played the keyboard and saxophone, dabbled in piano and finally settled on the tuba. Initially, it wasn't the sound that attracted him. "I was obsessed with big machines—maybe from my dad (a tugboat captain) showing me the engine rooms of many tugboats. Later, I saw a picture of a kid sitting inside a sousaphone on a stand. I liked the challenge of mastering a machine to create the sounds I wanted, and my mom was very supportive." At UCLA, he studied with Tommy Johnson, who mentored him in the tuba world. "I wanted to be like him, and I still do," Stapp says. At the Royal College of Music in the U.K., Roger Bobo challenged and pushed him in new ways. Asked about the milestones in his career, and the recognition he has received, he gives a lengthy list. In 2006, at age 25, he played on his first creative music album: Alípio C. Neto Quartet's *The Perfume Comes Before The Flower* (Clean Feed), which included Herb Robertson (trumpet), Ken Filiano (bass) and Michael T.A. Thompson (drums). A few years later he released his debut album as leader *Ecstasis* (Uqbar Music, 2008) with Tony Malaby (tenor) and Satoshi Takeishi (drums/percussion). Then two of his projects—*Eight Houses* and the two-hour opera *Myrrha's Red Book*—came about as a result of Jerome Commissions at Roulette in Brooklyn. He has worked with a range of jazz luminaries (William Parker, Stephen Haynes, Nate Wooley, Ray Anderson, Steven Bernstein) and in various other contexts—from touring with Red Baraat to contemporary classical music projects such as those with John Luther Adams, TILT at Lincoln Center and with ICE, ECCE and SEM for AACM Composers.

Stapp is indeed a prized collaborator among other musicians. Bassist Parker calls him "a low-brass hero who creates beautiful full-range tuba sounds that make you love the instrument and the musician... and reinvented many aspects of tuba playing regarding the sounds, colors and textures—a great musician." Trombonist Steve Swell also has spoken highly of Stapp for "his positivity and sense of having fun while enjoying the playing and camaraderie with the other musicians." Guitarist Joe Morris calls him "one of the most profound improvisers

at work in the U.S." Will Montgomery states, "Ben is a state-of-the-art virtuoso and a ground-breaking innovator on tuba. He's a focused, collaborative and original improviser too." Guitarist Joel Harrison remembers Stapp thanking him for giving him difficult tuba parts in his big band: "Too often, Ben said, the tuba gets easy parts!"

Stapp is most proud of his opera as well as his music theory from the world of Eono-Theta Harmony, featuring 156 interrelated scales. A selection of these is demonstrated in his *Harmony in 4 Styles*. For listeners unfamiliar with his work, he recommends the track "Myrrha's Plea, Doctor's Thoughts", the second act of his opera *Myrrha's Red Book*, a "nice mix of techniques in one section—written out complexity (clarinets), conventional melodic and harmonic writing, directed improvisation and collage forms—subgroupings playing in different tempos."

Most of his albums are self-released on his Uqbar label, some as hard copies, most as digital streaming and downloads. His label name reveals his love of literature: "Uqbar is the fictional location in Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'. The story inspired me to continue my creative journey through a subjective idealistic lens." Likewise, James Wright's novel *The Kraken Imaginary* fascinated him for its description of the beast and the story created around it. It inspired his album *MCSD CH2: Imaginary Kraken*, a composition he describes as representing the unknowable and "a map where certain players act as conductors cueing players and sections, sometimes asynchronously with others.... and built around shaping and directing the extended technique sound world as a somatic focus."

Stapp is currently working on a four-dimensional musical object in his science fiction novel *Eono, Ourobius, Uzmic Ro'Samg*, called the Eonic Clock. Through creating a new world with new objects, he's found new questions and answers to help develop his Theta Harmony. "These scales and rhythms, my Eonic Clock, are like Borges' Tlönian objects showing up and influencing my creative real world. So, I'm digging around a subconsciously imbued, fictional world to find my materials—not unlike Jung's active imagination." With the skill, creativity and sense of awe he brings to his work, no doubt we are in for a special treat.

Asked how he balances the demands of teaching band in public schools with creating, performing and private life (he's the father of a toddler), Stapp, age 41, answers: "Saying no to tours with Ray Anderson and recordings with ICE, among other gigs I've had to turn down, definitely feels bad. I've taken solace in reminding myself I'm not trying to build a musician CV; I'm more interested in leaving a lasting piece of artwork behind."

For more info visit benstapp.com. Stapp is at Terraza 7 May 5 with Chia's Dance Party, Downtown Music Gallery May 30 in duo with Sam Newsome and Freddy's Bar May 30 with Paul Nadien and Max Kutner. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Alípio C Neto Quartet — *The Perfume Comes Before The Flower* (Clean Feed, 2006)
- Ben Stapp Trio — *Ecstasis* (Uqbar Music, 2008)
- Stephen Haynes — *Pomegranate* (New Atlantis, 2013)
- Ben Stapp/Joe Morris — *Mind Creature Sound Dasein (feat. Stephen Haynes)* (Fundacja Słuchaj, 2017)
- Ben Stapp, Sara Schoenbeck, Sam Newsome, Olivia D. Prato, Tyler H. Borden, Stephen Haynes — *MCSD CH2: Imaginary Kraken* (Uqbar Music, 2019)
- Joe Morris/Ben Stapp/Dan O'Brien — *Amphibious Not By Nature* (Phonoemulsion, 2021)

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