

ON RECORD

THE ALLURE OF VINYL

Newvelle Records and the LP aesthetic

BY BRADLEY BAMBARGER

BEYOND THE ART itself, what's the most important draw in the consumption of recorded music? Sound quality? Convenience? Price? One thing is certain: More and more of the population experiences music in an incorporeal manner, as something to be grabbed at will from the ether. Online streaming has become by far the most popular way of consuming music, having eclipsed the digital download seemingly overnight. We are on our way to a post-ownership society when it comes to music, the "record" having fast become — to the general public's mind — not a thing to collect and pore over, but something evanescent, a disembodied pleasure.

Yet not all music lovers see the intangible as inevitable. It's true that sales of the once-dominant CD have declined precipitously, though they still account for half of all albums sold; the CD remains the major artifact for quality sound, digital-compatible convenience and physical tangibility. What's surprising, though, is the exponential resurgence of the vinyl LP (or "long-playing") record, that vintage analog product once considered as dead as dirt. Although very much a niche concern — last year's top-selling LP, David Bowie's *Blackstar*, moved under sixty thousand copies — overall sales of new vinyl records have increased by orders of magnitude over the past decade.

Vinyl's renewed popularity stems from the fact that the LP is the ultimate rejection of digital ephemera in music, with the "warmth" of analog distortion and even surface noise having their appeal for some. The vinyl experience enshrines a physicality to listening — the artwork and information on the sizable sleeves; the tangible lushness

of vinyl, its weight and smell; the act of putting the record on a turntable and flipping it over. Much of vinyl's allure lies in the sheer retro ritual of it. And aesthetic ritual — like sound quality, convenience and price — can still be key to the experience of recorded music. Vinyl purveyors are betting on this, with several latching onto the subscription model to stoke the collecting impulse. Of course, the subscription model for financing and selling records goes back to the earliest days of the business, with such initiatives as EMI's Hugo Wolf lieder society in the Thirties.

At the high end of these new ventures is the boutique jazz label *Newvelle Records*, which releases its music exclusively on vinyl. The model for *Newvelle*, founded by Boston-based musician Elan Mehler and his French business partner, Jean-Christophe Morisseau, is to release six deluxe LPs per year, sold by annual subscription. Working out to sixty-to-eighty dollars each, the albums are an expensive proposition; but these LPs, with 180-gram clear vinyl and gatefold covers, are gorgeous objets d'art, with much care put into the sonic mastering and visual presentation. Each annual series will juxtapose work on the covers and sleeves by a pairing of visual artist and writer; the 2016 LPs include evocative photography by Bernard Plossu and poems by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Tracy K. Smith.

By showcasing not only musicians but also visual artists and authors, *Newvelle* aims to utilize "the full aesthetic canvas of the LP,"



Don Friedman at the piano.
The late Don Friedman recently released *Strength and Sanity* on *Newvelle*.



WILLIAM SEMERARO



Return
Jack DeJohnette, piano (*Newvelle*)

says Mehler, thirty-seven. "This is so that the listener enjoys a synergistic impact from the combination of music, writing and images. I grew up on LPs from Blue Note and ECM, falling in love with their sheer quality and attention to detail."

So far in its inaugural year, *Newvelle* has shipped exquisite LPs by pianist Frank Kimbrough (*Meantime*), saxophonist Noah Preminger (*Some Other Time*) and bassist Ben Allison (*Quiet Revolution*), as well as by Jack DeJohnette (*Return*). Although DeJohnette is renowned as one of the all-time great drummers in jazz — being the most recorded artist in ECM history, a long-standing member of Keith Jarrett's Standards Trio and an alumnus of important Miles Davis bands — the seventy-four-year-old recorded his first-ever album of solo piano for *Newvelle*. Also just out from the label is the final album by pianist Don Friedman, who died a few months after his trio session, at age eighty-one; rhapsodic and ruminative by turns, Friedman's *Strength and Sanity* serves as a beautifully produced tribute to short-lived trumpeter Booker Little, with whom the pianist recorded in the early Sixties. Capping *Newvelle's* 2016 is the color-rich LP *Argentinosaurus* by pianist Leo Genovese, who fronts a trio featuring DeJohnette and star bassist-vocalist Esperanza Spalding.

The fifty-nine-year-old Kimbrough has long been a fixture on the New York scene, though his accent still rings of his native North Carolina, as does his blue-hued phrasing on the piano. He's a pianist's pianist, a deep-soul player steeped in the art of jazz forebears from Herbie Nichols and Andrew Hill to Paul Motian and Paul Bley. A member of the Grammy-winning Maria Schneider Orchestra and professor of jazz piano at the Juilliard

School, Kimbrough has made a string of compelling albums, with *Meantime* his thirteenth as a leader. It's his first to appear on vinyl, "which seems kind of odd given that I grew up listening to LPs," the pianist says. "But by the time I started making records, in the late Eighties, people were giving away their vinyl by the crate-load. To tell you the truth, I don't even have a turntable at home now, but when I went with Elan to the Juilliard library to play the test pressing, it was exciting to hear."

Kimbrough's *Meantime* is a departure for the pianist in that instead of setting him within a group of veteran peers, it features him alongside a quartet of young players in a mix of originals (including a heartfelt homage to Motian with *Elegy for P.M.*) and interpretations of tunes by Andrew Hill and Kurt Weill, as well as a languid take on the standard "Last Night When We Were Young." Kimbrough says: "Seeing the finished LP with the nice, big gatefold — it was beautiful, man. It brought me back to how great it was to listen to records when I was a kid, rolling reefer on those gatefolds, which were so handy for that. Of course, I don't roll joints anymore. It's not economical."

Suitable for preparing herbal remedies or not, Newvelle LPs are undoubtedly a luxury item, as Kimbrough points out: "I don't know any students of mine who can afford them." So far, Newvelle has a coterie of two hundred subscribers, and Mehler, a former piano student of Kimbrough's at New York University in the Nineties, says he and Morisseau hope to hit a break-even point of six hundred by the end of their second release cycle next year. Newvelle has a generous stance toward its artists, with the label retaining vinyl rights but only licensing the music itself exclusively for two years; after that, the artist can also go elsewhere to release the album digitally and on CD. "As cool as I think our LPs are, we don't want to hoard the music," Mehler says. "We want the artists to be able to really get it out there."

Preminger's *Some Other Time* is a spacious, twilit all-ballads collection with the young saxophonist leading an ace band with guitarist Ben Monder, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Billy Hart. Allison's *Quiet Revolution* is a lovely tribute to the chamber-jazz sound of Jimmy Giuffre and Jim Hall, featuring the bassist alongside reed player Ted Nash and guitarist Steve Cardenas. Before he made his mark as a drummer, DeJohnette played standards on piano in Chicago, and his *Return* LP is an impressionistic set of both new pieces for solo piano and reworked compositions from across his career.

Newvelle's 2017 release schedule will include an album of all-Brazilian music from Patitucci in league with guitarist Yotam Silberstein and percussionist Rogerio Boccato. Other LPs will showcase the duo of pianist Kevin Hays and guitarist Lionel Loueke; Cuban pianist Aruán Ortiz solo; bassist Rufus Reid in a jazz trio plus string quartet; bassist Chris Tordini with vocalist Becca Stevens and guitarist Greg Ruggiero; and saxophonist Jon Cowherd with Cardenas, bassist Tony Scherr and drummer Brian Blade.

"We'll see what the market will bear, but I believe that in this digital world there is still a thirst for art you can actually hold in front of you," Mehler says. "An LP certainly focuses the mind on the album as an artistic statement, like a novel. And to me, and I think plenty of others, a physical artifact just adds a more consequential dimension to the experience of music."

DeJohnette has been something of a godfather for Newvelle, helping to spread the word and champion the label. To that end, he even sees virtues to vinyl beyond the aesthetic. The jazzman explains: "Something I like about LPs, beyond how beautiful they can be, is that you even get exercise while you're listening to them — you got to get up and turn them over!" ■

KEEP AN EAR OUT

CROWD FAVORITE

Outsider pianist *Lucas Debargue* revitalizes the classics.

BY BRIAN WISE

HE DID NOT win a coveted gold, silver or bronze medal when he performed at the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow in 2015, but fourth-place fame was enough to score Lucas Debargue a record deal and a schedule packed with recital dates.

"Everything didn't work how I would have liked," says Debargue, "but I'm happy I made the finals. It's life. I prepared very seriously and there are some good things and less good things and that's it. We are not robots."

Debargue — a mustachioed former supermarket clerk who became the fan favorite among viewers of the competition's webcast — releases his second album for Sony Classical in September, featuring sonatas by Beethoven and Medtner, plus Bach's Toccata in C minor. He says the career adjustment hasn't been particularly difficult.

"Now I have this inner intensity that's stronger than ever," said Debargue in a telephone interview as he dashed from the Paris Metro to meet a real-estate agent. The pianist had just secured an apartment big and soundproofed enough to accommodate his own piano. "It feels very natural to prepare for concerts."

Debargue, who turns twenty-six in October, may offer hope to anyone who has sought a career change or who followed a new passion as an adult. Growing up near Compiègne, north of Paris, he says he did not touch a piano until the age of eleven. After two years of lessons at the town's conservatory, he continued to tinker and study online videos before other teenage pursuits took priority. "There was no one in my environment to guide me in the direction of competitions or music schools," Debargue says. "As a teenager I became able to play tricky things at the keyboard. By forcing a bit and wanting to do things, then you can succeed."

By age seventeen, Debargue traded piano for the electric bass. He joined a rock band, read Balzac and Proust, and worked in a supermarket. After nearly four years away from the piano, his enthusiasm was rekindled by a fluke invitation to perform at a small festival in Compiègne. In 2011, he began more systematic training with Rena Shereshevskaya, a respected teacher at the École Normale de Musique in Paris. Debargue also taught himself jazz, funding his education with gigs at open-mic nights and hotel bars (he continues to play occasional jazz sets in recital settings).

Debargue first caught the public's attention in 2014 when he took first prize at the Adilia Alieva Piano Competition in Gaillard, France. The Tchaikovsky Competition, however, was a bigger task: he had never performed with an orchestra, and some observers remarked on his unorthodox fingerings. But devotees heard a particular sensitivity and imagination in his playing of Ravel, Chopin and Scarlatti, which yielded a special citation from the Moscow Music Critics' Association and an invitation to perform in the winners' gala.

Debargue shrugs off questions about his late start. "If you look at Horowitz or Richter, none of them started at age three," he notes. He deflects praise of his talent as well. "Maybe I am naturally gifted, but I cannot think about this," he says. "I just think about following my feelings and being really grateful to the people who helped me on my way." He is particularly drawn to other artists with strong personalities, and is gently critical of those who closet themselves in the practice room. "Musicians today care about playing all of the notes as fast as possible but they don't especially care as much about the interpretation. That is the most fascinating part of the job." ■



FELIX BROEDE/SONY CLASSICAL