Hans Lüdemann Interview Virtuosity and "Virtual Piano"

By Ken Weiss

Photo credit: Ken Weiss

Photo credit: Ken Weiss

Hamburg-based Hans Lüdemann (born September 14, 1961, Hamburg, Germany) studied Classical piano at the Hamburg Conservatory and Jazz piano at the Musikhochschule Köln (Cologne) and with Joachim Kuhn. He later went on to make history as the first to achieve a Jazz master's degree in Germany. Lüdemann started his professional career in 1985 and was soon touring with a group led by Eberhard Weber and Jan Garbarek. Time spent in Africa has enriched his understanding of rhythm and harmony and transformed his art which is also broadened by an interest and use of the "virtual piano." Lüdemann has worked with Paul Bley, Albert Mangelsdorff, Heinz Sauer, Toumani Diabate, Mark Feldman, Marc Ducret, Silke Eberhard, Thomas Heberer and Lee Konitz. He leads a number of groups including Rooms [with Sebastien Boisseau (b) and Dejan Terzic (d)] and Trio Ivoire [with Aly Keita (balafon) and Christian Thome (d)]. This interview took place on March 18, 2016 in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania while Lüdemann was working as a visiting professor. Of note, we met in his study which held a piano once used by Bill Evans for one of his recordings.

Cadence: When your name is searched on the Internet, it brings up Hans Lüdemann as a 1936 German destroyer vessel. Any relationship to you?

Hans Lüdemann: [Laughs] No, I'm afraid not. He was actually a war hero, who supposedly saved a lot of lives, but I'm not related to him.

Cadence: You're certainly a well-rounded Jazz artist. You play improvisational Jazz with people like Phil Minton, Mark Feldman, Mark Helias and Gebhard Ullmann, along with playing more traditional Jazz and collaborating with African musicians. You also occasionally perform Classical music in prominent settings.

Lüdemann: I don't see a separation between all of that. For me, there's a unity. It's all music and it's very important that I can deal with the different sides of music. I grew up with Classical music, it's the German roots you could say. Bach, Beethoven and Mozart feel very much at home. I was a freak for Jazz already

at a very young age. I liked Blues and Dixieland Jazz but at that time there were no Jazz piano teachers in Germany. They didn't exist in the '60s or early '70s, so the only way to learn piano was to get Classical lessons and that's what I did. I still tried to improvise and invent songs and imitate stuff on my own, in addition to doing what I had to do for my teacher. I always play Classical music, but only seldom perform it. I consider myself an improvising musician as well as someone who composes and plays his own music. It really helps to have the Classical technique as a piano player when you're trying to be very free with the instrument. You need to really know your instrument. The history of the piano is basically the history of Classical music going all the way back to Bach and Beethoven. I love the instrument and to really own it and feel completely at home with it, it is really beautiful to have all these sources to draw from because it's all great music. I try to stay connected with that, I think it makes my music stronger.

Cadence: It's fascinating that you, a German musician, is teaching Jazz history as a visiting professor at an American college. That's the proverbial "carrying coals to Newcastle." This is your second time as a visiting professor at Swarthmore College. How did you make the connection with the college?

Lüdemann: I have an old friend from Hamburg and we were both exchange students in the '70s in the United States and she became a professor at Swarthmore. We had lost contact for over twenty years and by chance, her dad went to a concert of mine in Germany and sent her my CD. She contacted me and asked me to do a concert at Swarthmore and eventually I was offered a guest professorship. I came for the first time in 2009 and it went really well and now I'm back six years later. They were very skeptical in the beginning, especially about a language barrier, but there was no problem.

Cadence: What's been the biggest surprise for you in teaching Americans about their own music?

Lüdemann: Coming here as a guest professor is a different role for me. What is very interesting is that in Classical music, nobody is asking a question why a Chinese pianist like Lang Lang could be a great Classical pianist, even though it's not his music. No one asks why Glen Gould, as a Canadian, can play German music. He can play Bach, and be famous for it, and nobody thinks that's weird. So why should it be weird that a German is a great Jazz pianist and expert on Jazz? Jazz has also been a universal form of art for most of its history, like classical music. It's quite normal that there should be experts and great artists in this music from all over the world. There's even the young player from as far away as Indonesia now, Joey Alexander, and he's a great talent. I find it an amazing opportunity and honor to be able to teach the history of the music I love at the place of its origin, close to Philadelphia, were many great Jazz musicians come from; from Bessie Smith to McCoy Tyner to Christian McBride. I also feel a big responsibility to do it and put a lot of heart and work into it and believe I probably learn the most through this experience. A part of it is getting in touch with musicians

over here and attending concerts in Philly and New York. I also read all the Jazz history books now because I have to be on top of everything. It is interesting that the American books are very much focused on the United States, which for me, as a European, is a narrow perspective that overlooks important parts of Jazz history. There are very few non-American musicians even mentioned in those books. Maybe Django Reinhardt and Jan Garbarek pop up, but very few. This huge country is very self-centered, but Jazz has actually been a universal music since it's beginning. It's been popular and has been played and developed by musicians all over the world. Also, it's very important for me as a college professor to stress the fact that Jazz is very much rooted in the African American experience. Of course, I'm not African American, but I am also not a white American so it kind of liberates me because I have a perspective that's uninhibited by all these issues. I don't come from a background with racial issues. I don't think of people as being African American or Latino or whatever, and for me, it's really hard to learn this concept in the United States. Many of my musical heroes were African American and I've been taught by Steve Coleman, Anthony Davis and Muhal Richard Abrams and I never thought of them as being different from Dave Holland or other great teachers I've had.

Cadence: You've spent significant time in America since the late '70s. What strikes you as most unusual about Americans and the American culture?

Lüdemann: What's very difficult to understand is how the communication works here. People will not always be open in criticizing people. Part of it is being very polite and nice to others, but the downside to it is that sometimes you have to guess what people mean. It can often be the contrary of what they are actually saying. It takes time to get a sense if people really mean what they say or are just being polite. I know Americans find Germans very blunt because Germans may say things very openly. In Germany, you just say things that you mean and that could be seen here as offensive and too direct. It's really interesting in America that when someone tells you something, you have to determine if it is a compliment or a critique.

Cadence: You've come up with the concept of "virtual piano" which enters into some of your pieces. Would you define what that is?

Lüdemann: It's a name I invented. I have acoustic piano samples in my laptop computer and I connect a keyboard to the computer so I can trigger this "virtual piano" sound. Because it's coming from the computer, I'm able to experiment with all parameters of the sound. I call it "virtual piano" because I want to make it clear that it's about the piano sound. That's all I use. I don't use organ sounds or electric piano sounds.

Cadence: How do you work "virtual piano" into your playing?

Lüdemann: I see "virtual piano" as an expansion of the acoustic piano. It extends the possibilities and the range so it basically allows me to manipulate the sound so I can change the sound quality. I can make it darker or lighter or distorted. I can also detune it or use different

tunings which allows me to go outside the normal twelve tone system and to play "between the keys" of the piano. Brass players, guitar, and violin players, they can catch the notes that are between the tones, but pianists can't because they are not on the instrument. My "virtual piano" allows me to reach these notes, so the piano becomes more fluid. I often think of it as using blue notes. Sometimes it may sound like an old, funky piano that's out of tune, but that's also nice because the piano is a very clean instrument and this makes it dirtier and more expressive. You can actually bend notes which is a very expressive tool.

Cadence: Are you aware of other musicians employing "virtual piano"?

Lüdemann: I recently saw a catalog with a keyboard that's called "virtual piano" but this is quite new. "Virtual piano" is not an established term, it's just something I came up with to call this. I'm not aware of other musicians using this. I talked to Craig Taborn recently and he told me that he had done a project with Steve Coleman once where they played microtonal music and Craig was programing different scales but I think he played keyboards. Mine is a different concept. I'm combining sampled piano sounds with the piano. It's contrary to what most people do.

Cadence: I've seen you work inside the piano with a window wiper. How are you using that and do you utilize prepared piano?

Lüdemann: There was a phase in the '90s where I did a lot of prepared piano, before I got into the "virtual piano." What I do not like to use are preparations that are fixed in the piano because that means you are stuck, you're limited to certain notes, and one of my principals in improvising is being free all the time. So the "virtual piano" is something that at any moment I can alter everything. It's completely free. I can change the tuning from quarter tone to normal tuning and back while I'm improvising in a split second. I use a window wiper now because I can move it around and its tip is rubber which will not harm the strings. The piano likes rubber, it's like safe Jazz, and you can actually play on the partials of the strings. It gives you a lot of possibilities and I can cover an octave with it so you can play chords with it. It can give a distortion effect and many different sounds. What's very special on the Steinway piano is that my wiper actually fits in on the bass keys and I've written some compositions that are based on that. The window wiper can be put into the piano and you can play normally on the keyboard, but bass notes will transpose by an octave plus a fifth.

Cadence: You had a special solo project ["Hommage a Köln Concert"] in 2015 that celebrated the 40th anniversary of Keith Jarrett's historic Köln concert. Why is Jarrett's Köln Concert recording so important to you.

Lüdemann: That's one of the records that I grew up with. When the Keith Jarrett recording came out, it was something completely new. Nobody had done a completely improvised solo concert before. It was amazing. You had to be really courageous and also confident, and most

astonishingly, it worked! It was so strong and it just hit a nerve that matched the time and everybody bought it, even people who didn't listen to Jazz. It was something you had to have in your house. One of the secrets is that it has a Classical touch to it, the way he uses the dynamics of the piano, so it appealed to many listeners in Europe. Also, some of it is like Pop music with him playing very simple triads and grooves. He plays in a very relaxed feel which is really amazing for a solo concert because usually it's quite stressful to be alone on stage. As a pianist, you always feel that you have to show off and impress people, so to play something really relaxed is quite an achievement.

Cadence: You had the opportunity to perform your "Hommage a Köln Concert" at the Köln Opera, the same venue that Jarrett made the famous recording at in 1975. That had to be one of your career highlights?

Lüdemann: Yeah, it was a beautiful thing and it went really well. I was quite nervous about doing it and I had doubts if it would really work as an idea. I played some short parts of the Köln Concert as a reference to the historic event and also to act as markers and I improvised around them. It was like a film that cuts back and forth from 40 years ago to today. It was a bit of a paradox that I would reproduce music that was essentially improvised, but the Koln Concert was published as a book of piano music for a long time and it functions as an actual piano piece. I limited the actual reproduction of the concert because the idea of improvising is contrary to reproducing what's already recorded.

Cadence: Another pianist who influenced you significantly was Paul

Lüdemann: I first discovered Paul Bley through Keith Jarrett because I listened to Keith's recordings and it made me want to listen to who he listened to. I found out that he was influenced by Paul and when I checked out Paul's recordings I really thought Paul was even more interesting than Keith. He seemed to be the original guy who invented this kind of lyrical playing which was very free within the song forms and going outside the harmony and translating Ornette Coleman's concept of playing to the piano. I really admire the real original guys who invented something. The first transcription I ever did was Paul Bley's "When Will the Blues Leave?" I never expected to meet him but two friends of mine, Gebhard Ullmann and Andreas Willers, invited Paul to do a record date with them in Berlin. I went to Berlin for their rehearsal and Paul, [Laughs] he doesn't like to rehearse. He was notorious for that but I had no idea at the time. So Paul heard I was a pianist and he said, "Oh, that's great. Can you play something for me?" So I did and he said, "That was really great." I don't know, he may have just wanted to escape rehearsal. I ended up spending one or two days with Paul, showing him around Berlin, and he invited me to come visit him at his house, which I did a year later. I stayed at his house for a week and we listened to music every night until 5 AM. He played all his old tapes. It was amazing. Some years late he would also spend time at my house in Germany. When he had gigs in Europe, he invited me and I came. After a few years, we played some gigs and made a record

together [Moving Hearts, 1994, ITM/West Wind]. He was almost my parent's age but it didn't feel like that when I played with him. Jazz guys are cooler.

Cadence: Paul Bley was known for his quirky personality and sense of humor. What was he like as a teacher/mentor and a friend?

Lüdemann: He wasn't my teacher. I never asked him to have a lesson because I knew he wasn't a real teacher. I was teaching at the conservatory in Koln at the time and one time I invited him to do a workshop for the students. At his workshops he just talks. It's not like he's showing them anything or giving instructions. He never practiced. He had a Kawai piano at his house and I sat down and played it a little bit and his wife, Carol, said, "Oh, that's so great to have piano in the house. We haven't heard any piano in fifteen years!" [Laughs] Because he never touched the piano.

Cadence: He wasn't composing?

Ludemann: No, he rarely ever composed. There are very few songs of his that could be considered compositions in a traditional way. He's a complete improviser. He only touched the piano when there was a gig or a recording, not before or after. He wanted to be fresh.

Cadence: You actually spent time at his home a few months before he died in January 2016. Is that something you care to talk about?

Lüdemann: I'm really glad about that. I spent a weekend in September there and he was already not in a very good state but we had some amazing moments. He was very tired and he had a problem with his brain. He was always nodding off at that time but then there were moments where he would wake up and he could be very funny and the real Paul Bley popped up. We also went out for a picnic which was really fun. Also, before I left, it was very moving. Carol, Paul and I watched a video of Paul's Oslo concert, the last record he did for ECM, which I found very impressive because he had this amazing sound. Many of the older players get weaker [with time] but he didn't change one inch. He had natural technique that was just amazing, especially when you know that he never practiced. So we watched that together and then I played for them for a half hour and they were very responsive and it made me feel very close to both of them, both physically and also in spirit. It was a very beautiful and moving feeling that will always be in my memory. After that I left and it was like our goodbye. I really miss him. There's no replacement for someone like Paul. He was unique. You don't find that extreme kind of personality in Jazz so often anymore. It's really hard to exist that way today. He did it the way he liked and everyone just had to put up with it. For the musicians who had to play with him, it was pretty much a nightmare, even when I played with him. He never told you what tune he was going to play. There were no clues. He would just start playing some kind of tune and if you didn't know it…That generation knew thousands of tunes. I'm sure he knew two or three thousand tunes by heart so he could play whatever he wanted and if he played with someone of his own generation, such as Gary Peacock,

the other guy could just pick it up. My generation doesn't know all the songs, we just don't. There aren't that many players around with that kind of background. Those guys grew up playing in the clubs every night, five sets per night. They played so many tunes within one year, and they played them every night, so they knew them by heart. Now our generation, we may have one gig and then the next gig is with a different band and with different tunes, so you can't remember what you just played. I don't often play standards so my repertoire isn't so big in that respect. I play my own music or the music of the other guys in the band. That's today's reality and often the tunes are quite complicated, you have to write them down.

Cadence: You've spent significant time in Africa, including your honeymoon. Would you talk about your experience there and what it's meant to your own music?

Lüdemann: I love Africa and it's a very positive experience for me in different ways. My first experience was on a very human level. I first went to West Africa in '84 to visit my brother, who used to live and work there, and I was very impressed by the people who were so poor. My brother was living in the bush in a very small village in the north of Benin. These people, who basically had nothing, heard that I was there to visit him and they gave me presents and the best food they had. I met the chief of a local village once and he said, "Ah, you are the brother, you come visiting. Wait a minute!" So he ran into his house and brought me two handfuls of eggs because that was the most precious that he had as a gift. These people were so friendly and amazing. I started getting really interested in the music and how rhythm and groove is really present in even how people move in daily life. The people actually work in a groove and rhythm. It's also there in the way they talk. Everything is rhythmic. Africa is like the paradise of rhythm. I felt very free there. People accept you like you are, you don't have to pretend anything. I always liked Abdullah Ibrahim, who is from South Africa – but his music has very little connection to West Africa. West Africa has this really old tradition with the griots and the balafon and the kora and high level of virtuosity and musical culture built up over hundreds of years. Music is very important there and it's more close to the people than in most other cultures. That's similar to Germany with Bach and Beethoven. In Germany, music is almost something holy, it's the deepest you can get. It can be different in America where music is often on the entertainment side or might sometimes even been treated as some kind of competitive "athletic discipline". In Germany and West Africa the music is very serious, it's very spiritual and deep and expresses the soul.

Cadence: One of your trips to West Africa came in 1999 as a challenging solo tour.

Lüdemann: Right, that's actually how the "virtual piano" came about. The Goethe Institute in Germany, which is like the U.S. State Department, sends artists out on tours. After they heard my CD Natural Piano, which incorporated African music, they decided I

should have a solo piano tour in West Africa. It turned out that many of the places there didn't even have a piano at all so the question was what to do. At that time, the keyboard's piano sounds were not good, so I ended up borrowing a sampler that had a sample piano sound which was the best that I found. So that's what I traveled with, along with my clavichord. It was amazing, I had over a hundred kilos of luggage and I was traveling alone. It was quite a nightmare at the airports with all the African porters wanting to grab all the suitcases and I had five or more pieces to look out for. I had also told the Goethe Institute that I wanted to play with African musicians and I was setup with balafon player Aly Keita in the Ivory Coast, who I still work with up to this day. He put a quartet together and then I also played with Toumani Diabaté in Mali and Tata Dindin in Senegal, the great kora player who I would later work with very intensely over many years. This was maybe the most liberating experience in my life. I experienced music from a totally different perspective. It was a chance to both see myself more clearly and also to be able to forget about a lot of Western musical conventions and conceptions.

Cadence: What was it like to travel to Africa in 2002 with Germany's president at the time - Johannes Rau?

Lüdemann: I've actually played for a lot of German presidents [Laughs]. One might say that presidents come and go, but I have stayed! They have this castle in Berlin where the president lives and where visiting presidents and politicians are invited and very often they will have a cultural program after dinner. I've played there a number of times but the only time I've traveled with one of the presidents was with Johannes Rau. He was traveling to South Africa and Mali and they considered me as an expert for cultural exchange with Africa. So I was actually a member of the delegation, which was very interesting because the other guys were big bosses of big companies or some scientists. There was even a famous writer. So we had dinner with the South Africa president, it was Thabo Mbeki at the time, and I gave him my CD. I also performed with Toumani Diabaté during that trip. It was an honor. I haven't played for the current president yet. He's the first one I've missed since 1998.

Cadence: Let's talk a little bit about your early days. You became fascinated by music at a young age and by 6, you were studying Classical piano but also improvising and exploring the Blues. As a European, how did you get into exploring American Blues music?

Lüdemann: Neighbors gave us this really ancient and huge and very funky, old upright piano with candleholders and I fell totally in love with it. My older brother started with Classical piano lessons and I begged my parents to get some too but they told me I was too small. So I just started on my own, trying to imitate what my brother played or whatever else I heard or could think of. I made up things myself. I'm not sure if it was really the Blues I played, but I was trying to! Some of my first heroes became Professor Longhair, Snooks Eaglin and Freddie

King. There was a Blues program on the radio by Tony Sheridan that I loved. A year later my parents gave in and allowed me to have lessons but the piano teacher at first refused to accept me because my technique was all wrong.

Cadence: You were studying Classical music. How did you get enthused about Jazz?

Lüdemann: When John Abercrombie's debut record Timeless came out, my brother played it for me and told me that on the tune "Lungs," drummer Jack DeJohnette was playing something different each bar. I thought that's impossible but when listening closely, it turned out to be true. It completely fascinated me because I suddenly understood that he was developing a stream of ideas while he was playing. It seemed to me the greatest thing. How could you be so free and creative and at the same time be part of an ensemble interpreting a piece of music and be playing a groove? I got hooked and since then, contemporary Jazz was what I was interested in and I became very dedicated to learn and play it. I practiced, played solo, and in bands, went to all kinds of concerts, caught everything I could find on the radio, on albums and in the Real Book. The music I listened to and identified with was mostly new and contemporary. It took me a while to realize where it came from and to connect to older styles of Jazz. The group that was really a model for me for a long time was the Abercrombie Gateway trio with DeJohnette and Dave Holland because they were three equal musicians and the soloist was not way in front with the others just backing him up.

Cadence: How much opportunity did you have to absorb Jazz in Germany at the time in the late '70s-early '80s?

Lüdemann: Even back in Hamburg, I had a chance to learn and play Bebop with Herb Geller and Walter Norris and to play in big bands, performing the music of Count Basie and Charles Mingus. But the side of Jazz that most attracted me has always been its creative and contemporary side as a personal expression and expression of its time. The first live concert of contemporary Jazz that I saw was the Jan Garbarek quartet with Bobo Stenson, Palle Danielsson, Jon Christensen and special guest Kenny Wheeler. It completely blew me away. I did not understand what they were doing at all, but it seemed to have great clarity, cohesion and energy, while giving great freedom to each musician. The question was: how the hell could they play together like that?

Cadence: How did you enter the music scene?

Lüdemann: I became a busy guy while still in high school, playing in the local Hamburg clubs late and going to school the next morning. At that time, formal Jazz education in Europe was just starting. I attended some summer workshops and was able to get some private lessons/sessions with Joachim Kühn, who lived in Hamburg at that time. I believe, I was the only student he ever had. I remember giving him a cassette of my first solo recordings I had made in 1980 after a show he played at Onkel Pö's Carnegie Hall to become his student. I also met

Gebhard Ullmann, Thomas Heberer and Andreas Willers during that time and we started our first projects together.

Cadence: You mentioned formal Jazz education was just starting in Europe. What was your experience?

Lüdemann: I was playing with Manfred Schoof in 1981 and he told me to go to Köln, the first Jazz school on a university level in Germany. It had just started and the education back then was not very structured. With Frank Wunsch and Reiner Brüninghaus I had very good pianists as my teachers, but I also worked a lot on my own and I consider Bach and Schönberg among my most important teachers. One of my buddies in Köln was Achim Kaufmann and we played piano duo. I started my own group NANA 1982 in Köln with saxophonist Roger Hanschel (who would become and is still my brother-in-law), Reiner Linke (b), and Klaus Mages (d). The band worked intensely for a number of years and received a scholarship to study at the Banff Centre in 1985. CBC did a TV documentary of our work with Dave Holland during that stay. The group later changed into a trio without drums named BLAU FRONTAL and did a project with Mark Feldman and Hank Roberts.

Cadence: You spent time with Jan Garbarek.

Lüdemann: I toured with Jan Garbarek, Eberhard Weber and Ralf Hübner from '85 –'86. Jan Garbarek and Eberhard Weber had been among my heroes, so to perform and tour with them was like a dream come true. But it also became a turning point. Up to that point, I had been influenced strongly by a number of artists associated with the ECM label. Jan and Eberhard were among those that had developed that new kind of esthetic but they also had their own strong individual voices. I realized that it was necessary to break with that esthetic to find my own voice. In the following years, I started experimenting a lot to find my own path.

Cadence: What interesting memories can you share from your time with Garbarek and Weber?

Lüdemann: I was still very young when I got to play with them. Eberhard was looking for a keyboard player for his group Chorus and I got recommended. I went to his house and he checked me out and he hired me for a two month tour of Asia. It was 30 concerts in 7 weeks through 10 countries. I was 24 and I had never played a big tour in my life before and here I was on stage with two of my big heroes. It was almost too much for me. He had me playing a Yamaha DX7 synthesizer, which nobody uses anymore, but at that time was the ultimate new keyboard. I was playing three of them: Eberhard's, Jan's and my own, stacked on a keyboard stand. It felt comfortable playing several electric keyboards, which I had been doing a lot before, but I missed having the acoustic piano. It still was amazing to be able to play with those guys. I was playing the music that I had been listening to and it really worked, but what I found weird was that they wouldn't improvise so much. After four or five concerts, we would always play the same set list and order of solos. It was organized like a Pop group and I found

that disappointing. I expected someone like Jan to be much more adventurous musically. You know Jan is one of the few guys who invented a completely new saxophone sound after Coltrane, except that some of that might also be credited to Jim Pepper. He's an absolutely unique guy on stage. I don't think I've ever played with somebody so sensitive, so seismographic. The smallest thing you do on stage, he will react to it. Also, he never stands in front of the others, which very often horn players do. He stands on the side so that he's in the group and never in front of the others. I really loved that and I learned from that. I hate when horn players step in front and they don't listen to what the other guys play. That happens very often and it's very boring. As a person, Jan is very calm and reserved. He also doesn't say much about the music when you play. You don't get much feedback, although one night, I don't know what happened, but I played the intro to one of his songs with a completely wrong chord and it took me a little bit to get back [on track]. Jan didn't react directly until after the gig. He came to me and said, "Ah, Hans, some nice reharmonization tonight!" He was kind of funny. He's a cool guy.

Cadence: You also worked with the great masters of the "Frankfurt School of Jazz" such as Albert Mangelsdorff, Heinz Sauer, Ralf Hübner, Günter Lenz, and Christoph Lauer since 1985. What was the mindset of the "Frankfurt School of Jazz" artists?

Lüdemann: Ralf was actually the drummer on that Asia tour with Jan and Eberhard and that's really how I developed the connection with that circle. Ralf was one of the main composers for the Radio Jazz Ensemble in Frankfurt and he invited me to play with them in '85 and since then, I've worked with them off and on as a guest soloist, composer and arranger. The Frankfurt School approaches Jazz in a way, which is maybe a little bit German also, where you treat the material that you play, the themes, the songs, the structures, that you really draw from them in your improvisations and your solos. So it's not like you play a head and then you just play up and down the changes. You take the motives and themes and you really try to develop the ideas and respect the framework and atmosphere of the song. So a solo played on one song must always be different. It's a convincing concept. I never understood all these Jazz solos where there's a head and afterwards it all sounds the same. Everybody's just playing up and down the changes and running through the chords and very often it doesn't have anything to do with the melody or the atmosphere. It's just showing how fast or how many different things you can play. Even if you play free, there's got to be structure. It's very rewarding, it's very interesting, and it gives a sense of unity to the music. It actually helps you create something specific with every song.

Cadence: Would you talk about Albert Mangelsdorff? What he was like as a person and how it was to play and interact with him?

Lüdemann: He was also more on the calm side. He wasn't a pushy guy, he wasn't in the foreground. The way it worked in that Radio Jazz Ensemble was that everyone would contribute compositions, and after

the take, we'd all go into the booth and listen to it. It was very nice with a collective kind of spirit in that group because it was the old Albert Mangelsdorff Quartet plus other older players and some younger guys like Christoph and me. Heinz always said, [Mumbles] "Oh, shit! This was not good enough - I have to do another solo!" Everyone really listened to each other, even Albert, he would never dominate in any way. He was the most respected, of course, but he was always kind of from the background. Everybody was always looking up to him, even Heinz. I mean, he's the father figure of German modern Jazz. He's the hero of German Jazz after World War II. Also because of his personality. He was a gentleman, never aggressive. He was always kind, friendly and low-key. The whole vibe of the group was very collective. It was never about somebody overplaying the others. It was always about constructing something together musically which was very beautiful. In the studio, everyone, these old guys, were hugging and talking to each other. Albert's older brother Emil was also in this band. He's now 85 and he plays a warm, beautiful alto sax, but he's more of an old-school Swing guy. He never went into the more free music like his brother.

Cadence: You've made many significant recordings but your 2012 5-CD box set The Art of the Trio [Die Kunst des Trios] is worth special mention. The epic project involves five completely different standard Jazz trios recorded over a year and a half period of time. What led you to undertake such a massive project?

Lüdemann: Every trio includes my compositions along with compositions from the other players. That was very important for the project because it meant that I was also challenging myself. It has a little bit to do with [the recording] Kind of Blue. It's focusing on this moment in Jazz where everything is really fresh – the first meeting of musicians, the first take of a song, the first performance that you have. This project was all of that. These are trios that never had played together before. They meet only once and put together a program only once and they are recorded and will never perform again. So it's all about this moment of performance and every take on those 5 CDs is a first take. It's about a freshness that only improvised music can have and tension that's there when you meet people for the first time. It's an essential of Jazz that's impossible to have with certain other types of music. All these trios were so different. They were designed so that each member could bring out his own individual voice. Each one was piano, bass and drums, but each one is a completely different band sound and atmosphere and intensity, and that's amazing because it was recorded over a relatively short period of time. I'm actually continuing this project with more trios. I've already done two more in the last year. One with Pierre Favre and Mark Helias and one with two African musicians, bassist Manou Gallo and drummer Boris Tchango.

Cadence: It's quite a financial undertaking to put out a 5-CD set.

Lüdemann: I know. Well, it was my fiftieth birthday and I thought it

was the moment to do something crazy and out of the ordinary. I had already done the recordings without the intent of releasing them. It was more of an experiment which could have completely failed also, but listening back to all the tapes, I thought it was really interesting, especially if you have the trios together and you can actually compare them. I figured, 'What the heck. I'm turning fifty, I don't care if it doesn't sell. I'm just going to do something crazy.' Fortunately, I have this label [BMC] in Budapest that is really into my music and they did a great job with the packaging. I also got a grant to help with the production. But it was very surprising for me that this actually was a very successful release and it won the 2013 ECHO Jazz award [Germany's Grammy equivalent] and got a lot of airplay and great reviews.

Cadence: One of your original compositions is "Prinz" which appears on your 2010 Rooms recording. It's based on the Jazz standard "Someday My Prince Will Come." You end up completely fragmenting and reharmonizing the well-known tune on the basis that you believe the prince will not come. Why is that?

Lüdemann: Right [Laughs]. Well, it's like a modern interpretation. The original song I really love. It's very romantic but the lyrics are a bit silly. Someday my prince will come? Is that the way we think? My attitude is rather my prince is never gonna come [Laughs], so that's the way I reinterpreted this song. It's a more disillusioned version of the song. It's based on the notes of the melody of the song but with different harmonies and different placement of the notes. When people play that song, it's very difficult to escape the famous versions by Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly, and the beautiful solos they played on it, so when I play it my way, there's no danger of that happening.

Cadence: Your group TRIO IVOIRE includes Ivory Coast balaphone player Aly Keita. He's not a Jazz musician at heart so what accommodations have you made in order to fit with him?

Lüdemann: It's interesting that these African musicians have a similar approach to music. The old African tradition is to play a repertoire of traditional songs that everybody knows and to improvise on them. African musicians like Toumani Diabaté consider themselves to be Jazz musicians. Playing with Aly presents a lot of difficulties. There's quite a gap to bridge between the two of us. There are the limitations of his instrument in terms of range and missing notes. Also, African music swings in a different way. His instrument is a percussion instrument and it's very hard to play lyrical on a percussion instrument. It typically leads to very rhythmically, very accentuated and precise phrasing while in Jazz you usually have more flexibility and you can float. The African rhythm is actually very percussive and very strict. It's much stricter than Jazz rhythm, so for me to fit with that, to take liberties with or against it, is something to really figure out. Ultimately, it's about giving and taking, so I'm losing some of my freedom but the energy that he brings into the music, his rhythmic and spiritual energy, is an

African energy that I love and makes up for all of that. So you lose something but gain something and it's the same for him. He cannot play everything that he's used to playing and he has to listen and play with much more dynamics. We have different approaches that we use. Sometimes I will follow him and play more "African," because I've studied a lot of African music and I've learned from him and other African musicians, and then there are other times where Aly plays European or contemporary Jazz music. We also have something in-between where we freely improvise, which is very different from what I do with other Jazz musicians. It usually becomes more minimalist and rhythmic. What I like is that it forces me to go other ways. There are certain rules and conventions in Jazz that you have to know and relate to, but in African music, for a pianist, it's almost like a white spot on the map, except for South Africa with Abdullah Ibrahim. In West Africa, piano does not have much of a tradition. There are some keyboard players that play in hotels or bars, they will play mostly top 40 stuff, but in real African music there is very little piano. For me, it was very liberating not to have to look to any model. I just listened to Aly and we would do something new. There is no other trio group that has balafon, piano and drums. It's a different thing.

Cadence: The last questions are from other musicians who have given me questions to ask you.

Simon Nabatov (piano) asked – "In the wake of Paul Bley's passing, reflect on the meaning and influences of his music on your own playing, "back then" as well as today."

Lüdemann: There was one moment when I was listening to music with Paul that really struck me. I played him something from Heinz Sauer and Bob Degen, the American pianist who some people say plays like Paul, that kind of lyricism. Paul said, "Hey, this guy sounds like me. Turn that off!" He hated it, he didn't like it at all because he thought Bob was trying to sound like him, which I don't completely agree on. I realized at that moment that the worst thing you can do if you really love somebody's playing is to play like them. Respecting somebody and really loving the way they play means you can't play like them. I know I can sound like Paul if I want to. I know him, I really know his music. I just played "Ida Lupino" at my last concert in his memory but I made sure to not play it like him. It's all about playing yourself and being yourself. What's interesting is that in some cases, when people play similar to another person, it's almost like mocking them. If you talked to me and I imitated you back to you, if I repeated what you said and how you said it, that's the same thing. Paul felt that way about someone copying him. In Jazz it's all about finding yourself. When I told him I was doing the Keith Jarrett concert he said, "Ah, you shouldn't do that. Play your own stuff." I think he's right, you need to focus on yourself. (In that case my solution was to play some quotes, rather like playing classical piano pieces and otherwise improvise myself.) That's really what it's about. And Paul is a great example for somebody with a

strong and recognizable personal sound – you hear that it is him after one note. I found out that, although Paul was a great inspiration, I am very different from him as a person but also in my approach to music and the instrument. But to be directly confronted with and experience his very personal and in some ways radical approach to music and the piano was also very impressive. He was a model for someone who has great and sometimes uncompromising integrity as an artist, which can be a source of self-confidence and is very useful to have.

Dejan Terzic (drums) asked - "How would you describe your music?"

Lüdemann: Crazy! Wild! [Laughs] In my music, there are different areas that are important for me and they come out, to a certain degree, in each project that I do but it's all different. Sometimes I'll focus on melodies, on lines. I'm not the typical pianist who's really into playing big harmonic stuff all the time and playing thick, colorful things. I'm much more interested in the single note and in the lines and in the melodies. Maybe that's why I like Keith Jarrett and Paul and Bud Powell. I like to have both simplicity and complexity - some of my compositions are more complex and relate to modern and microtonal music. What's essential for every project that I do is that I'm always looking for a communal thing. I think the start of that goes back to my beginning when I first played with my two brothers on all kinds of instruments. It felt very close, like we were one. I need to feel connected to the other players in my band and to create a unified whole embracing all the different personalities in it. First there is a structural level in the music: concerning lines and melodies I think the classical background is important in regard to polyphonic voices, counterpoint and voice-leading. There are harmonic questions to answer and some of my typical colors tend to be complementary like yellow with blue or sharp contrasts, sometimes intensified by microtonal intervals. In terms of rhythm, I feel polyrhythmically and refer to African rhythm, allowing me to constantly shift perspectives. Secondly there is the communal aspect I was talking about that extends to and includes the audience in performance. A third level is when I create and perform pieces, there are usually Meta-levels to the music of emotion, atmosphere, spirit, associations, a certain kind of energy or feel. The term that I like to describe my music as a whole or as a style is "Polyjazz,"describing the fact that it is a unified concept but it has different layers and integrates diverse influences on all levels. And almost always, there is a bigger idea behind each project and each album: the TRIO IVOIRE is a musical answer to globalization, the T.E.E. and ROOMS are Pan-European projects, with the T.E.E. designed as the base of an expandable orchestral project, and Rooms as a most flexible and open small chamber ensemble. The combinations of piano with balaphone and piano with Kora also make it evident that two very different cultures are meeting on equal terms. And the solo programs with acoustic and virtual sounds explore our different contemporary realities.

Silke Eberhard (reedist) asked – "I´d like to ask you how you got interested in quarter-tone music and how you got the idea to transfer that to the piano?"

Lüdemann: The first step in that direction was with Hayden Chisholm, the saxophone player from New Zealand. He used to be my student and at that time he started changing his saxophone so that he could play quarter-tones. We had been playing in duo so I thought, 'Gee, what am I going to do? I hear it, but I can't do it.' At that time I bought a clavichord where you can actually bend the notes, so I could do some stuff to come close to what he was doing. Since then, I have been interested in that pitch stuff. The first piece I wrote using quarter-tones was "The Virtual Piano" in 1999. I started out doing my own experiments and not until years later started to check out what existed, including Classical composition. In 2009 there was an article in a German Jazz magazine that put me in a line of heritage with Monk, Bill Evans and Ivan Wyschnegradsky – the latter I had never heard of before. I found out that there were some quarter-tone composers from the '20s. Then I heard about a quarter-tone concert in Hamburg with two pianos so I went to hear it. They played music from the old gurus - Charles Ives; some pieces of Ivan Wyschnegradsky, the Russian composer; Alois Hába, the Czech composer; and also Georg Friedrich Haas, who now lives in New York. That gave me a lot of ideas, but my own use of the quarter-tones is very different from them. For me, it's mostly about blue notes, making them dirtier and more "harmful." The greatest thing about microtonal music is that it completely resets your brain. After hearing it, you hear everything differently afterwards. It's the same sort of effect if you play the clavichord, which is a very soft instrument, and you go to the piano afterwards. The piano sort of hits you really hard because you're used to listening in a different way. The same is true for microtonal music. It's very refreshing for the ear.

Sébastien Boisseau (bass) asked – "Hans, I remember we've discussed the special relationship between the sound of the virtual keyboard and the piano. With [your trio] ROOMS, at some points we are melting acoustic, electric, numerical, analogical, tonal and microtonal waves or signals. All of those coexist within quite classical jazz trio forms. It results in a feeling of distortion of what the listener expects from the melody or the harmony. We know some who are skeptical about this, even disturbed. They argue that it affects the "beauty" of the lines, or the sound in general. We know that "beauty is a rare thing." Are you looking for a hidden beauty, one that people are not used to?"

Lüdemann: For me, it's not so much about beauty, it's about this time and the virtual world we live in. It's like mirroring things. We go from talking face-to-face and then we go online and basically leave the real world for long periods of time so large parts of our lives have become virtual. It's breaking the allusion that we are actually doing something real acoustic because every recording is like a trick. You would never be able to tell if I was actually playing the acoustic or non-acoustic piano

on the recording. Even myself, I can't tell sometimes because they are both recorded acoustic pianos on a recording. When it's live you can see which one I'm playing on, but not on the recording when it's is well done. In those moments when you can actually hear a difference, it may sound a little bit strange or alienated, and that's also interesting, I think, to play with those realities should be irritating also. It's good if it's irritating, it shouldn't always be beautiful. It's not interesting if it's all beautiful. It's also about being disturbing, about being strange. You know it's kind of frightening that we can be sitting here looking at our phones and being somewhere else all the time. It's a big change. I grew up in the '60s and '70s, there were no cell phones or laptops. Everyone would just hang out together and have a good time, and now I'm spending hours and hours on the fucking computer every day! That's the reality and I'm trying to work with it, to make music with it, and to ask questions with it. I want to break up aesthetics also. I started out with an ECM aesthetic, which was important when I started out with those guys. That was their aesthetic but what am I gonna do? I didn't create that music so I have to go somewhere else. I could have gone on to play in that vein after working with Garbarek and Weber, but what's the point of doing that? To sell records or to please certain expectations is not my primary goal. I think it's more interesting to break aesthetics then to fulfill them.

Achim Kaufmann (piano) asked -"Is there anything that you retain from your student days at the Köln Conservatory, any particular piece of advice or wisdom (or the opposite) that has stayed with you?"

Lüdemann: I actually learned a lot from Achim. We were and still are friends and hung out together as students. He's a very different kind of player from me and he had some things that I really liked that I didn't have. Also we went to Banff [Canada] together in '85 and trained with Richard Beirach, Muhal Richard Abrams, Steve Coleman and Dave Holland. One of the best learning experiences is to compare yourself directly with your peers. It was great to grow up with him and Simon [Nabatov]. Maybe I learned more from them than my teachers. When I studied at the Köln Conservatory it was the very beginning of Jazz studies in Germany and it was not very structured. We never actually studied a Duke Ellington score. But I got to play in combos of Manfred Schoof or the big band directed by Jiggs Whigham and I also was in touch with Classical music and students from that area. Being a student gave you room to work and develop, but much of the learning took place outside of school. You had to teach yourself. I think one of the greatest achievements from that time was the musicians association "Initiative Kölner Jazzhaus" (modelled after the AACM) that I became an active member of and that has since changed the Jazz scene of our city, region and country – its initiatives leading to the Jazz Haus school, Jazz Haus label, festival and the club "Stadtgarten", that became one of the important venues for contemporary Jazz in Europe with some of its members becoming active also on the national and international level. I

would advise younger musicians to also come together and get engaged and organized in their local scenes.

Thomas Heberer (trumpet) asked – "Remembering the late '70s in Hamburg, Germany, and thinking about the loosely associated group of teenagers hungry to cut their teeth in the Jazz world, it is delightful that we all made Jazz our life's mission and are still at it - Gebhard Ullmann, Frank Gratkowski, Matthias Schubert, Andreas Willers, and you and I. The question to you is - why? What factors at the time in that environment allowed us to dream up this path?"

Lüdemann: Yeah, it's astonishing. I first played with him when he was 15. I don't know if I can answer that question. It seems we had a scene there that we weren't even aware of. It was for a very short period. I came back from studying in California when I was 18 and that's when I started playing with those guys. I think the '70s were a real exciting time with a lot of creative freedom and some of the contemporary Jazz of that time achieved quite big popularity. The upcoming German ECM label gave it probably even more presence in our country. It felt like Jazz had a lot of relevance in society and brought freshness into the culture and was something new that fit to the alternative lifestyle of our generation. To be part of that seemed to be a way of creatively expressing yourself and the time you live in – something very "en vogue" at that time. Maybe this "spirit of the '70s" of Jazz as a creative and contemporary expression is still what motivates us and has become our mission. What helped in Hamburg was that the radio station had an amazing Jazz program and a concert series. I have mentioned the small club "Onkel Pö's Carnegie Hall" that showcased a large number of international, but also local bands – I saw even Pat Metheny and Jack DeJohnette there, in front of 150 people. But there were also the bigger "Fabrik" and an annual "New Jazz Festival." There also was the NDR Bigband with its very open-minded director, Dieter Glawischnig, who encouraged the local scene and first attempted to start popular music at the Hamburg Musikhochschule as a summer program. Also Herb Geller was living there, a real bebop player who we did workshops with. I did a lot of playing in Hamburg during and at the time I went to the conservatory. I was playing solo, in several small bands and in three big bands at the same time. I don't even know how I did it because I was still in school. I would rehearse and practice in the afternoon, play in the club at night, and sleep for a few hours and write my exams in the morning. I missed school a lot!