

In the reverberations of the hammered dulcimer

Is this trio, which presents itself under the name of a drummer, a piano trio like countless others? Yes, in terms of its instrumentation. Gilbert Paeffgen, born in Würzburg and based in Bern since the early 1980s, is the leader, an extremely sensitive, reserved drummer who often plays organically in the spirit of the whole, almost whispering. His partners are Fabian M. Mueller from eastern Switzerland, a pianist with an enormous range, from orchestral two-handed soundscapes to virtuoso linear outbursts and expressively punched passages; and Claude Meier from Aargau, who provides the solid and inspiring foundation of the group with his bass (often bowed). In this line-up, the Gilbert Paeffgen Trio is already a very unusual, exciting group with a lot of repetitive magic.

But then: bang! With power and all its overtones, the aptly titled "Glockenship" roars into life, and we are far beyond any piano trio conventions. Paeffgen has long been interested in the wonderful traditional instrument that, like no other, makes a whole world sing and which has the grotesquely martial name "Hackbrett" in German. In Hungarian it is called cimbalom, in English dulcimer. Depending on its design, this archaic zither instrument has between 40 and 120 strings, bundled into multi-string choirs and stretched over a sound box.

"The Man on the Trampoline" (so the title of Paeffgen's album) is by no means dedicated to his passion for the hammered dulcimer. Or rather, the majority of the compositions continue the space-creating, reverberating technique of the cimbalom in the piano trio, thus elevating its aesthetics above all convention. In three pieces in particular, the drummer picks up the hammered dulcimer (whose soul is definitely percussive). The most beautiful is a direct homage to the folkloric context: "So So Zäuerli" was written by Noldi Alder, the great innovator of Appenzell folk music.

The trio (and pianist Mueller in particular) pays another homage to a lesser-known piece by Duke Ellington, "African Flower" from the classic "Money Jungle."

Even beyond the exoticism of the hammered dulcimer, Paeffgen's album is a success.

Peter Rüedi, August 2025