

MUSIC REVIEW

‘Elegy’ by Theo Bleckmann Review: A Jazz Vocalist for the 21st Century

With his clear, crisp diction and use of digital effects, Theo Bleckmann makes some of the most interesting music in recent history.

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By *Martin Johnson*

Jan. 25, 2017 4:36 p.m. ET

Vocalist and composer Theo Bleckmann has been a leader or collaborator on some of the most interesting jazz and new-music projects of the past 25 years. He has clear, crisp diction and can render a lyric poignant during a straightforward reading, but Mr. Bleckmann is unusually tech savvy and often uses delays and other effects to create an ethereal dreamscape. He has taken vocalese into the 21st century.





Theo Bleckmann's new album is 'Elegy.' PHOTO: LYNNE HARTY

Mr. Bleckmann has brought his unique approach to a remarkable range of source material. He has performed albums of Las Vegas standards, Weimar art songs, and songs by art rocker Kate Bush. He collaborated with the electric jazz collective Kneebody for a collection of rearranged music by Charles Ives, and he is a member of the Refuge Trio, which takes its point of departure from the Joni Mitchell song "Refuge of the Roads." He has been a core member of the Meredith Monk Ensemble for more than 15 years. He brings all of those interests and experiences to his new release, "Elegy" (ECM), out Friday.

"Elegy" is an unusual recording for a performer known for his vocals, as they are not at the center of each tune. Some are instrumentals, and on others Mr. Bleckmann contributes elegant scattling to the work of his stellar band: guitarist Ben Monder, pianist Shai Maestro, bassist Chris Tordini and drummer John Hollenbeck. In the notes to the album, Mr. Bleckmann says that the unifying theme of the new recording is songs about death, but less in mourning than as a meditation on transcendence. For instance, he wrote the lyrics of "To Be Shown to Monks at a Certain Temple" in response to a Zen poem that sees death as a sign to the living to keep moving. Stephen Sondheim's "Comedy Tonight" is the showstopper of the recording. On it, Mr. Bleckmann slows the tempo to a crawl, accentuating minute differences between the "r" sounds in "familiar" and "peculiar." In the first verses he's backed only by restrained

play by Mr. Maestro. Mr. Bleckmann gives the song a complete and stunning makeover that showcases his vocal ability. On the other tracks he demonstrates the versatility of vocals within an ensemble.

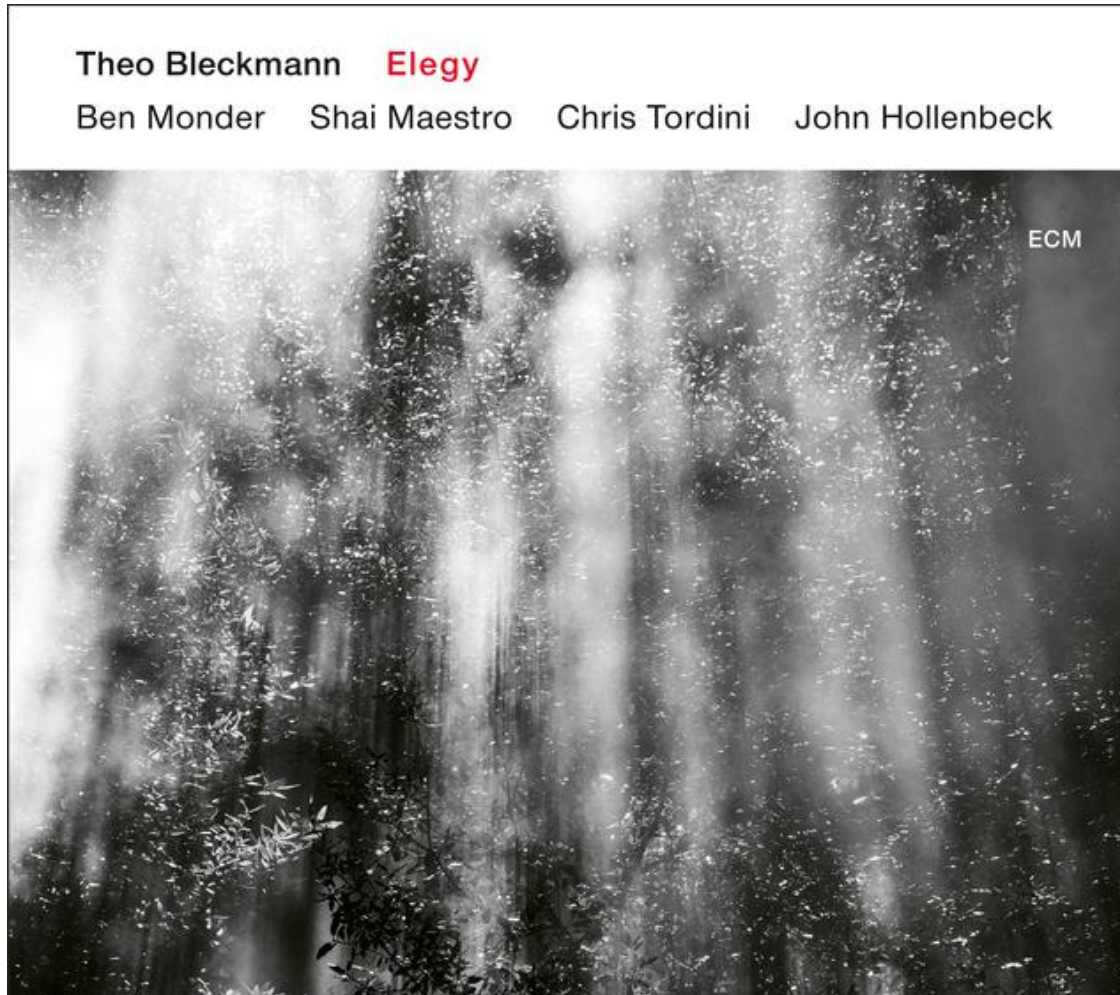


PHOTO: ECM

Mr. Bleckmann, who is 50, was born in Dortmund, West Germany, and originally pursued ice-dancing. He was a junior champion before turning his ambitions to music after meeting the stellar jazz vocalist Sheila Jordan at a workshop in Graz, Austria. He moved to New York in 1989. He quickly won acclaim in both jazz and contemporary classical music circles, collaborating with leading lights like Anthony Braxton, Steve Coleman, Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson. He created the alien space language for characters in the film “Men in Black.”

On Feb. 7 Mr. Bleckmann begins a brief tour with his quintet at Jazz Standard in New York. His performances are typically full of charming wit, dazzling technique and unexpected humor. Today’s jazz is often as much about texture as it is about virtuosity, but in Mr. Bleckmann’s music it’s about both.