

IIRO RANTALA

Iiro Rantala (b.1970), probably "Finland's best known jazz musician internationally," (Jazz Finland) has been an ACT exclusive artist since 2009. His years with the label have witnessed a steep rise in his renown outside Finland, and have produced a series of major albums, each one a significant and contrasting statement. He is an artist in his absolute prime, and now has the international standing that he so richly deserves.

A major public figure and musical advocate in Finland

As a teenager, Iiro Rantala was playing in several jazz and pop groups around Finland. When his Trio Töykeät was formed in 1988, Rantala concentrated on this group for 18 years. The trio were known for a unique combination of deep musicality and madcap humour, and played over 2,000 shows in forty-five countries.

At age of 26, Rantala also started a career in classical music, playing Mozart concertos and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with Finland's leading orchestras.

Within Finland itself, Rantala is a major public figure and an advocate for music. He has been a goodwill ambassador for Finnish Unicef since 1994. He has done extensive work as presenter for the national television corporation Yle, hosting two popular TV series, "Iiro irti" (Iiro on the loose), and "Iirottelua" (a play on the Finnish expression for to let your hair down). He has also participated in 'Juhannusjuna' (Midsummer train), a TV programme which is a national institution in Finland. He has published his autobiography "Nyt sen voi jo kertoa" (Now It Can Be Told, 2011). Rantala has written music for dozens of plays and musicals, as well as a few feature length films. He has also hosted a piano festival and a concert series at the Alotria club in Helsinki. He has been running the Jazz Piano Festival at Kapsäkki since 2011. His recognition in Finland continues: in 2013 he was given Finland's highest award for artists the Pro Finlandia medal, and in 2015 a substantial five-year grant for artistic work by Finnish state.

The ACT years have brought international profile

Rantala's move to ACT proved a success from the start. His first release for the label was "Lost Heroes," a solo piano album which came out in February 2011. It was hailed as "a giant of an album" by AllAboutJazz.com, and "a masterpiece" (Süddeutsche Zeitung). It earned him the 2012 ECHO Jazz award for Best International Pianist, and the album received the annual prize of the Deutsche Schallplattenkritik. It has proved of lasting value: in early 2016 it was garlanded with a German Jazz GOLD Award.

In late 2012, "My History of Jazz" was released. The critical reaction as Rantala's international profile started to increase was above all to praise the breadth of his inspiration: "Iiro's a hero," wrote the late Jack Massarik in London's Evening Standard, describing the pianist as "a virtuoso who raises versatility to another level."

In "Anyone with a Heart", released in 2014, the pianist was joined by a violinist (Adam Bałdych) and a cellist (Asja Valcic) - the instrumentation of the classical piano trio - to reveal the more tender, classically-inspired side of his artistry. Both the widely read German magazine Fono Forum and Concerto in Austria gave it five stars. "Simply beautiful and stylistically confident," was the verdict of Frankfurt Radio.

In 2015 two contrasting albums followed. "It takes two to tango" was a happy and friendly dialogue with saxophonist Jukka Perko, in which AllAboutJazz.com enjoyed the two players' "respectful humor that keeps the album bouncing through evergreens and oddities alike." Rantala's thoughtful solo piano tribute to John Lennon "My Working Class Hero" brought a different, more reflective side, a "liturgy of memories and love for the music." (LondonJazz News)

Iiro Rantala was asked earlier this year to name his favourite piano players. "Richard Tee, Egberto Gismonti, Keith Jarrett and Michel Petrucciani," he responded. The surprising name in there is the first one. Tee was a studio player on countless soul and R&B albums, who died in 1993. That influence is to the fore on "How Long is Now" (2016), an "infectious, tuneful and swinging trio album" (Times of London) made with Lars Danielsson on bass and Peter Erskine on drums.

Awards have continued to be conferred on Rantala. In the laudatory speech presenting him with the JTI Trier Jazz Award 2016, the respected jazz critic of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Ralf Dombrowski said: "More than ever, Iiro Rantala is now playing what he enjoys. He is a seasoned performer and his touch at the piano is uniquely beguiling. His ability subtly to vary his sound and the imagination he brings to his melodic lines are unforgettable. Rantala can sweep listeners of their feet, he can be clown and magician, charmer and virtuoso, maverick and humorist."

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