

Officium business

When Jan Garbarek's spare, moody saxophone sound put sacred chants into the charts, a modern maestro broke cover

JAN GARBAREK LIVES FOR PART OF THE YEAR IN A small farmhouse high up in the Norwegian mountains. It is simple and remote, set amid a wild, dramatic landscape, and has a log cabin where the saxophonist practices and composes. It is cold – down to -25°C in winter – but a place of inspiration. “When I’m in hot countries, my mind stops and I feel that I cannot conceive even one note,” he says in his calm, impeccable English. “I need my natural environment, which is fresh air and crisp weather. That clears my mind and I feel the urge to create something.”

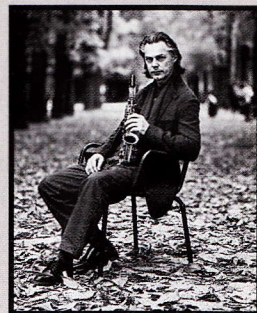
It is this icy clarity that Garbarek brought so powerfully to *Officium*, a collaboration with English vocal quartet The Hilliard Ensemble that became 1994's most unlikely hit. A collection of early European sacred chants, hymns and motets, *Officium* intriguingly combined the ethereal purity of classical singing with Garbarek's lustrous improvisations. Like Górecki's *Symphony No 3* and Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* before it, the CD was a word-of-mouth crossover classic, an album at home at the top of classical, jazz and even pop charts.

Yet – again like Górecki and Tavener – 49-year-old Garbarek is no parvenu. A musician with nearly 50 albums to his name (all for the estimable German ECM label), he has worked broadly within European jazz and folk traditions for over 25 years, continually honing and developing his craft. A saxophonist initially inspired by the thunder of American free-jazz improvisers such as John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, Garbarek has, since the early Seventies, painstakingly pared his music down to its most basic ingredients: tone and texture. In Garbarek's music, *sound* is all important.

“Modern music seemed to be getting too cluttered – there were too many elements going on at the same time on too many levels,” he explains. “I wanted clarity, so I decided to play fewer notes and add as much information – through changes in breathing, embouchure, inflection, pitch, volume, weight, and so on – as I could. I wanted to create a feeling of movement even though I might be playing just one, long note. I wanted to do the 100 metres in one step instead of 30.”

FIVE GREAT GARBAREKS

- 1 JAN GARBAREK: *FOLK SONGS***
“World music” way ahead of its time.
- 2 JAN GARBAREK: *DIS***
Saxophone meets solitary windharp.
- 3 JAN GARBAREK: *I TOOK UP THE RUNES***
Magisterial melodies; Nordic colours.
- 4 ZAKIR HUSSEIN: *MAKING MUSIC***
West meets masterly East.
- 5 KEITH JARRETT: *BELONGING***
Sublime Seventies scorcher.



Garbarek has his detractors (along with that of many of his ECM contemporaries, his work is routinely dismissed as being little more than overly minimal mood music), but it is this spare, poetic quality – the sense of space – that has always attracted a large and appreciative audience. It has also facilitated his work with an impressively disparate range of leading musicians, from jazz pianist Keith Jarrett to Brazilian guitarist Egberto Gismonti, Indian tabla player Zakir Hussein and Greek composer Eleni Karaindrou. Garbarek has an uncanny ability to find a common musical language.

His new CD, *Invisible World*, draws upon work with his regular jazz quartet and his more experimental projects outside it. Ten of the fifteen pieces were originally conceived for film and ballet, and it is an album that will find favour with anyone who luxuriated in *Officium*'s more emotive and evocative aspects.

Future projects include guesting on a recording with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra to be released later this year and further work on original material for a follow-up session with the The Hilliard Ensemble. *Officium* remains, however, by far his most commercially rewarding project to date. I ask him whether, almost two years on, he is still surprised by its success. “Oh, very much so. Although,” he pauses, smiling ruefully, “I’d rather say that I am more surprised by all the records that weren’t such a success.” **PHILIP WATSON**

Jan Garbarek tours the UK from November 20-24.