

**Artist: Hauschka**  
**Album: Philanthropy**  
**Release Date: October 20, 2023**  
**Label: City Slang**

The word “philanthropy” is defined as “the practice of performing charitable or benevolent actions” or “the love of humankind in general” by the Collins English Dictionary. For **Volker Bertelmann**, aka **HAUSCHKA**, music is as much about how it sounds as it is an opportunity to engage in discussion and exchanges of ideas. Perhaps too modest to consider his music a benevolent or charitable act, Bertelmann unquestionably displays “a love of humankind” through the compassion and openness of his new music. While not the obvious choice for an instrumental album dominated by the ever-changing but distinctive sound of prepared piano, the Academy Award and BAFTA-winning composer named his 15th solo studio album **PHILANTHROPY**, and it fits.

Like the album title, many of the song titles on the album are also interesting fits and, yet strangely, inexplicably, each suits the other perfectly. “Diversity,” for instance, is attached to playful, rolling arpeggios and pizzicato melodies and “Nature” to a haunting piece whose individual elements slowly coalesce, while “Loved Ones” is married to an affecting chamber music and “Altruism” to five minutes of joyful, carefree rhythms.

The composer, whose extraordinary, prize-winning soundtrack to *All Quiet On The Western Front* was in fact one of two scores for which he was Oscar-nominated in 2023 – the other was, coincidentally, another war drama, Norwegian director Gunnar Vikene’s *War Sailor* – uses his work not only to move people, whether emotionally or physically, but also to provoke. Not for him a word or phrase which predictably contrives to evoke an emotional response similar to a composition’s. Instead, many of his albums have been shaped to stimulate dialogue about a specific thesis: 2011’s *Salon Des Amateurs* explored his love of house and techno music; 2014’s *Abandoned City* used the names of such desolate but awe-inspiring places to convey the hope and sadness he experiences alone at the keyboard; 2017’s *What If?* addressed utopian concepts and his concerns for the world in which his children will live as adults.

“Pursuing angles that are connected with one theme is always satisfying,” he explains, “because it opens up routes of communication. It helps make an album like a concert, which for me is a social event because, besides performing, I love meeting fans and hanging out with them, or having a chat while I’m selling merch. A record with a concept offers another way of communicating with the people who listen to it. Concepts always connect you with real life.”

*PHILANTHROPY* – which, incidentally, owes a debt to the established pleasures of each of those aforementioned records – follows that pattern.

Not that its themes, many of them products of isolation, were fashioned in isolation of its music. “I always felt that I wanted it to be a very optimistic record,” he continues, “and I find a lot of pleasure in performing and listening to it, so I think it fits the album title well. Also, after the last couple of years, where everybody was thinking about how life would continue, I felt the urge to release a record that would help open the windows a little. I wanted to be positive, to put some energy into the music, not just play slow, depressed pieces.”

This certainly illuminates *PHILANTHROPY*'s moods, at times among the most upbeat in the extensive HAUSCHKA collection. Apart from the delightful “Diversity” and delirious “Altruism,” there’s the mischievous “Inventions” and the intriguingly dubby “Generosity,” with each title nodding to reasons to rejoice. On the other hand, there are more pensive pieces, with “Searching” stumbling towards an eerie climax and “Science” a kaleidoscopic landscape of seemingly random elements shifting in and out of focus, these titles again acknowledging activities vital to human progress, while the plucked piano strings and mysterious creaking of “Detached” and ‘Limitation of Lifetime’'s magical ripples, like a Debussy *Prelude*, offer peaceful interludes.

“Magnanimity” is the most melancholic, perhaps since the quality appears lacking in today’s society – now there’s a thing to talk about! – but “Noise” rounds things off in a manner which, not for the first time on this record, could be described as ‘ambient’. It was originally written for the credits of *All Quiet On The Western Front*, Bertelmann confesses: “I like a blank page at the end, just to let it all sink in. It's important afterwards that you reset before returning to these topics, which you can do, of course, by re-listening.”

*PHILANTHROPY* is HAUSCHKA's first new album in four years, the longest gap between records since his debut, *Substantial*, in 2004. Though Bertelmann started in pop music, he adopted his solo guise as Hauschka in the early 2000s, earning a reputation as a pioneer of what would come to be known as New Classical music. However, he hesitates to silo himself in one genre, saying “The only way to survive is actually to leave the ship when it starts to get going,” he laughs. “Otherwise it’s the last ship you take.” Not that he’s abandoned that side of his creativity altogether: his last album, 2019’s *A Different Forest*, was largely centered around solo, ‘unprepared’ piano.

The thing is, no one sounds like Hauschka, which he quite reasonably celebrates on this latest album by revisiting past habits. “I really loved how I worked in the beginning,” he smiles. “I wanted to connect with the time I first started.” Consequently, most of the record was recorded alone on his piano in his studio, beginning in summer 2022, though of course Bertelmann never restricts his use of his instrument to its keys. In addition, he employs a Turkish davoul drum, as well as, more prominently than ever, synthesizers, not least a bass synth. There are also

contributions from cellist **Laura Wiek** and violinist **Karina Buschinger**, while two tracks, “Generosity” and “Altruism,” survive from highly productive sessions with Múm’s drummer, **Samuli Kosminen**, with whom he’d initially intended to record an album before putting the project on hold. “As the pandemic progressed,” he clarifies, “I began to feel it wasn’t the right step. I need, you know, to be honest.”

Despite the gap between albums, Bertelmann hasn’t been twiddling his thumbs these last years, not that he was ever drawn to that. *All Quiet On The Western Front* was just the latest in a rush of productivity precipitated by the success of 2016’s Oscar-nominated collaboration with Dustin O’Halloran on the score to Garth Davis’ *Lion*. He and O’Halloran have worked on a further six projects, most recently the Kate Winslet-starring *Ammonite*. His catalog now includes almost 50 film and TV scores, with 2018’s *Patrick Melrose*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, again nominated for a BAFTA, which in turn led him to working again with its director, Edward Berger, on *All Quiet On The Western Front*.

Now, Bertelmann is back as HAUSCHKA, and *PHILANTHROPY* lives up to its name. An occasion for celebration and reflection, it’s a carefully considered but jubilantly improvised response to recent years, with its philosophically-inclined but approachable and compassionate creator at the peak of his compositional powers. If music be the food of love, then, here it’s also food for thought. That’s surely a gift worth giving and, even more, receiving.