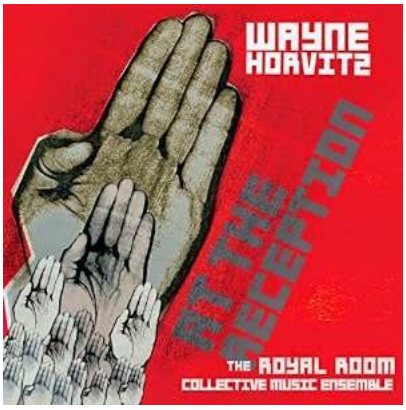
Wayne Horvitz and The Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble - At the Reception (Songlines, 2014) ****½



By Paul Acquaro – Thursday December 18, 2014

On his Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble recording "*At the Reception*" - keyboardist, composer and conductor Wayne Horvitz leads a big band through a set of his compositions that involve a great deal of improvisation and are highly enjoyable to listen to, over and over again. The music is collection of themes that long time listeners of Horvitz may recognize from recordings like "American Bandstand", "Sweeter than they Day", and the Gravitas Quartet. What sets this set apart is of course the big band setting and the process in which he shapes the music.

In fact, it's the later part that is discussed in the liner notes. Horvitz begins his notes referencing his work with the late Lawrence "Butch" Morris, who had developed an approach to improvisation and large ensemble improvization that he called "Conduction". The site "www.conduction.us" offers an explanation of Morris' approach:
Conduction®: A vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement (of any notation) or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation and provides instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing or form.

As Horvitz explains, it was through a deconstruction and reconstruction of the methods that he learned when working with Morris in the 1980s that he came up with his own approach to working with a large ensemble. Unlike Morris, who worked with more spontaneous developments, Horvitz moves around composed sections and has his musicians develop their improvisations through his compositional frameworks. Though his initial work was with high school students, he transferred this approach to more seasoned and professional musicians. This ensemble is currently working out of the Royal Room in Seattle and creating music of wonderful subtlety and contrasting grand sweeps of sound.

After the refined bass intro to "Daylight", a composition from his rock oriented late 1990's group "PigPen", the group explodes into free playing that eventually funnels into a solo by trumpeter Samantha Boshnack. As interesting as the soloists are, the background playing needs to be called out too as it creates an ever changing tapestry of tonality and colors. The track "Trish" is a

gorgeous movement of chords shifting and under a pleasant melody. Another highlight is on the following track "Barber Shop," a work Horvitz composed for a Charlie Chaplin movie soundtrack. It features the work of soprano sax player Kate Olson (from the duo The Syrinx Effect, whose other member Naomi Siegel also plays on this recording) and tenor player Skerik, who co-leads the joyful marching band-esque romp. “Ironbound” is a track that features the horn section in making an abstract picture. Broken into a virtual “Side A” and “Side B”, the album continues with a program of music that continues to captivate with an interpretation of Sweeter than the Day’s “Prepaid Funeral”.

At the Reception is an excellent large ensemble recording that doesn’t aim to challenge the listener by pushing them to edge, as it rather engages the listener with the spontaneous arrangements. These interpretations of Horvitz’s music are enjoyable to hear and can easily appeal to listeners beyond the dedicated avant-garde jazz audience. The album’s appeal grows more on each listen as new musical details emerge.

The collective is: Ivan Arteaga: alto saxophone; Samantha Boshnack: trumpet; Ryan Burns: piano; Eric Eagle: drums; Geoff Harper: bass; Jacob Herring: trombone; Al Keith: trumpet; Willem de Koch: trombone; Beth Fleenor: clarinet; Steve O’Brien: trumpet; Kate Olson: soprano saxophone; Naomi Siegel: trombone; Greg Sinibaldi: baritone saxophone; Skerik: tenor saxophone; Wayne Horvitz: conductor, composer

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