Wayne Horvitz and the Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble – At the Reception [TrackList follows] – Songlines

by John Sunier | Dec 3, 2014 | Jazz CD Reviews |

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Wayne Horvitz and the Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble – At the Reception [TrackList follows] – Songlines SGL 1609-2, 74:34 [10/14/14] ***1/2:

(Wayne Horvitz – conductor, composer, producer; Al Keith, Samantha Boshnack, Steve O'Brian – trumpets; Naomi Siegel, Jacob Herring, Willem de Koch – trombones; Beth Fleenor – clarinet; Ivan Arteaga – alto saxophone; Kate Olson – soprano saxophone; Skerik – tenor saxophone; Greg Sinibaldi – baritone saxophone; Ryan Burns – piano; Geoff Harper – bass; Eric Eagle – drums)

There's a telling graphic on the cover of Wayne Horvitz's latest album, the 75-minute *At the Reception*. It's the hands. They point up, directionally and intentionally. Hands are important to Horvitz and the modern big band he leads for this project, the 14-member Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble, which is christened after the Seattle music venue which Horvitz co-owns and helps promote. Why are hands so vital? For one thing, there wouldn't be music without hands pressing trumpet keys, pushing trombone plungers, stroking piano keys, hitting sticks against drum cymbals or flipping music sheets. And this contemporary, large-format jazz wouldn't and couldn't exist without Horvitz's hand signals. What Horvitz does is not mere conducting, but the *Conduction System*: it's a distinction, and the method was started by Horvitz' former New York City mentor, Butch Morris. Essentially, *conduction* is a way of harnessing the improvisatory power of musicians together with transcribed composition, extemporaneously arranging and reconstructing the music in the moment, something that is a complex approach which can yield many possibilities. Horvitz does this with a series of hand gestures to guide, prod and/or stimulate the musicians.

At first listen it does not appear Horvitz's ensemble is intermingling on-the-fly improvisation with written music. That is because the large band includes top-notch players who can perform both tight and loose, and maintain spontaneity while collectively following a steady structure. Also, melody and harmony are always part of the experience, even when specific musicians knowingly shift away from pre-written instructions. Despite the freedom offered to the musicians, nothing ever sounds chaotic. The multiple horns (four trumpets, three trombones, four saxophones and clarinet) and rhythm instruments (bass, piano, drums) coalesce and combine in a manner which brings to mind Charles Mingus or Duke Ellington, or some of John Zorn's catalytic tactics, but is progressively apart from those antecedents. Those interested in how this works visually can view an online live excerpt of "Disingenuous Firefight," one of 13 cuts from *At the Reception*.

Horvitz's record is a lot to take in with a single listen, particularly since some details might not be initially noticed. Horvitz understands. That's the reason the CD is split into a Side A and a Side B like a vinyl LP. Obviously, listeners don't need to turn the CD over like an LP platter, but you get the idea. Like Mingus, Horvitz uses fairly simple riffs or motifs, and repurposes them in unique elaborations. A notable case in point during the first half of tracks (the Side A material) is the colorful, circus-esque music which permeates the *up-tempo* "Barber Shop," which is fashioned like something which might be heard in a Fellini movie about acrobats and clowns cavorting on a sunny beach. Ballads and slower *tempos* are also plentiful and provide adroit balance between beauty and glimpses of agitation. "Daylight," for example, begins with low-moving *sonority* (lightly plucked bass, gradually ascending horns) and then organically builds, as more instruments are added, and a shimmering theme emerges. And like a strong wave striking a beach, the music swells to a *crescendo*, and then falls back to constancy, and thus, the tune proceeds onward. "Forgiveness" has a similar organization. The picturesque and unassuming piece commences with nuanced components, the horns conversing in a multi-instrument dialogue, sometimes massed as one and then veering off into separate voices. This is Side A's most Ellington-like number. Side A finishes with a reiteration of "Daylight," called "Redux #2 (Daylight)," which illustrates how the same composition can be altered in significant ways, but retain core elements.

One of Horvitz's prior assemblages was the quartet, Sweeter Than the Day, which performed forward-looking chamber jazz. A comparable quality pervades one of Side B's appealing selections, "Sweeter Than the Day." This is music which has an outwardly modest veneer, but has depth and intricate fluctuations. Another memorable undertaking is "Disingenuous Firefight," which echoes "Barber Shop" with a kaleidoscopic configuration, a humorous cadence and a lighthearted and weaving arrangement. The title track also has a Mingus-like forcefulness, with ample solo space and a swinging currency. Side B, and the album, concludes with "Redux #4 (Sweeter than the Day)," a short, pleasing restatement of the longer, aforementioned piece. A quick commendation must be given to Andy Meyer, who recorded this music at Seattle's London Bridge Studios; Brian Montgomery, who mixed the material; and Graemme Brown, who mastered. Each person should get kudos for their aural design or audio work. The communal band sound is excellent as well as all of the individual instrumentalists, from serene clarinet to soaring saxes. [Songlines is one of several labels who have given up on SACD lately due to its additional expense and low sales. Better support SACD more on other labels to avoid this continuing and to support this superb format…Ed.]

TrackList: Side A: A Walk in the Rain; Forgiveness; Daylight; Trish; Barber Shop; Ironbound; Redux #2 (Daylight). Side B: Prepaid Funeral; First Light; Sweeter Than the Day; Disingenuous Firefight; At the Reception; Redux #4 (Sweeter than the Day).

—Doug Simpson

Published: Audiophile Audition