textura

Wayne Horvitz: Some Places Are Forever Afternoon Songlines

Each recording Wayne Horvitz issues on Songlines seems to be different from the one before, and the difference is not only a matter of personnel as every release originates out of a particular concept that then proceeds to profoundly shape the project as a whole. In his earlier 2015 release At The Reception, for example, he used the 'Conduction' method associated with Butch Morris to direct The Royal Room Collective Music Ensemble in a programme of all-Horvitz originals. And now on Some Places Are Forever Afternoon, he merges two of his groups, Sweeter Than the Day and the Gravitas Quartet, to perform twelve compositions inspired by Northwest poet Richard Hugo (1923-1982). Accompanied by his daughter Nica, Horvitz went so far as to undertake a Montana road trip to visit the towns and places Hugo wrote about, and the two even stayed in a cabin where the writer lived during the last decade of his life.

One decision in particular figures critically into the nature of the recording and its impact. Though the deluxe full-colour booklet accompanying the release includes the poems upon which Horvitz's pieces are based (plus complementary photography by Nica), the poems themselves are neither recited nor sung on the recording; instead, Horvitz opted to compose instrumental music that would reflect Hugo's poems rather than present the material with the texts included (the live presentation of the material does involve the reading of each poem after the piece that inspired it, however). Relatedly, in eleven cases the track title is a phrase lifted from the poem (its case consistent with its setting in the text) with the title of the poem itself included in brackets.

The decision strikes me as wise, as including recitations of the poems would have proved to be too great a distraction from the instrumental flow, and furthermore the momentum of the recording also would have been compromised.

The other aspect that stands out—aside from the high calibre of the musicians' playing—is how much the recording centers on formally structured composition; Some Places Are Forever Afternoon is not, in other words, a blowing session, even if succinct solo statements do now and then occur. Horvitz, credited with piano, Hammond B-3, and electronics, brings a stellar crew on board—cornetist Ron Miles, bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck, cellist Peggy Lee, guitarist Tim Young, bassist Keith Lowe, and drummer Eric Eagle—to help bring his striking compositions to life. Obviously the cornet-bassoon-cello front-line makes for an ear-catching combination, but no one player dominates. Young gets in a generous share of licks, but so too do Miles, Schoenbeck, Lee, and Horvitz himself. That being said, the material more often than not centers on ensemble playing.

The music itself, like much of Horvitz's, strikes me as very American in kind, one extending out of a long tradition of jazz and classical composers, people like Aaron Copland, Duke Ellington, and Charles Ives. Perhaps it's the folk dimension that gives it that quality—even if there's nothing on the hour-long set that could be labeled folk in the literal sense. Still, folk, country, blues, swing, classical, and jazz all seem to blend together in these pieces, and it's perhaps this melting-pot quality that lends the material its American identity. Representative of the recording's character is “Nothing dies as slowly as a scene (Death of the Kapowsin Tavern),” which, after a jaunty intro led by Schoenbeck's bassoon, navigates an intricate course with brief solo expressions by Miles and Young surfacing along the way.

In settings marked by humility and respect, moods range from ruminative to playful, and those familiar with his previous output will recognize the writing as quintessential Horvitz. Not only is Some Places Are Forever Afternoon another high-quality recording to add to his growing body of work, it's also admirable for the originality of its concept. To his credit, he could have chosen a figure like Whitman or Kerouac for a project of this kind but instead went with the lesser-known Hugo. One imagines that were he still alive he would be enchanted by the result.

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