

JAZZ: THE RECORD ROUND-UP

3 PIANOS, 2 SAXES AND 1 FIDDLE... by MARC CHÉNARD

Irène Schweizer – Han Bennink



Welcome Back – Intakt CD254 (47 min 57 s)

In 2016, she turns 75, he a year later. Almost three decades after their first recorded encounter, Schweizer and Bennink met last Spring to cut their third duo album. The title track, which opens the disc, is like a microcosm of the whole album. In it, the pianist and drummer romp with great ease over free form terrain before hitting a madly swinging groove. A veritable national musical treasure in her native Switzerland, Schweizer is an icon of the European improvised music scene, yet solidly anchored in the jazz tradition. She pays tribute to her greatest influence, Thelonious Monk, by playing his tune “Eronel” and two old jazz standards associated with him. Bennink, the wild Dutch drum master, is in perfect synch every step of the way. Given that two are company, and a great one at that, a bassist would certainly be like the proverbial three is a crowd. Guaranteed to make you smile.

Myra Melford



Snowy Egret – Enja YEB 7752 (60 min 23 s)

An established name in the contemporary jazz arena, Myra Melford has always been pigeonholed into an “avant-garde” niche. But close listening shows that her music rests on a traditional basis, most notably the blues, which surfaces explicitly at this album’s last cut. Her band Snowy Egret is a slightly modified variant of the standard jazz quintet, with trumpet, guitar, bass guitar, and drums. The program of ten of the pianist’s originals breaks down roughly into alternating numbers, five of which are more energetic, the remainder more on the balladic or contemplative side. The hour of music is in fact so well-balanced and proportioned that is hard to find a moment that stands out, like a sparkling solo or an ear-catching theme. What counts here is the overall result of this impeccably performed set. With almost 30 years in the spotlight, Myra Melford offers us a music most becoming of a mature artist.

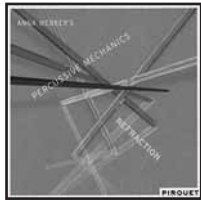
Miho Hazama



Time River – Sunnyside SSC 1420 (61 min 34 s)

Also a pianist, but more of a composer than a performer (she plays only on two of the eight pieces), Miho Hazama is a newcomer hailing from Japan. She has penned a series of six orchestral works for a dozen players, including a string quartet. Two special guests join the fray, Gil Goldstein featured on accordion for one track, and Joshua Redman wailing on tenor sax on another. Hazama’s musical space rests on a conventional tonal language, allowing her to remain harmonically clear within the quite densely written charts. In the two tracks where she is heard, she is joined by the strings and drummer alone. These shorter tracks are actually the most interesting because of the instrumentation and overall sound concept. Let’s hope she can do more in this vein for the future. The album closer, the rousing “Magdalena,” also stands out in this debut release.

Anna Webber’s Percussive Mechanics



Refraction – Pirouet PIT 3079 (64 min 59 s)

Canadian tenor saxophonist and flutist Anna Webber is one new voice also to be reckoned in the so-called contemporary creative music scene. This New York-based McGill alumna states her case by fronting the septet Percussive Mechanics. Assembled during an extended stay in Berlin five years ago, the group offers a highly original musical perspective. For one, the instrumentation is unusual in that there are two drummers, as many reed players and keyboardists (piano and vibraphone), but one bassist. More importantly, Webber’s pieces do not unfold like conventional jazz vehicles where linear melodies are laid out in circular forms. Instead, her compositions (seven in total) are structured in blocks that are reiterated several times only to morph into new ones. While there are improvised solos, it is more the overall concept of the music that impresses the ear than the individual contributions. In this second release for the German Pirouet label, Anna Webber refines her musical vision by looking beyond free form jazz or purely improvised music as alternatives to standard jazz.

Annie Dominique



Tout Autour – MCM 017 (66 min 44 s)

Multi-reedist Annie Dominique sticks to tenor saxophone, her main axe, for her debut album. On it, she is cast in good company with close associates trombonist Jean-Nicholas Trottier, pianist Jonathan Cayer, bassist Sébastien Pellerin, and Éric Thibodeau on drums. She pens nine originals, all crafted within the mainstream jazz idiom. The group is consistent in its playing, with a special mention to the trombonist for his solos, probably his best on record to date. The saxophonist, for her part, is more discreet in the first half of the disc – in fact, she gives a lot of place to her sidemen throughout the session – but asserts herself a little more in the remainder, each solo carefully constructed and always mindful of finding the best notes. Like all well trained musicians, her playing rests on solid foundations, now the challenge is to expand on these, maybe in a smaller group setting or else by incorporating the other horns at her disposal.

Lisanne Tremblay



Violinization – Inner Circle INCM 042CD (59 min 11 s)

The violin has always been something of a marginal instrument in jazz, even today. In this debut album, issued on the imprint of New-York saxophonist Greg Osby, Montrealer Lisanne Tremblay serves notice that she can fiddle with the best of them. Not only is her technique spotless, but her playing has the rhythmic suppleness so essential to jazz, but generally lacking in classically trained musicians. What’s more, she prefers a darker sounding timbre, closer to the viola than the customary brilliance of her instrument. In all ten pieces she is deftly supported by her partner, pianist Rafael Zaldivar, likewise for bassist Rémi-Jean Leblanc, and drummer Philippe Melanson, all of whom breathe vitality into the music. Fortunately for her, this record was issued south of the border, affording her the opportunity to reach a wider market.

... AND THEN 4 DRUMMERS

Mark Nelson



Sympathetic Frequencies – MCM 018 (60 min 42 s)

Issued on the label of the Parc-X trio, this release is the brainchild of that group's original drummer, now leading a quartet. The lineup of tenor sax, piano, bass, and drums may seem conventional, but the music is more adventurous than one could expect. Nelson has penned a program of originals that are contemporary in concept yet jazzy at heart. The suite "Hymn of Hope for Him," divided in five tracks, occupies almost half of this 62-minute side, and exemplifies the band's range. Notwithstanding the leader, pianist Andrew Boudreau and bassist Nicolas Bédard are up to the task, likewise for tenorman Mike Bjella. In fact, the latter's refreshingly original concept eschews all Coltrane mannerisms, retaining only a touch of Wayne Shorter in his sound – some pretty nifty frequencies indeed.

Harris Eisenstadt



Canada Day IV – Songlines SGL 1642 (50 min 48 s)

A resident New Yorker for a decade, drummer Harris Eisenstadt hasn't forgotten his homeland, hence the title of his band. Like all of his preceding albums, this fourth chapter is issued on Vancouver's Songlines label, and contains seven originals by the leader. Save for the vibraphone, which replaces the piano, the lineup of trumpet, tenor sax, bass, and drums is in keeping with the jazz canon. Like Nelson, Eisenstadt avoids all drumming displays to better enhance his sidemen's contributions, most notably trumpeter Nate Wooley whose solos are brimming with imagination and daring. A contemporary jazz offering of the first order.

Joe Hertenstein



HNH – Clean Feed CF332CD (51 min 41 s)

Though top billing goes here to drummer Joe Hertenstein, this is more of a cooperative unit comprised of a cornetist, Thomas Heberer, and a bassist, Pascal Niggenkemper. All hailing from Germany, but now residing in New York, these players have just issued their third album. Of the 11 tracks, four are collectively improvised, the remaining seven work off of compositions attributed either to the leader or the brassman. In those latter pieces, the improvised and written parts are quilted in such a way that they blur into each other. But such a result is best achieved when musicians have been working together over a period of time, in this case since 2007. In 50 minutes, this trio puts its best foot forward thanks to the concise nature of the pieces.

Christian Lillinger



Grund – Pirouet PIT 3086 (51 min 38 s)

Unlike the preceding drummer and cohorts, Christian Lillinger has not left his native Germany. Also very open in style, his music is however much more elusive in character. The instrumentation of his septet is almost identical to that of Anna Webber's band, the exception being two bassists rather than two drummers. Overall, his music is quite diffuse, with fleeting written ensembles or sections where some improvise while others play notated parts, with only hints of steady tempos. At once remote from jazz, in the usual sense, even from customary free jazz, the music treads over such slippery terrain that it's hard to find a solid footing. Multiple listenings required.

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