

DIFFERENT WORLDS • Arte Quartett • MARSYAS 1804 (59:45)

ARMBRUSTER *Chintro*. **SOMMER Moos-Ruef**. **TRADITIONAL-HOFSTETTER** *L'Hioba*. **TRADITIONAL-KAPPELER** *Schönster Abendstern*. **ABOU-KHALIL** *Dreams of a Dying City*. *Arabian Waltz*. **ZORN** *Tiferet*. *Nevalah*. *Mahshav*. *Mikreh*. **KAPPELER-RILEY** *Indian Trail*.

Now, *this* is my kind of album! Four eclectic, classically-trained saxophonists—one each of soprano, alto, tenor and baritone, with the second of them also playing something called a “trumpetsax” in the opening of the first track—giving us the music of seven composers, two of them being in fact adaptations of traditional music by members of the quartet (more on that in a moment) and another being a collaboration between one of the quartet members and Terry Riley. To call the music eclectic is putting it mildly; it ranges from an archaic sound, something like Mediaeval music on hormones, to multi-layered polytonality to jazz riffs (albeit non-improvised riffs) to Eastern sounds, not only the Lebanese style of Rabih Abou-Khalil but also a Sephardic sound (as in the oddly titled “Schönster Abendstern” or “Beautiful Evening Star”). Moreover, with no breaks between numbers, the entire CD has the feeling of a continuous, slightly wacky but extremely fun-sounding jam session. (Those listeners who may be familiar with the World Saxophone Quartet, an a cappella avant-garde jazz group, will hear many similarities between the two.)

The members of this extraordinarily talented group are Beat Hofstetter (yes, his first name is “Beat”!) on soprano sax, Sascha Armbruster on alto sax (and trumpetsax), Andrea Formenti on tenor sax, and Beat Kappeler (two Beats in one group?) on baritone sax. Being classically trained, none of them really have the kind of rich, burry tone quality one associates with jazz musicians in those ranges, but listeners familiar with the “purer” sounds of Johnny Hodges on soprano and Lee Konitz on alto will have a good idea of what the Arte Quartet sounds like. Abou-Khalil’s *Dreams of a Dying City*, by virtue of its being played a cappella, lacks the back-beat “kick” of the composer’s own recording, but this quartet does have his style down pat.

Back to the album, Abou-Khalil is followed by the eclectic music of avant-garde and jazz composer John Zorn which include quarter-tones, polyphony and an Eastern feeling (beginning, it seems, in an Arabic mode but becoming more and more klezmer-like as it progresses). This is in turn followed by the piece that has become something of a “hit” for Abou-Khalil, his *Arabian Waltz*. Ironically, the recording that made it a hit—Yo-Yo Ma’s *Yellow Road Tour* album—gave us the least authentic or enthusiastic reading. The version by the Amici Piano Trio on Atma Classique is terrific, however, as was the version by the Balanescu String Quartet, and this one is also quite good. (The best words I can find to describe the rhythm of this “waltz” is a sort of camel trot danced by an animal with three legs on uppers.) There are a lot of syncopated backbeats in this piece that often give classically-trained musicians fits, but the Arte Quartet has it well in hand.

Our journey of exploration ends with a collaboration between Beat Kappeler and Terry Riley titled *Indian Trail*. This starts with voices heard faintly in the background, then a sound that resembles a sitar swathed in an ambience that sounds like a Middle Eastern mosque. The call of a muezzin is heard over a bass drone. Where, oh where is our saxophone quartet? Eventually they do show up, also playing over the bass drone, but their sound seems electronically distorted, creating a “buzz” sound. Typically of Riley, it evolves into a minimalist piece, with the same short pattern repeated over and over; but aha! In the middle, both key and melodic patterns change, and we get a drone in the upper voices while the lower ones play their own melody. A drum kit suddenly emerges out of thin air, gently propelling the music as it evolves into a sort of quasi-Eastern shuffle-beat—then later, almost a soft rock beat, with the tenor sax playing (possibly written-out) jazz riffs, then vocal riffing over that as the beat loosens up into more of a jazz groove. This is some wild stuff!

I cannot praise this CD highly enough. It’s a one-of-a-kind experience, one that you’ll want to hear over and over and over again. Go for it!

Lynn René Bayley