

Mood" help shape a beautiful performance, with inspired contributions from Griggs and guitarist Petersen. It's obvious that a lot of care went into every aspect of this production, and it's paid off in an easily recommendable first installment of what was, evidently, a grand recording session.

Larry Nai

THE NOW ORCHESTRA, WOWOW, SPOOL 107.

Wowow / The Yellow Sound / The Tyranny of Interest. 73:41
Coat Cooke, ts, as, bari s, flt; Ron Samworth, g; Paul Plimley, p; Kate Hammett-Vaughan, vcl; Graham Ord, ts, as, ss, flt, pic; Saul Berson, as; Mark Nodwell, ss; Ralph Eppel, tbn; Rod Murray, tbn; Brad Muirhead, b tbn, tba; John Korsrud, tpt, flgh; Bill Clark, tpt, flgh; Peggy Lee, cel; Paul Blaney, b; Clyde Reed, b; Dylan van der Schyff, d; George E. Lewis, tbn; Vinny Golia, rds, flt; Paul Cram, cl, ts. 11/14-15/97, Vancouver, BC.

The genre that Anthony Braxton calls "Creative Orchestra Music" is alive and well! This splendid recording - commissioned to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Vancouver's NOW Orchestra - is a rich document not only of the important Vancouver scene but of the vitality of large ensemble improvisation at century's end.

Incorporating three very long pieces of multiple sections - by mainstays Cooke and Samworth, as well as by guest soloist Paul Cram - this date demonstrates the NOW Orchestra's synergy as well as its knowledge of the large ensemble continuum that stretches from Ellington, Fletcher Henderson and Basie to Sun Ra, the AACM Experimental Band, and Braxton's Creative Orchestra, all the way to Globe Unity, LJCO, and ICP. Yes, I mean that. Yes, they're that good.

Coat Cooke's "Wowow" is one of the best performances I've heard all year. It opens in invocation, with clarinet and trombone dancing in open air, soon joined by a multitude of voices summoning the spirits. The spirits are those of the great big bands and traditions mentioned above, but this ain't no Lincoln Center. Over the bluesy strut of muted brass, George Lewis goes nuts, giving a clinic on his 'bone and calling to mind the glories of classic big bands while incorporating contemporary techniques, gestures and sensibilities (joined gleefully by Plimley's atonal cluster-comping and Samworth's hissing guitar). The next segment is mournful and spacious, anchored by Peggy Lee's superb cello playing, a huge lament that soon unfolds for clarinets and which abruptly cuts off, leaving a duet of Lewis and van der Schyff (who here recalls Bennink at his best). They cue in the next section, a ferociously swinging riff over which reeds and brass gliss crazily. Someone (Golia perhaps?) - solos are unfortunately uncredited in the liners) takes a white-hot clarinet solo and whips the ensemble into chaos. And we reach the piece's climax: over an undulating, disquieting background, Kate Hammett-Vaughan and Cooke bark like dogs and give a recitation on the inspirations behind their music. Most of this recitation deals with music as a response to worldly pain, with the transformative power of pure sound, in many ways a modern ver-

sion of what Walt Whitman called the "barbaric yawp" (which the two vocalists, in their fashion, emulate with their repeated howls and the incantation "wowow..."). Soon, they stir the bubbling noise again and the band is off into a defiant riff (which unfortunately fades out all too quickly). At first I wondered whether this might all be a bunch of a neo-beat pap, but these passages continued to be stirring over repeated listenings.

"The Yellow Sound" begins similarly, with a free exploration by piano, cello, vocals and drums. This 7-section piece makes plenty of room for individual and collective statements, but it is rooted in a swelling chord progression reminiscent of Miles Davis' "Aura." Whereas trombones and clarinets dominated much of Cooke's piece, Hammett-Vaughan's vocals and Lee's cello are responsible for much of the main thematic and melodic material here. Composer Samworth takes his inspiration from Kandinsky's "Blue Rider Almanac," first in Hammett-Vaughan's recitations of the actual text and later in the way he uses disparate voices from the orchestra (primarily Lee's cello but also notably trombones, guitar, and drums) to experiment with color, intonation, and form. For example, in the third section we hear strings and voice state a compelling melody as the initial chordal progression is played over a martial rhythm - an example of layering and juxtaposition that would do the great painter proud. Across the span of this piece, the number of voices increases and decreases to spotlight duos and trios (notably the tenor, trombone and drum feature at midpoint) but also to build tension as the ensemble builds to a powerful climax.

The final piece by Paul Cram chugs along merrily, with alternating blocks of sound for different configurations of reeds and brass. As ever, there are several episodes of highly-caffeinated open improvisation, combined with staccato ensemble bursts that recall Mr. Braxton, big riffs for guitar and trumpet soloists, and dizzy melodies. While balancing composition and improvisation as adroitly as the other pieces, this last feature allows a bit more room for spontaneous creation - about midway through, for example, there are knockout passages, first for baritone sax and then for cello and guitar. Sweet polyphony follows these interludes, most of which eventually coalesce into a formal statement by the ensemble - Cram clearly delights in building up the listener's interest and breaking it down, toying with the conventions of composition. The daffy cop-show funk towards the piece's end is delightful, particularly since it's broken up by roaring statements from Plimley and Hammett-Vaughan. Thankfully this isn't done with the shrugged shoulders of an arch-ironist, but rather as part of the composition's piecemeal construction, which careens madly towards an exuberant finish.

I've narrated the course of these compositions for a quite deliberate reason, not just because I think this is one of the tasks of a reviewer but because I've always felt that one of the finest qualities of large ensemble improvisation was its ability to take the listener on journeys just such as these. They're over too quickly, and I was hungering for more of this fine ensemble (who, to my knowledge, have only elsewhere been documented playing Barry Guy's Study

- *Witch Gong Game*). And perhaps the finest compliment I can muster, this music had me itching to pick up my own instrument and join in. By all means, listen to this.

Jason Bivins

1) CONRAD HERWIG, OSTEOLOGY, CRISS CROSS 1176.

Syeeda's Song Flute / Kenny K. / Devil May Care / First Born / Fire / It Ain't Necessarily So / You Don't Know What Love Is / Osteology. 60:51.
Herwig, tbn; Steve Davis, tbn; David Kikoski, p; James Genus, b; Jeff Tain'Watts, d. 12/20/98, Brooklyn, New York.

2) WYCLIFFE GORDON, SLIDIN' HOME, NAGEL-HEYER 2001.

Mood Indigo / Green Chimneys / It Don't Mean a Thing / Do Nothin' 'Till You Hear from Me+ / Jolly Jume Jumej (Wycliffe II) / New Awlins" # / Amazing Grace / St. Louis Blues# / What?! / Blooz... First Thaingh 'dis Moanin' / Beauty's In the Eye / The "Hallelujah" Shout / My God. 64:59.*
Gordon, tbn, tba; Victor Goines, ts, cl; Eric Reed, p; Rodney Whitaker, b; Herlin Riley, d; Joe Temperly, ss, bs*; Randy Sandke, tpt#; Milt Grayson, vcl+. 12/21-22/98, New York City, NY.

(1) A familiar setting: two trombones in mostly tight post-bop harmony over a strong, if sometimes undistinguished sounding rhythm section. Sound familiar? In the liners, Herwig is quoted as saying he's tried to "update the vocabulary [of J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding]." In a sense, he has brought their classic '50s sound to the 1990s, with extended range, lengthier tracks (a function, in large part, of CD vs. LP), and at least a partial emphasis on modes.

Herwig has a strong technique, one that rivals any of his peers. The criticism of his work has always been a perceived coolness in his playing. In the past, some have noted an off-putting, personality-less reserve to his blowing that negates his monster chops. Here, he is less restrained, showing flashes of brilliance, although, to be sure, he sometimes reverts to pre-programmed licks. Herwig has come a long way, and when he lets go, he bursts notes forth like a machine gun (as on "Devil May Care"), and soars into the upper registers, not afraid to take chances and stumble. He rips through the chords, and if he seems to be occasionally on automatic pilot, there is no mistaking his super chops.



Conrad Herwig by Jimmie Jones

You can hear the influence of Carl Fontana, by way of Frank Rosolino, although Herwig has cultivated his own voice. Davis lacks the range of Herwig, but as a musical descendant of Curtis Fuller, Davis tells a story with his horn - usually smack dab in the middle of the clef. His solos flow logically, the result of considerable thought. Like a consummate sculptor, he pays attention to form and emotion, so that his performances leave a satisfying taste. His distinct burred tone lulls, a lure and a siren. He knows how to effectively build tension, and release it at the last moment. Jeff Watts continues to show his prowess as a powerful supporting drummer. He kicks hard, when appropriate, as on Joe Henderson's "Fire," and lends a subordinate, though critical role on the slower pieces. His extended solo on Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So" should silence any doubters. David Kikoski, while a more than competent pianist, too often proffers the kind of predictable, pleasant, sometimes impressive fare that seems to fill up space as often as not. For evidence that he is capable of burning with unmitigated force, just listen to him on the Gershwin piece. If only he always played with such finesse and excitement! James Genus' bass offers powerful support throughout.

The arrangements for trombone are usually right on the mark, with tight harmony the name of the game. There are hints of JJ and Kai throughout, but this is far from being any sort of retrospective. There are modern touches: counterpoint, slightly extended harmonies, lengthy improvisations, joint blowing, and variety in rhythm. The Gershwin piece compares favorably to similar efforts by the older quintet. The three Herwig tunes, "Kenny K.," "First Born," and "Osteology" are all winners, the latter a study in bones of the higher order rattling at express velocity.

This entertaining set should satisfy those who enjoy the two-bone format combined with thoughtfully conceived arrangements. As Herwig says, it is "in the pocket." You should find it joyfully ossiferous.

(2) Wycliffe Gordon is, of course, best known for his association with Wynton Marsalis, and the trumpeter contributed liner notes to this release. As with Wynton, there are few innovations to be found, but there is an impressive handling of traditional sounds. The thirteen tunes look backwards, as in