



Relay
Wet Ink Ensemble (Carrier)
 by Kurt Gottschalk

Conventional jazzbo wisdom holds that the 'jazz composer' is the great, underrated genius. Ever since Gunther Schuller's "Third Stream" of the '50s-60s, musicians have been striving to merge 'classical' levels of formalism with jazz linguistics. But that same jazzbo doctrine holds that "classical musicians can't improvise." Meanwhile, and for at least as long a time, composers in the classical tradition have been working with group improvisation, nontraditional scores and other structural strategies that run counter to the staid reputation of the institutionalized classical ensemble.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. And New York of late has been home to a number of challenging chamber ensembles: the string quartet JACK; the ensemble ICE and So Percussion are just some of the brilliant ensembles blurring lines between perceived camps. Add to that list the wonderful Wet Ink, whose new release features screaming saxophones, electro-noise, a composition by a jazz master and the honed precision of a finely tuned chamber ensemble.

On *Relay*, the group's third full release, the ensemble employs the unusual instrumentation of flute, violin, saxophone, piano and percussion with Sam Pluta on electronics and the remarkable soprano Kate Soper. Four of the six compositions are by ensemble members, with strong contributions by Rick Burkhardt and trombonist/scholar George Lewis.

The album opens with saxophonist Alex Mincek's "Color, Form, Line", employing the ensemble's well-oiled dynamics in exciting stops and flutters. Burkhardt's "Alban" follows and is one of the high points of the album, making great use of Soper's particular talent for moving with slippery ease between operatic singing, abstract vocalese, authoritative narrative and plain speak in what seems to be increasingly fragmented news stories. While her own short suite on the album tends a bit toward the melodramatic, here she is wonderfully authoritative. Pianist Eric Wubbels' "Katachi" - at 20 minutes the longest piece on the disc - uses a variety of devices to pass threads across the group, making for plenty of fast interplay before being taken over by an electronic drone. This leads quite naturally into Pluta's unhinged

"American Tokyo Daydream V", the jazziest piece, Mincek's sax soaring over a nest of pops and blasts.

The final track is another high mark, Lewis' hilariously dense and unexpected and fittingly titled "Anthem", which heralds the band as champions worthy of a Pete Townsend lyric in an overblown smugness worthy of Frank Zappa. If the allusions at this point fall out of the realms of jazz or classical and into dinosaur rock, it's only because Lewis embraced the opportunity to occupy the unmapped terrain between musical provinces that Wet Ink inhabits.

For more information, visit carrierrecords.com. This group is at The DiMenna Center Feb. 8th. See Calendar.



Twelve
Amina Figarova (In & Out)
 by George Kanzler

The relatively stable, long-term working band has become increasingly rare in jazz, so it is impressive that two of them with decade-plus tenures are led by women: singer Tierney Sutton's Band and pianist Amina Figarova's Sextet. The latter group is closing in on two decades and is anchored by the leader, who was born and raised in Azerbaijan, and her husband, the flute player Bart Platteau. Other members are tenor/soprano saxophonist Marc Mommaas, trumpeter Ernie Hammes, bassist Jeroen Vierdag and drummer Chris "Buckshot" Strik. Figarova and Platteau relocated from Europe to New York (Forest Hills, Queens) a couple of years ago and *Twelve*, Figarova's 12th album as a leader, is a suite of 12 songs reflecting her impressions of their move and new home.

Working together under the unifying direction of a single composer-player-leader, the sextet produces a group sound that is unique and identifiable. It is a highly nuanced, delicately calibrated sound, buoyed by a resiliently nimble rhythm team and tonally homogenous blend of flute with sax and trumpet that often creates an impression of a mellifluous ensemble section rather than three disparate instruments. Figarova's piano is also a crucial element in the group sound, reminiscent of John Lewis' role in the Modern Jazz Quartet. Like Lewis, Figarova has a spare, forthright sound with a limpid touch and weaves strikingly unadorned, lyrical lines through the music. That music is the triumph of this album, tunes that achieve perfect equilibrium between communal form and individual expression.

There is expansiveness here in the breadth of the compositions, although intimacy and a deft intricacy are also part of the fabric of the music. Figarova ranges from a "subway tango" ("NYCST"), a title tune in 12/8 and a dreamy, pastel-washed "Morning Pace" with piano-stroked melody and obbligati to a fast, skittery "Sneaky Seagulls" and refined takes on hardbop ("New Birth") and Horace Silver-ish soul jazz ("On the Go"). Ballads are definite winners, especially "Isabelle", with Mommaas' soprano solo keying in a lovely, rhapsodic piano coda, and the gently sweeping melody of "Another Side of the Ocean".

This is a rich album that reveals new facets - like the sly reference to Cole Porter's "Heat Wave" on "Leila" - with repeated listening, as well as one that showcases one of jazz' very best working bands.

For more information, visit inandout-records.com. Figarova is at Blue Note Feb. 10th. See Calendar.



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