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Vienna's New Waltz

Europe's hot in jazz now, but the Vienna Art Orchestra was celebrating it when it was still out in the cold. JOHN FORDHAM talks to bandleader Matthias Ruegg about a 20-year project that's still unique.

In an era in which the classical and traditional virtues of jazz have been celebrated almost to the point of embarrassing the pioneers of music's radical and innovative life, the 20th anniversary of composer/pianist Matthias Ruegg's Vienna Art Orchestra ought to warrant a great many more than three cheers. This adventurous, theatrical, ruggedly independent and sometimes explosive ensemble (Willem Breuker's and Mike Westbrook's bands are its closest European relatives), has been creatively re-working the century's jazz and modern classical repertoires since its inception, originally as a showcase for Ruegg's composing and playing, in 1977. 'Affectionately disrespectful', the Zürich journalist Christian Rentsch called it. That's only the beginning. 'We give our all, and a good deal more' is the Orchestra's motto.

Over the years the ensemble has applied its ingenious collective imagination as steered by Ruegg, the multi-talented, rigorously intellectual piano-playing guru in charge, to the works of Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Erik Satie, Ornette Coleman, Lennie Tristano, Anthony Braxton, Charles Mingus, Duke Ellington, Eric Dolphy and many others. Remarkably, the band rarely lets the spirit of the originals out of

earshot, yet the arrangements and interpretations are forcefully

and memorably their own. Ruegg has also recently directed the inventiveness of his jazz-based instrumentalists toward a new place for Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête*. The Art Orchestra now tours the UK this month on the Contemporary Music Network circuit, delivering an unbroken 90 minute set, paying tribute to 40 years of European jazz – from Django Reinhardt and Albert Mangelsdorff, via Michel Legrand, Jan Garbarek and Louis Sclavis, to Django Bates.

'The theme of the tour' Ruegg says, 'is to feature contributions of those European musicians who didn't emigrate to the US, but who invented something very personal and special. Not the type who refuses everything with American origins, yet not the type who copies everything American. So the programme is dedicated to Django Reinhardt and Albert Mangelsdorff as unique European jazz instrumentalists, to Michel Legrand, a European who was able to be admitted to the phalanx of Great

American Songwriters, to Michel Portal, Hans Koller, Jasper van't Hof, to Jan Garbarek, who's now a star but with a style true to his roots, and to Louis Sclavis, Django Bates and Wolfgang Muthspiel as younger musicians who have made an impact with their own material.'

Matthias Ruegg was born in Zürich in 1952, and discovered jazz at secondary school in Switzerland. He went to music college in Graz, Austria, but quit when his national service was due (Ruegg was a confirmed pacifist), moving to Vienna to take a job as a club pianist.

Ruegg formed a band with saxophonist Wolfgang Puschnig, now a star Carla Bley soloist. The band steadily grew in size as Ruegg's composing talents became apparent, and its evolution engendered an Ellington-like approach in the

leader, writing and arranging for the particular voices around him. Like Gil Evans before him, Ruegg was also broadminded about instrumentation, and began to freely use marimbas, bass clarinets, piccolos, tubas, sometimes alpine horns, strings, and melodica. But as much as Ruegg has been driven by jazz, he is equally absorbed by materials drawn from Schubert, Stravinsky, Wagner, Bartok or Brahms. Unlike Jacques Loussier however, Ruegg doesn't simply add a jazz groove to classical music's greatest hits, but uses its harmonic and textural innovations as raw material to be vigorously massaged and reshaped.

'I love jazz, but I couldn't say my ideas have only come from it,' Ruegg states firmly. 'It was such an adventure for all of us to play Mingus, for instance, and everybody liked doing it so much, but Erik Satie has been such a major inspiration for me too.'

(Ruegg recorded the

"I would still say that a jazz musician is someone who is coming from jazz... something very special and unique, and whatever musics we play, the members of the Orchestra are all rooted in jazz"



Bridget Metcalfe



These are heady times for Tees-side born Bridget Metcalfe, having just completed a successful week at Ronnie Scott's to celebrate the release of her debut CD, 'In Your Eyes'.

An Essex Girl by adoption, Bridget's jazz career started after she left her native Middlesbrough. "I had piano lessons, and started singing in school," she recalls. "I then started singing on the folk scene which is great training – all that unaccompanied singing which is such an important feature of traditional folk music."

"I'd always wanted to sing jazz though, and when I came to London to work in a bank, the opportunities just seemed to open up." To such an extent, that in 1995 she was able to turn professional and immediately left for France to tour with a Glenn Miller revival orchestra, where she met saxophonist Mark Allaway, who has become an important part of the Metcalfe success equation, contributing material and leading her accompanying quartet.

"Mark writes lovely melodies," she explains. "The songwriting partnership has really grown – we must continue to write to develop our style". Indeed, Mark's compositions are well to the fore on the new CD, with Bridget supplying the lyrics to a fresh sounding set. There are standards, too, of course – including an excellent reading of 'Everything Happens To Me' and Bridget is keen to acknowledge the influence of many of the great vocalists – Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Dinah Washington.

Bridget, who also presents a weekly arts programme on BBC Radio Essex, "adores live performance". And she's turning heads, and some pretty impressive ones too. The great drummer Elvin Jones, who was appearing opposite her at Ronnie's, commenting: "She has a stage presence that I personally haven't seen in years, and her voice is marvellous... one in a million."

'In Your Eyes' by Bridget Metcalfe is available on Amber Records (AMBCD 20997)

spare, haunting 'Minimalism of Erik Satie' for HatArt with the Orchestra in 1983) 'and so has Mozart. You are attracted to artists who for some reason are closer to your own aesthetic, whatever genre they come from. What is all written music at the end, but just pieces of paper? Whatever the style, the interest always lies in the interpretation, and there are lots of possibilities to make an interpretation. It often seems as if only one way of performing a particular type of music is permitted. But nowadays I would prefer to hear Sting, for

still divided into a lot of different countries and cultures after all, whereas in the US the jazz scene was mainly concentrated on New York, with Chicago and Philadelphia to some extent involved, and with everybody in the States speaking the same language, more or less. But though the distances might be shorter, there are worlds between Oslo and Paris much further apart than New York and Philadelphia for instance. Joe Zawinul always shows a little of his Viennese background in his music. Django Reinhardt had strong French

Mingus, Reinhardt or Garbarek, he consistently makes music that is both familiar and utterly surprising. Some say the Art Orchestra's work sounds formal and contained, and it certainly doesn't go for the usual knee-jerks of clichéd climaxes, blues licks musicians execute in their sleep, or crowd-baiting build-ups. But the revitalising of familiar materials the Orchestra achieves so well, comes from a heated emotional core. Matthias Ruegg's appreciation of most of the world's music also doesn't lead him to blur edges that are



Photos: Christian Niederbacher

instance, sing Schubert than the traditional way of doing it. Even when Herbie Hancock did the 'New Standards' record, he just took the material and intentionally did it without respecting the milieu of rock music. Everything can be interpreted in new ways.'

European jazz is, significantly, the theme of the Vienna Art Orchestra's 20th anniversary, and the ways in which it departs from rather than resembles African-American traditions has fuelled the band's long and illustrious life. Ruegg nevertheless doesn't look for convenient unifying elements that aren't there in the complex tapestry of the continent's jazz history.

'I don't really think there's a general European jazz style,' he reflects, 'besides free jazz, which does have some Europe-wide similarities, or copying American jazz which obviously does. Europe is

roots. Jan Garbarek, though it can be a cliché to state it, has a very cool sound that comes from the Northern countries, it definitely couldn't have come from Spain. But what does bring together the musicians we're paying tribute to is the fact that they have taken the American musical forms into consideration, and then combined them with their own roots, whether from European art or folk music'.

Matthias Ruegg and the Vienna Art Orchestra bring many persuasions of music together, but theirs is not the restless eclecticism that reduces the contributions of rich traditions to fleeting soundbites. Ruegg has never regarded himself as an avant-gardist, seeing the apex of the sharp end as too far removed from the realities of both musicians' and listeners' lives, yet in his probing for the essence of artists like Ellington,

uniquely distinct.

'There are more and more performers able to play both classical music and jazz well these days, but you can usually hear which tradition the musician is really coming from. I would still say that a jazz musician is someone who is coming from jazz and a classical musician from classical music, and there are clear differences, in phrasing, timing, understanding of form, and harmonic conception. I think jazz is something very special and unique, and whatever musics we play, the members of the Orchestra are all rooted in jazz. A lot of critics embrace the present movement toward retro-jazz or classic jazz or whatever you want to call it, but for us even if we play traditional music we try to play it in a personal way.'

The Vienna Art Orchestra's tour runs from November 14 to 21 – see the listings.