

DEPARTMENTS

- 8 First Take
- 10 Chords & Discords
- 13 The Beat
- 14 Remembering
Jack Maher
- 18 Backstage With ...
Curtis Stigers
- 20 The Question Is ...
- 22 Caught
- 24 **Players:**
Detroit Experiment
The Bad Plus
Tobias Delius
Jody Williams
- 59 Reviews
- 80 Toolshed
- 82 Jazz on Campus
- 84 Transcription
- 90 **Blindfold Test:**
Patricia Barber



34 Regina Carter
Courting The Cannon

Her first trip to Genoa, Italy, in 2001 to play Niccolò Paganini's Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù-made violin was met with resistance and controversy. But Carter won over the naysayers who did not want an African-American woman to play jazz on the instrument and became the city's darling. Craving another encounter with the "Cannon," she returned to Genoa last year to record a new album, *Paganini: After A Dream*, on the vaunted instrument.

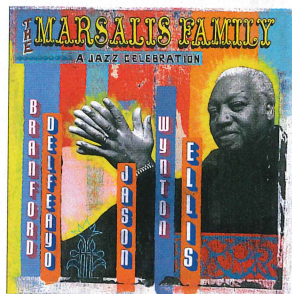
By Dan Ouellette

FEATURES

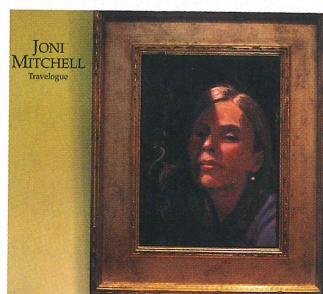
- 40 **Herbie Hancock**
New Perspectives
By Ted Panken
- 46 **Vienna Art Orchestra**
Artful Fun
By Josef Woodard

50 Where To Buy Jazz
*A Guide to the Jazz
Retail Market*

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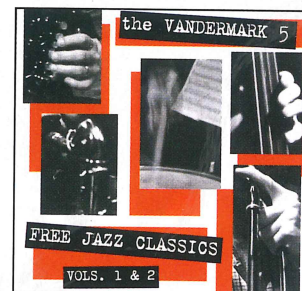
59 The Marsalis Family



Joni Mitchell



Steve Turre



The Vandermark 5



THIAS RÜEGG

Artful

FUN

25 Years With The Vienna Art Orchestra

It's hard enough to keep a band together for a quarter century. Keeping up a big band, and one that works a fringe terrain and has no specific institutional support system, seems slightly miraculous. But working its way across Canada last summer was the celebrated, virtuosic and zany Vienna Art Orchestra, celebrating its 25th anniversary. This was one of the VAO's too-rare North American tours, and they showed how to seamlessly meld humor and serious intentions; and how to flit across jazz, classical and avant-circus idioms—among others—on themes woven into tight and complex charts that are among the most exciting and distinctive in the global big band canon.

The secret to longevity in a project like this is simple: It takes a fiendish singular vision at the core of the machinery, being founder/composer Mathias Rüegg. One afternoon in the lobby of his Montreal hotel, Rüegg, nursing tea and cigarettes, spoke about his labor of mostly love, before the band put in a steamy performance late that night in the Salle de Gesu as part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival. This afternoon, dusted by the itinerant life, he appears both stylish in a gray suit, but also a tad disheveled, an effective paradox also detectable in the band sound, both crisply articulate and given to flights of improvisatory lunacy.

As Rüegg lays out a slick complement of promotional materials on the table, he seems highly organized in the face of the pressures inherent in running a big band. "You have more time to be chaotic and crazy if everything is very organized," he says.

As heard on the aptly titled recent double-CD, *Art & Fun*—their first for the Emarcy/Universal label after numerous albums for hatART, Moers, TCB and other European labels—the band is still up to its old and new tricks. Genres mix freely, including one entire disc of remixes (by VAO guitarist Martin Koller) as a handshake with the electronica world in Vienna. And, as usual, big band conventions are stretched with an abiding sense of, well, art and fun.

Keeping VAO alive and kicking for 25 years amounts to an impressive milestone, but

Rüegg insists, "this was actually never planned. It's the same for the future. I think in terms of one or two years, not more. If you think of 12 times two years, you reach 24 and then 25. I wanted to give up quite a lot of times. I get a lot of different offers, especially as a producer, director of festivals, much more offers than for writing. But on the side, I do quite a lot of classic composition. These are a lot of different activities on the side, but my heart belongs to the orchestra.

"With money, one bill looks like another. It's interchangeable. To make money cannot be the goal of our life. The work with this orchestra, whatever lineup it is, is unchangeable. It's something you cannot substitute. This is still the most satisfying work for me. It doesn't look like a lifetime dream, but overall, when the band plays good, it's a special experience. There is a very good mood in the band. The financial situation is, practically every year, difficult. There are some faults we have, like if we reach 50 years, then we'll be a legend."

Does the VAO, a quarter century into the experiment, qualify as an institution? Rüegg ponders this: "An institution in the philosophical sense, not in the practical sense."

That night, heightened recreation and intense interest fuel a concert by the current 19-piece incarnation of the VAO, delivering on its promise. As strong as its discography is, the band's live experience is gripping and inimitable. There is plenty of clownishness and shameless complexity, and a mixture of

acoustic and electric instruments along the way, with some rigorous note-mapping reminiscent of Frank Zappa. Theirs is a walloping, gleaming sound, with the added attraction of the seamlessly gymnastic Italian-born Anna Lauvergnac on mostly wordless vocals, a VAO trademark.

When heard in the Americas, the VAO is most often found in Canada, whose festival circuit is famously more adventurous than its stateside kin. They were last in Montreal and elsewhere in Canada five years ago, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary. There remains the question of why the VAO isn't better known in the States, and more to the point, why they have played here so rarely. They managed an American tour in the early '80s, a period when they showed up in the TDWR Big Band category of the DownBeat Critics Poll. They also put in a week stint at the Five Spot in New York in the early '90s, but have otherwise been unable to generate enough support or interest to warrant the struggle of hitting the road in the U.S.

Posed with that question of why the cold American shoulder, Rüegg appears frustrated, but is philosophical about cultural differences. "Vienna is a city with a long, long tradition of music," he says. "Vienna supports culture instead of something else. In the United States, they are too young. Maybe in a hundred years, it will be different. New York will be a cultural museum for jazz, rock or whatever music and for dance, and L.A. a museum for film. But the art form is still young."

Rüegg & AMO Establish European Prize

On the night of his 50th birthday party, Vienna Art Orchestra leader Mathias Rüegg was serenaded, spoofed and celebrated in such a way that the love and respect musicians and friends have for him floated tangibly throughout Vienna's Porgy And Bess jazz club. Given his contributions to Vienna's music scene over the past 25 years, it wasn't surprising. Rüegg's activities go way beyond that of leading the VAO. As president of the Austrian Music Office (AMO), he's head of the association that organizes and presents the Hans Koller Preis, Austria's major jazz award that honors Austrian musicians. For 2002, the AMO expanded the Hans Koller Preis to include a new category, the European Jazz Prize.

"I thought it wasn't a good idea if jazz prizes are too local," Rüegg said. "A Finnish jazz prize is nice, but it's only for Finnish musicians, and so on. There was no European jazz prize at all, besides Django D'or, but it means you don't get any money; all the money for the Django D'or goes to the organization. In our case it's exactly the opposite—the organization costs practically nothing and all the money goes to the artist."

Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stanko received the inaugural European Jazz Prize, an award totaling 14,500 euros, during the Hans Koller Preis jazz awards presentation weekend at Porgy And Bess in early December 2002.



DAVE ZAWORSKI

TOMASZ STANKO

The prize is given to a European musician who has attracted major international attention during the year. "The prize is not a life achievement, it's for the musician of the year, someone who's especially in the focus and who did quite a lot," Rüegg said. "This was the first year and the reactions in general were good. It will take two or three years before this prize is really established."

To decide the European Jazz Prize winner, members of a 21-member jury representing 21 European countries nominate one musician from his or her country. In a series of votes, the jury members whittle the list down to five finalists and then vote for the winner. The jury includes European record company executives, radio producers, festival artistic directors and journalists. "The jury members are



MATHIAS RÜEGG

DAVE ZAWORSKI

involved in the jazz scene, they know the newcomers as well as the more established musicians," Rüegg said.

For the Hans Koller Preis awards for Austrian artists, a nine-member jury composed of Austrian musicians, journalists and producers choose the winners for five separate categories. Winners in 2002 were reedman Klaus Dickbauer, musician of the year; trumpeter and flugelhornist Thomas Gansch, newcomer of the year; pianist Oliver Kent, sideman of the year; and Martin Reiter, New York stipendium. Guitarist Alegre Correa, alpenhornist Arkady Shilkloper and bassist Georg Breinschmid won the prize for CD of the year with their recording *Mauve* (Quinton).

All the Hans Koller Preis winners performed Friday night during the awards weekend (with Gansch's performance with his group Mnozil Brass, especially memorable for its note-perfect brass band and vocal rendition of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody.") Stanko performed solo on Friday and in a Saturday-night set with the same quartet (pianist Marcin Wasilewski, bassist Slawomir Kurkiewicz and drummer Michal Miskiewicz) that recorded his *Soul Of Things* (ECM) and toured the U.S.

Sunday evening was devoted to Rüegg's birthday celebration, which included numerous gift presentations, humorous stories and performances by many musicians and artists Rüegg has worked with throughout his career, including current and past members of the Vienna Art Orchestra.

—Dave Zaworski

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