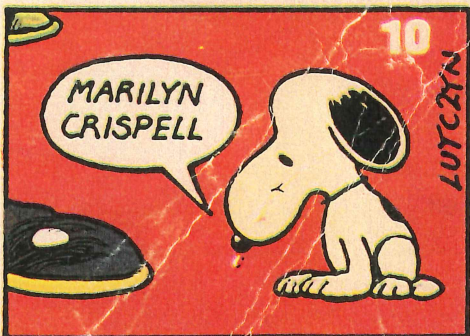
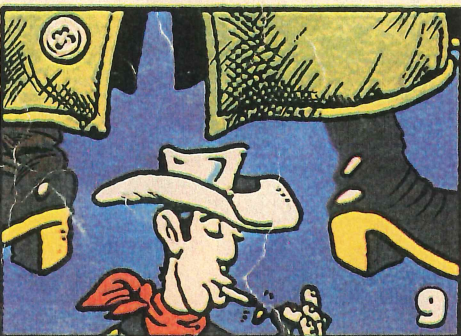
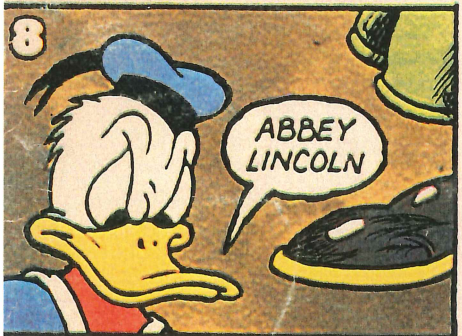
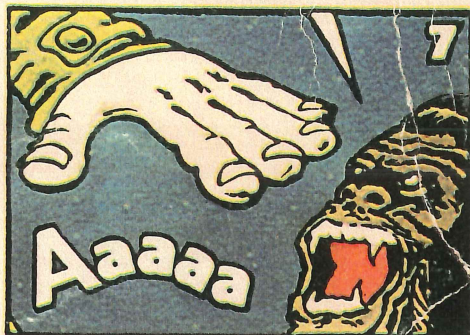
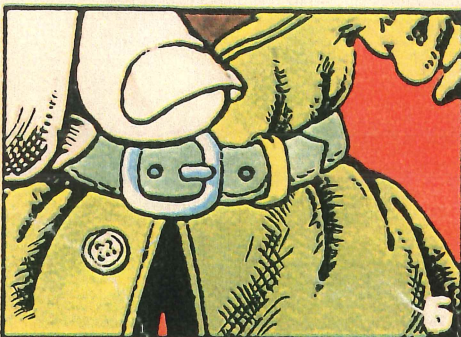
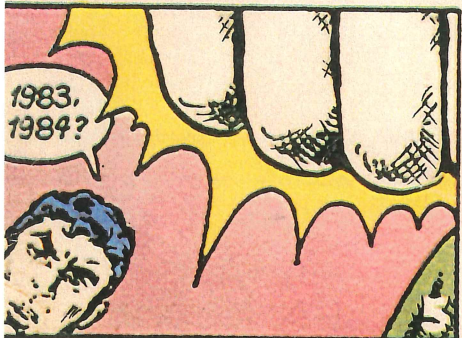
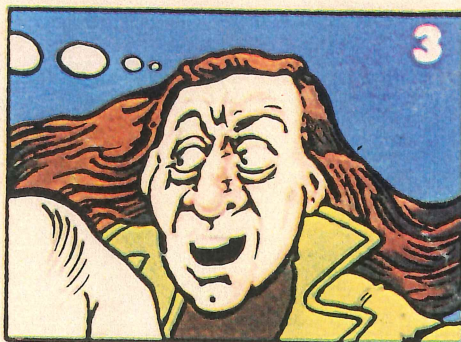
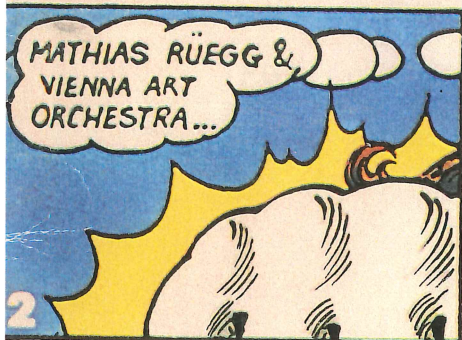
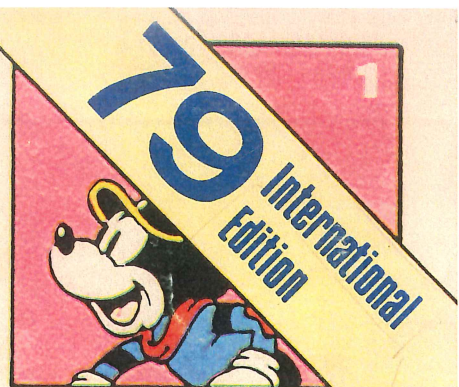


jazz forum

THE MAGAZINE OF THE INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FEDERATION





MATHIAS RÜEGG

& VIENNA ART ORCHESTRA

Photo: Wolfgang Grossebner

by JURG SOLOTHURNMANN

In his earlier promotional material, Mathias Rüegg described himself not only as a musician but also a "skiing instructor, bricklayer, draft resister and crosser of the Alps." But ever since the premiere of "Johnny tritt ab" at the 1981 Donaueschingen Festival, the Swiss composer and leader of the Vienna Art Orchestra has become the shining star of new European jazz. There have followed commissions — partly for collaborations with "serious" composers — from the NDR, SDR and SWF radio stations as well as the Vienna Festival, but

"strangely enough not even one from Switzerland." All of this indicates the interest evoked by his work to date.

Mathias Rüegg was born in 1952 in Zurich, but spent most of his childhood and schooldays in the small parish of Schiers (Graubünden). As a child, he received the usual piano lessons and — as is usually the case — lost interest as a teenager. At the age of 16, he was playing rock music, but then his high school teacher, a former jazz guitarist, got him interested in jazz: "He was the only person in Schiers who had any jazz records. I got involved in jazz very quickly. I played solo, in a duo and with my own group Candlelight, which had three horns, a violin and rhythm

section. After leaving school, I studied at the Higher School of Music in Graz (Austria), and played for three years with Joe Malinga's Mandala. Next, I worked solo for a whole year in Vienna and finally, in 1977, the thing with the Vienna Art Orchestra began to develop."

JAZZ FORUM: From reading your informational material, it's obvious that you somehow got into composition and serial music. How did you develop this interest, since I notice you didn't study at a conservatory?

MATHIAS RÜEGG: No, I really didn't. I truly consider myself self-taught — at least as far as my composing work

is concerned. At one time, I attended for a year in Vienna the lectures by Sokolowski, the successor of Anton Hauer. Many jazz musicians used to come there too. Two of them in the meantime have become teachers themselves. But once I recognized that 12-tone music is very heavily philosophical, becoming an image of the world, I stopped going there because I wasn't so interested in all that. I don't think that 12-tone music is at all that interesting. It's a type of game that can fascinate you once, but doesn't lead you anywhere further.

JF: But you don't just start writing compositions overnight for such an unusual 13-piece group as the Vienna Art Orchestra. How would you describe your development up till then?

MR: My main experiences as a composer began with the Vienna Art Orchestra. At one point, I simply made a beginning. Composition has always been an area that interested me. Already in high school, I was writing quite a lot of piano and combo compositions. An important moment came in 1977. I got a solo job in Vienna as a pianist. Well, all of a sudden I got the urge to play in a duo. I invited Wolfgang Puschnig — and, by the way, he is the only person who has always been with me since that time. Soon I expanded the duo into a trio, and then into a quartet and so on. Each day I used to come to the club owner and tell her: "Hey, we're really playing in a septet." — "We're playing today in an octet." — "Now there are nine of us." Finally, we reached the proud size of 17 musicians. During the day I'd write the music, in the afternoon we'd rehearse, and in the evening we'd perform. This caused a slight sensation in Vienna. Since then, I've always been working with approximately the same formations. In the course of time, I more or less learned how to compose and arrange.

JF: So it was sort of a trial and error method — you followed up on certain ideas that appeared to be good during actual rehearsals. Or was there some definite procedure, for instance following rules of composition?

MR: No, none at all. I would always start from what a given piece was supposed to say, what kind of sound combinations are there and so forth.

And since the rehearsal time was always so short, there were no chances for experimentation. I would write something, and that's also the way it was performed. There was no time for changes, so I was sort of forced in advance to write so that it sounded good. Any other possibility was out of the question.

JF: You're saying that you always start out from the content of the pieces. Can you illustrate what you mean by giving a few examples?

MR: I was brought up in the Grisons (southeastern Switzerland), and there is naturally a traditional music. It can be heard everywhere. So the idea came to me to use it somehow. This led to the arrangement of the *ländler* *Em Hermineli z'liab* ("For Little Hermine") (Note: the *ländler* is a folk dance of Austrian-Bavarian-Swiss origin). I wanted so to speak to become clear with my own folk tradition. I analyzed more than 100 pieces of local *ländler* music until I came across this particular one with a harmonic structure similar to the "rhythm changes" of jazz. Indeed, these weren't all written out, but unequivocally became required by the melodies. I simply didn't want to change the character of this piece in a free jazz manner but rather shape everything in a thoughtful way. It was something of a compositional mastering of a *ländler*.

JF: I noticed that in your five-part "Suite for the Green Eighties," for instance, you don't give one soloist the same improvisational scheme as the others. How do you see the relationship between improvisation and composition in your pieces?

MR: Yes, this is the usual difficult problem: composition — improvisation or non-freedom — freedom. I've already known most of the band members a very long time, so I write as it were personally for each individual musician. I know exactly who likes to play what and does it well, and I try to use everyone in such a way that he can really display his best sides. But secondly it is important that the solos always be thematically related to the composition. Besides this is for me the only positive aspect of the early jazz and swing: these musicians played a tight piece. Later the theme only became a start-

ing point, a common beginning, but the relation of the solos to the theme was hardly recognizable. But with Louis Armstrong, you can always hear what tune he is improvising.

I try to create a certain unity between the solo and composition by also using the musicians in the rhythm section and giving them room to demonstrate their creativity. They give each other cues, and to a certain definite degree can bring in their own ideas. The music is relatively open, but everything must suit the overall mood of the piece, and if you hear a fragment of a chorus, you should always recognize to what musical part it belongs.

I always take pains to shape the theme strongly before, in between and after the improvisations, so that hardly any alternatives remain. It should be so forceful that it really indicates only one possibility, even though I must admit that I am not always successful in doing so. But, generally, the problem is to create a mood which the soloist must adopt. In my new program I use frequently changing backgrounds, which force the soloist to improvise, in the course of seven minutes, over seven completely different moods and basic patterns, all of which are definitely related to one another. He has so much to do that he doesn't have any time for silly ideas. (laughs)

JF: Let's assume that a saxophonist is heavily into one particular style and finds himself confronted with your *ländler*. Can he handle this? Doesn't it lead to tensions?

MR: That hasn't happened yet. Generally speaking, we are a musical and human whole, and that's what makes this orchestra special. Basically, the musicians like my pieces and my musical ideas. I also make little suggestions as far as the solos are concerned. Mostly the pieces are so strongly colored that it's clear in advance that here you can only play in a certain definite way... Well, we have very different people in the orchestra. For example, Harry Sokal plays in a totally American way. Those Americans who hear us always flip out over Harry's solos, because he's on the level of a Mike Brecker or Bob Berg. Yet, even though his style is so clearly fixed, he tries nevertheless to make it relate to the character of a given piece.

JF: Don't the musicians make any suggestions for altering or adding to your scores?

MR: Yes, especially regarding the phrasing and dynamics. But generally, they all know so well how I write and almost from the start get everything the right way. They come up with small additions, decide what should be played long or short, loud or soft, and so forth. In the suite, Herbert Joos and Christian Radovan made the suggestion for this alphorn and trombone duo themselves. We then gave it some thought together to find a suitable place for it. For percussion and drums, I almost only write the accents. The rest is taken care of by the musicians themselves — that is which instruments should play where.

photo: Wolfgang Grossebner

lauren **Newton** USA voice
harry **Sokal** A ssts, flute
wolfgang **Puschig** A as, bcl, flutes
roman **Schwaller** cfts, d
karl **Fian** A trp
herbert **Joos** BRD flh, trp, bar · alphorn
christian **Radovan** Atb
billy **Fuchs** USA tuba
woody **Schabata** A marimba, vibes
oli **Scherer** A piano, melodica
jürgen **Wuchner** BRD bass
wolfgang **Reisinger** A perc, drums
janusz **Stefanski** A drums, perc
composer arranger matthias **Riedel** ch leader

JF: Could you show what kind of material you give the improvisers, using examples from pieces you have already recorded?

MR: In *Blues for Two* (on the LP "Suite for the Green Eighties" — hat ART 1991/92), the chord progressions are relatively complex, eight blues choruses but each one with a different harmony, so that it represents a continuous extension. This, of course, is a four-de-force for Harry Sokal. He plays the changes so well that as a composer I may indeed make a concession just to show him from this side.

In *Part III* of the *Suite for the Green Eighties* — with Lauren Newton as the soloist — the concept is totally different. After a slow part, there follow three rock parts. In each part something new



music. But this is the way it is when you bring anything that is so-called different or new. Some people have to attack it. And it's some kind of gauge to use to tell how important your music is. If somebody hates it, you know that you got something fine.

JF: Even when you see it in print and internationally read?

AL: Yes, I defend myself when people do that to me though.

JF: How?

AL: I write letters back. Since the last couple of years or even before, I've been getting wonderful reviews, thankfully. I'm glad it's wonderful and not the other way.

JF: Did you choose "Golden Lady" as a title for the album?

AL: No, I chose "Painted Lady" — the album was released in Paris as "Painted Lady" with another cover. And when Irving Kratka decided to release it, he chose "Golden Lady." I'm glad he did too. I like that title for the album.

JF: Did you have total control over what was recorded?

AL: Yes, in Japan and in France. The impresario only asked me if I would record. They did not suggest to me anything that I should do. That's the way artists are really treated in the World... in the Real World. So, it's all right. I'm thankful for what I have because so far I have done what I wanted to do on record. I am not really interested in a wider audience either, only in gathering the one that I have. You know, just the people who really like the music. If they get a chance to hear the music on the radio or wherever, if it's given some attention, then they have a chance to come and make themselves known and they'll buy the work. Because it is the people, after all, who decide whether your work is any good or not.

The music that they play on the air in the name of jazz a lot of the time is not really anything. They call it crossover and fusion. But it's a potpourri of ambitious music. And it won't live but a minute.

JF: What do you mean by ambitious?

AL: The music comes before the money. If people make music for the sake of money they don't have good music. Billie Holiday has more records avail-

able than any other singer and she is not even here in the body. But her work is good because it's like anything else fine. It lives forever.

This is a time for the artist and it's a test of the strength of the artist. We'll see how much we really do like this music because if people like the money more than they do the music, they'll sell it. And that's what a lot of them are doing. They are bastardizing the form and their sincerity for the sake of making money.

JF: I'm sure that there are musicians you've worked with closely who have done that. Is that upsetting?

AL: Yes, it is upsetting. And it makes me wonder about us as a people. I wonder how you can have such a great gift and have no regard for it. How could you have something this wonderful and be so willing to throw it away and take something that someone else has got?

JF: Many of the musicians who "cross-over" say that this is a way they can do well financially and play pure music later.

AL: It's a lack of understanding of what pure is and what it is used for. If you are the cream and you also want to be the buttermilk; who can help it? You can't be everything. You know what I mean? Those who know, who are taught, and who were given this music can bring this music because our ancestors did that as a matter of course, as a way of life. They sang and danced around the tree and didn't get paid for it. Theater was functional at one time in the life of the human being. So now people are willing to sell their souls because that's what the music is ("Fusion"). Music is the soul and spirit of the people. And no matter what reason you use to do this, it all comes from greed. Greed. Not being satisfied with what you have and wanting someone else to have it.

Jazz underscores the whole world as I can see — in the movies, on television, some form of it is played. So this music doesn't need promoting. What we need are gate keepers and standard bearers in the music such as John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and Max Roach. They are a few people who love the music. We need them in the flesh.

We need people who are not poor in consciousness. Poor people can never have anything. Poor people sell everything they have. There's a proverb, "The only thing wrong with poor people is their poverty."

I owe a lot to the time I was given with Max Roach because it was like a master/apprentice kind of relationship. Even though I had a very good career and I was famous when we met. When we got married they said that Abbey Lincoln took a husband. So it wasn't that I was not famous. But I didn't know anything about the Arts until I met Max Roach. That's true. He took me to art galleries and broadened my scope.

JF: It must have been difficult to be married to someone whom you saw as your teacher?

AL: No, I liked being married to a teacher. I'm looking forward to another teacher too! A man is a teacher for a woman and vice versa, a woman is a teacher for a man. That's the only way that I have really anything compatible or in common with a man. We have to have common work. If we're not doing something together it wouldn't be any fun for me. Just to have a warm body around, you know.

JF: Is "Straight Ahead" going to be reissued?

AL: It's been reissued twice. You can find them in bins, overseas bins, and they're around but they are bootlegging the music. A lot of my work is being bootlegged. There's something that was just released from Japan. Somebody told me the name of it — something about a joker but it's in Roach's name. They have songs — my work on it; you know what I mean? This is a vicious industry that we're involved in.

JF: You're talking about the record industry or the whole music industry?

AL: The whole. It's calculated to kill the spirit of the child in us. You know you can't make music without that little child.

JF: Well, they haven't managed to kill your spirit.

AL: No. I fight, you know. I do. I get it natural, but I'm like my mother. My mother brought me up like this. ■

MR: In Europe, too, there are still certain ghetto-like situations, and that so-called American type of jazz musician may just as well appear here. In Vienna itself — in Ottakring or the 17th Bezirk, the pimp district — someone can make his way from the bottom to the top. Here a person can also develop something like the power playing of the Americans, because he is also living and thinking in the same way. In Europe there is also this existential struggle situation, just as in the U.S.A. there are so-called intellectual musicians like Anthony Braxton who work and think in a very European way.

As far as the music goes, this is not such a special problem for me. I like very much the American way of playing, but I also like the European way. It simply must be good, it must agree with me. Albert Mangelsdorff has found his own excellent European means of expression. Or take the String Trio of New York. For me they are playing totally European! It is really a question of the type of person which defines what kind of music he plays. If you see a certain type of person, how he behaves, then it's usually clear that he also plays a certain kind of music. For instance, if I observe Chuck Mangione, then this case is clear for me...

JF: What in fact does Mathias Rüegg do when he is not touring with his orchestra?

MR: (laughs) ... then he is preparing for the next tour. It is a very laborious occupation. I write totally new music for each tour. This is really almost a full-time job. Besides that, I sometimes work as an organizer of concerts and other events, I write for two newspapers and see to it that in jazz things move ahead somewhat, that we get subsidies and the like. Sometimes I also receive commissions for compositions. I really always have too much to do. The orchestra alone would need two persons. I'm busy round the clock.

JF: Don't you think that many of the people who come to your concerts are not jazz fans but usually prefer modern classical music or music of the Frank Zappa type?

MR: I don't know that. After the concert the people go, and those that stay on are mostly jazz fans. But indeed

there are these indications. Our LP "Tango from Obango" was in 1980 one of the best selling records in Austria. Obviously, it appealed to a relatively large number of people outside the jazz milieu.

But I'm always really more enthusiastic about jazz. Earlier I also used to write classical compositions, modern things like actions compositions. But I am more and more convinced that there is a clear difference between jazz and non-jazz. Rhythm is very important to me. It is also a symbol of a different basic attitude, a different approach to life, the joy of life which stands as a contrast to the Western rubato pathos. Even if free modern music is being played, it can be noted exactly from what side the musicians come.

I've always liked the old traditional jazz better. Generally, that was really not the case earlier. Recently, one organizer asked me if he could play records before our concert. He was totally taken aback when I told him, "Yes, you can, but please play only Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra." He expected me to ask for Cecil Taylor or someone like that. Today, I'm interested in everything that has to do with jazz. It's been a long time since I gave up my utopia about the big union of all kinds of music. I'm pleased if it's possible on a bit smaller scale.

JF: Have you ever suffered as a kind of outsider, perhaps even within jazz circles?

MR: Oh, yes! At first, I was a total outsider in Vienna. That was rather bad. My work was torn to pieces. But that's the way it always is: if in a certain city or insiders' circle you begin something new, then you find at once that everyone thinks it's crazy and curses it. Now at least in Vienna we've reached this point where many people find us bad and gossip about us. At first, we were ignored, and now they find us bad. I'm very pleased about that, because if you have enemies it's at least a sign that you're taken seriously. (laughs)

JF: You often come in contact with

Mathias Rüegg

photo: Hans Kumpf

