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CD Review: Andreas Schaerer's Hildegard lernt fliegen - *The Fundamental Rhythm of Unpolished Brains*



Andreas Schaerer's Hildegard lernt fliegen - *The Fundamental Rhythm of Unpolished Brains*

(enja Yellowbird CD YEB 7740. CD review by Jon Turney)

No messing about here. This Swiss sextet's fourth CD opens with complex orchestrations of two lengthy, enigmatic lyrics by the band's compatriot **Brigitte Wullimann**. They're in English, like the one other long song here, full of striking imagery, and expressive singing and playing, and sound as if those involved heard Paul Haines' work with Carla Bley on her legendary *Escalator Over the Hill* at an impressionable age. That is, it is better to sit back and experience the overall effect than dwell on what any particular line actually means.

Bley's monumental, rambling masterpiece was a work of many voices. Here, there is just one. Although Wullimann is also a jazz singer, she does not get involved at the mike: leader **Andreas Schaerer** delivers all the lyrics. He is equipped with a remarkable vocal range – both octaves and styles - and a notable compositional gift for a band that includes two fine saxophonists, trombonist and tuba player **Andreas Tschopp**, **Marco Müller** on bass and **Christoph Steiner** on drums and - frequently and attractively - marimba.

The results are not quite like anything you ever heard. No: They are a little bit like everything you ever heard. I lost count of the influences and allusions that flashed by, but moments that afford brief glimpses of others are legion. Vocally alone, Schaerer can sound like anyone from Phil Minton to Freddie Mercury. Tom Waits and Eugene Chadbourne are in there somewhere, too. On *Don Clemenza* he wordlessly evokes grand opera while his own prog-rock leaning lyrics on *Zeusler* are delivered in the manner of Genesis era Peter Gabriel. There are Bobby McFerrin moments, too. Did I mention that he also does beatboxing and is credited as

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"human trumpet", which does genuinely sound like a trumpet?

It could be a car crash, but in fact the effect is dangerously enjoyable, the way Django Bates' ensemble writing often is, ideas shouldering one another unceremoniously out of the way. Like the music of one of the inspirations Schaeerer cites himself, Frank Zappa, the sound is often superficially anarchic but the arrangements, sliding from interlocking rhythms to free jazz and back again, call for an iron discipline. The band respond to Schaeerer's demands with total commitment, whether they have to perform straight-faced swing while one of the leader's wordless vocals ascends into the stratosphere, manage a Stravinsky-visits-vaudeville passage of fearsome complexity, or just interject some excellent jazz blowing.

The final brew is an effervescent European mix, reminiscent of those achieved by groups coming out of the 1970s Dutch avant garde like Willem Breuker's Kollektief. Hildegard walk the same tightrope, lacing jazzy exuberance with quirky humour. You keep thinking they will overbalance into chaos or just cheesy silliness, but I don't think they do. The abiding danger that they might adds a memorable spice to this rather remarkable recording. A live show must really quicken the pulse!

Andreas Schaeerer wrote for LondonJazz News in 2012, previewing his band's LJF appearance.

On Monday, April 07, 2014

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