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Jazz breaking news: Hildegard Learns to Fly get seriously silly at LJJF 2012



If the Swiss sextet **Hildegard Learns to Fly** (pictured left), have an unusual name, their music is equally intriguing. The brainchild of vocalist and composer **Andreas Schaerer**, they led the audience at London's **Pizza Express Jazz Club** on a journey replete with musical surprises – a full-on free blowing sax solo suddenly switches to a serene close-harmony ensemble of voice, two saxes and trombone and then to a bass-led 5/4 groove, all presented in a whimsical and highly entertaining fashion.

The sense of fun that pervades the performance – drummer Christoph Steiner seated at an old manual typewriter apparently writing a letter but beating out a rhythm on the keys or Schaerer's vocal pyrotechnics laced with humour – is sometimes in danger of obscuring the inventiveness of the leader's writing and the attributes of the musicians. Schaerer's vocal resources are extraordinary. Whether articulating fast complex rhythms or venturing into the stratosphere with notes beyond that few men over 50 can hear, he has a broad palette of vocal sounds which he uses to great effect in combination with three horns.

As a composer he never allows an idea or mood to last too long and it often falls to his capable double bassist Marco Müller to administer the coup de grace with an abrupt change of tempo, rhythm or mood. Schaerer writes to the strengths of his musicians and the varied instrumentation at his disposal. Trombonist Andreas Tschopp's multiphonics, reminiscent of the Swiss alphorn, released mellifluous triads that seemed to float peacefully in the air like wispy summer clouds over an alpine pasture on a summer's day.

Their UK debut closed, as it had begun, with some fun. After several faux encores bassist Müller reappeared and set up a simple groove on the lower strings. Then a colleague joined him to contribute a slap rhythm on the body of the instrument, followed by another who played a repeating riff on the upper strings until eventually the entire sextet were crowded around the bass, now transformed into a complete groove machine. Entertaining but seriously musical and ambitious, they are unclassifiable but totally worthwhile.

–Charles Alexander

– picture courtesy Cat Munro