

The Best of Jazz Festival Prague Bridge

Kentonmania Big Band conducted by Rudolf Mazač

Soloists: Kim Nazarian, Sydney Ellis - vocals, Bobby Shew - trumpet, fluegelhorn,

Don Menza - tenorsaxophon, Jay Ashby - trombone (all USA),

Ack van Rooyen - trumpet, fluegelhorn (Netherlands).

Recorded live at Jazz Bridge Festival concerts (Prague, Mánes) between 2004-2010

2 CDs: 75:59 (CD 1) and 76:05 (CD 2)

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Jazz big bands are "endangered species". That's why it can be seen as something even more pleased when the first-class musicians are willing to be involved in such an existentially unprofitable, but musically stimulating field. Rudolf Mazač - originally a horn player, who excelled in various musical genres (living and working from 1965 in Western Germany and since 1989 alternately in Munich and Prague) - devoted himself intensely all the past decade to setting-up of big bands and in this respect achieved impressive results, especially with the International All Star orchestra he put together signing Czech jazz musicians and great personalities of the jazz world.

"Kentonmania" as a term may have multiple levels and requires explanation. The authentic "Kentonmaniacs" are aged jazzophils who at the edge of 1940th and 50th enthusiastically enjoyed a quite unusual Stan Kenton music played by his orchestra. Its bandleader himself called his efforts as a "progressive jazz" and this term gave in jazz a name to his style. Kenton's band used a reinforced standard cast (5 saxofones, 4 to 5 trombones, tuba, french horn section and sometime's mellophones). Mazač's "Kentonmania" follows this concept extending it by the application of an eight french-horn section, which – particularly at the present time – is absolutely unique. In this respect, Mazač had many one-off projects in the past, but the systematic continuity of his orchestra started 2004 thanks to the Jazz Bridge Festival, which is able to provide the ensemble by 7-8 performances a year, held in various Czech, Austrian and German cities. The double-album offers 27 songs recorded live at various Jazz Bridge issues and really amazes by unusual ensemble sound, a perfect interpretation of very complicated scores (and when it slips into an error, it just shows how much work behind such a result is hidden). The French-horn section is ingeniously *incorporated* between the trumpets and trombones, even if horns are sometimes – at least from a listener point of view - hard to identify. But they are giving a very distinctive sound to the band. Reeds have an unusually wide range of expression possibilities in it, from the sharp punch up to a decent, airy, clear sound, just in the spirit of the *former cool jazz roots*.

Expectations of distinct Kenton's enthusiasts are not fully filled, as Mazač's repertoire doesn't include more than only two of Maestro's originals. The first and most famous of them, *Artistry in Rhythm*, has been the signature tune of his 1942-orchestra. When listening to its wonderful performance in the original adaptation, it reminds us that not only was the name of Kenton's music progressive for its time, but his daring dissonance, unusual harmonic progressions and a unique sound still is fascinating, even after a couple of decades.

The Kenton recordings were criticized in a certain time because of (jazz foreign) romantic puffy climates and application of either specific songs, or classical music undertones. This mistaken conception (to compensate for complex jazz classical music) caused his undeserved subsequent marginalization. Today, years after, Mazač proved that even once criticized kentonish Wagner adjustments (the theme of the „Valkyries“) are now appealing Kenton's original ideas. Effective part of band's repertoire are compositions especially written by former Kenton Orchestra members, developing original kentonish pulses in the current form. Among those original "Kentonists" the ensemble won the great tenor saxophonist Don Menza, who put the concept of Kenton-stylization together with Brazilian influences („*Sambiana*“, „*Faviana*“), as well as to his stirring solos.

In this respect, a great (and in the interpretation context very difficult) piece topicality of the model was a larger tune "*Terrestries*", by another Kenton's band ex-member Tom Harrell. Kentonmania Big Band recordings demonstrate the power of well established world soloists to inspire domestic players of various generations. The most experienced Czech musicians have settled their famous colleagues – for instance trombonist Josef „Bažik“ Pavelka (his great solo in the Hampton Hawes' „*Jackie*“), an excellent 'trumpet battle' was showed by Bobby Shew and Jiří Hlava in Isham Jones's standard „*There Is No Greater Love*“, and highly imaginative solos were also presented by trumpeter Julius Baroš, or tenorsaxophonists Milan Krajíc and Bedřich Šmarda.

Specific experience and broader audiences interest meant attractive style performances deviate from the so called „progressive jazz“ category. „Vocalese“ (i.e. transcription and adding of lyrics to the originally instrumental solo) performed by a great swinging singer Kim Nazarian provoked enthusiastic applause, and the audience appreciated an introverted captivating lyrical expression by Dutch post-Miles Davis trumpeter Ack van Rooyen .

Kentonmania Big Band double-CD recordings proof convincingly that with passion for music a project can be created, whose result is regarded as apparently impossible. Big band jazz fans can be grateful that the „their kind of music“ has currently such an impressive continuity.

Igor Wasserberger