

MICHAEL MANTLER

— EDITIONS

VOLUME THREE
—
CONCERTOS
AND SUITES

INTRODUCTION

— BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

Finding a balance between the written score and improvisation has long raised delicate, absorbing and sometimes apparently intractable questions for jazz composers. In the search for a Platonic ideal, questions of authenticity were often assumed to be involved. Were certain methods more valuable than others because they involved the individual musicians memorising and internalising their written parts (the Duke Ellington Orchestra), learning the compositions by ear (Charles Mingus's Jazz Workshop) or being granted extreme latitude in the interpretation of their notated parts (Gil Evans's later ensembles)? Were the highly wrought compositions by those who had immersed themselves in European music – Bob Graettinger, Bill Russo, André Hodeir – worthy of consideration as jazz at all? Is the technique of “conduction”, invented by Lawrence “Butch” Morris, through which the members of large ensembles are guided by signs and symbols, the only true way to reconcile the inherent spontaneity of jazz with modern thinking and practice?

More than a century after the first jazz recordings were made, the answer is now obvious: the best balance is wherever you want to place it. Some methods may yield greater rewards than others in specific cases, but there are no rules, no metrics by which validity can be assessed.

On his way to achieving the goal of every composer, the discovery of his own language, Michael Mantler has confronted these questions over the course of a career almost half as long as jazz itself. Mantler's adventurousness was evident from the moment his first recordings with the Jazz Composer's Orchestra appeared towards the end of the 1960s. Others were also grappling with the problems of reconciling the needs of improvisers working within the looser small-group environment of the jazz avant-garde with the possibilities offered by larger ensembles, but his solutions were immediately recognisable as bearing the signature of independent thought.

In a sense, *Concertos* is a successor, 40 years later, to the Jazz Composer's Orchestra's eponymous double-album, where the featured soloists were Cecil Taylor, Don Cherry, Pharoah Sanders, Roswell Rudd, Gato Barbieri and Larry Coryell. Each was given a composition that amounted to a concerto – a double concerto for cornet and tenor saxophone in the case of “*Communications #8*”, shared by Cherry and Barbieri. But whereas an Update album in 2013 found Mantler taking a new look at those early pieces, *Concertos* had consisted of entirely new material: seven compositions featuring trumpet (Mantler), electric guitar (Bjarne Roupé), tenor saxophone (Bob Rockwell), marimba and vibraphone (Pedro

Carneiro), trombone (Rudd), piano (Majella Stockhausen) and percussion (Nick Mason).

The orchestra in this case, conducted by Roland Kluttig, was the Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin: a line-up of four woodwinds (flute, oboe, clarinet and bass clarinet), three brass (trumpet, trombone and tuba), and five strings (two violins, viola, cello and double bass). The location was the historic Haus des Rundfunks, the headquarters of the Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg radio station and one of Europe's first purpose-built broadcasting studios, designed by the distinguished architect Hans Poelzig and opened in 1931. Mantler had always produced his own albums, but for this one Manfred Eicher was the executive producer and brought with him the engineer Gérard de Haro from La Buissonne, a studio in the Vaucluse. (Only an hour away from Mantler's own home in southern France, La Buissonne would later become the regular site of his future ECM recordings.)

Five of the seven pieces contain improvisation, although they are not defined by it. The other two – those featuring Carneiro and Stockhausen – are wholly composed. To listen to the music as an entire one-hour suite is to become oblivious to the distinction, or at least to recognise that the components are of equal value. Mantler's writing draws on all his varied experiences, from his studies at the university in his native Vienna and Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he arrived at the age of 19, to all he absorbed from playing with fellow musicians of various backgrounds, from Carla Bley, Cecil Taylor and Steve Lacy to Jack Bruce, Robert Wyatt and Nick Mason.

The writing is full of fascinating detail. The agitated pizzicato figures creating such a vigorous backdrop to the plaintive tenor saxophone at the emotional peak of Rockwell's feature fall between bookends in which strings and brass begin or end the same fragmentary phrases, establishing a mood of uncertainty on which the piece gradually finds its footing and to which it eventually returns. The unmistakable sound of Rudd, a hero of the 1968 recordings, spreads warmth over a hovering, slow-moving introduction before a lively, dance-like passage offers him another set of trajectories. Mantler's setting for Mason's drum kit is as stimulating as those devised by Howard Brubeck for Joe Morello in "Dialogues for Jazz Combo and Symphony Orchestra" (1960) and by Fred Tillis for Max Roach in "Festival Journey" (1995). And nowhere are the soloists and the ensemble in more fruitful dialogue than on the piece featuring Stockhausen's piano, where every written note has the energy of improvisation. This may be one measure of the ultimate success of his methods.

"Over the years," Mantler has said, "I've generally come to favour integrating improvisation ever more with notated compositional elements by providing more specific materials and 'surroundings' for the improviser to relate to, in order to create a composition as homogeneous as possible. Never in the form of conventional 'chord changes', though, since I find that this most often results in preconceived improvisational modules."

Just over a decade after the recording of *Concertos* came *Coda*, a set of orchestral pieces in which Mantler returned to the theme of reconsidering earlier works, in this case

material drawn from albums recorded over a 35-year period, abstracted and recombined into five suites of between nine and 14 minutes' duration. So "TwoThirteen Suite" is drawn from the albums *Thirteen* (1975) and *For Two* (2010), "Folly Suite" is from *Folly Seeing All This* (1992), "Alien Suite" is from *Alien* (1985), "Cerco Suite" is from *Cerco un Paese Innocente* (1994) and "HideSeek Suite" is from *Hide and Seek* (2000). Some of these were settings of words by the writers Samuel Beckett, Giuseppe Ungaretti and Paul Auster; now they appear in instrumental versions.

Listeners familiar with the original albums may find themselves "hearing" the voices of Wyatt, Susi Hyltdgaard or Mona Larsen as themes emerge in new forms and colours. Not so "Alien Suite", whose origins were in an album written for and performed by Mantler's trumpet and the synthesisers of Don Preston, and which now makes its reappearance in a very different guise.

Recorded at the Porgy & Bess studios in Vienna, the album was mixed at La Buissonne. The orchestra, conducted by Christoph Cech, consists of four woodwinds, four brass, 16 strings and the unit of Roupé's electric guitar, David Helbock's piano and Maximilian Kanzler's marimba and vibraphone, whose presence, in Mantler's words, "anchors the music in an environment clearly coming from jazz". Once again the contributions of the soloists are woven into the fabric of the ensemble with great ingenuity, with the composer's powerful, declarative trumpet emerging as a key voice alongside Roupé's finely textured lyricism and Helbock's exceptional agility.

The album's title was deliberately chosen. *Coda*, the Italian word for tail, is used in music to denote a devised ending, the equivalent of an epilogue in literature. This would be, Mantler says, not just the last time he would revisit and revise earlier material but his final work, thanks to his deep dismay at the evolution of the music business into an industry designed to prevent creative musicians from making a living by expressing themselves freely, a trend against which he has fought throughout his career. "I see no hope," he says. "I'll be happy, though, to be proven wrong." One can only hope so, for his sake and ours.