



## BRAINS ON FIRE

STADLER No Exercise. 3 Problems. Heidi. U.C.S. All Tones. Love in the Middle of the Air. The Fugue #2.  
FREEMAN Bea's Flat • Jimmy Owens (tp); Tyrone Washington (t-sax, fl); Garnett Brown (tbn); Heiner Stadler (pn); Reggie Workman (db); Brian Blake, Lenny White (dr); Dieter Glawischnig, cond; WDR Big Band; Dee Dee Bridgewater (vc); Joe Farrell (t-sax); Don Friedman (pn); Barre Phillips (db); Joe Chambers (dr) • LABOR 7069 (2 CDs: 131:43)

This two-CD set of historic 1966–74 recording sessions is an excellent sequel to Heiner Stadler's *Tribute to Bird and Monk*, which I reviewed previously. I do, however, take issue with annotator Howard Mandel's claim that this music stretches "the bounds of even the most ambitious music [that came] before." This music is not more innovative than the contemporary or somewhat earlier work of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or Charles Mingus. Oh yes, it's great, no two ways about it. But beyond the bounds of those artists? No, not really.

There is, however, a certain stylistic difference between this music and the pieces presented on the *Bird-and-Monk* album. That later (1978) session had much more polyphony, intertwining lines—some written and some improvised—that wove their ways through the music, making it an incredibly rich and complex (but not over-busy) listening experience. This album almost sounds more in the nature of jam sessions, even though Stadler wrote these charts out ahead of time. The opening piece, *No Exercise*, is deceiving, being a 12-tone row put into the shape and rhythmic pattern of the blues. It opens with solo bass, then trumpet, then drums and the rest of the group. Despite being atonal, it hovers around B $\square$ . The soloists, although respecting the 12-tone form in principle, tend toward slightly less strict forms in their solos. There is a free-form explosion around the five-minute mark, followed by Tyrone Washington playing distorted notes on his saxophone, yet a certain amount of cohesion emerges from this chaos. After an ensemble passage, bass, piano, and trumpet all have brief, terse statements before Washington returns, this time playing lines reminiscent of Eric Dolphy. Trombonist Garnett Brown is busy, playing his solo in double time, but also cheerful and coherent. Reggie Workman, one of the finest bassists of this era, plays a marvelous solo, even managing to improvise when he falls back to comping. Another ensemble rides it out.

In *Three Problems*, the themes are presented in a fragmented state at first, then Washington plays an angular solo, more rhythmic than evolving. Here, almost everything sounds atonal and chromatically evolved, not to mention the 12-tone influence. A sparkling drum solo builds the rhythmic base, yet when Washington reenters he is on a Coltrane kick, flying around his instrument with astounding ease. The tempo doubles, and doubles again, as things get very frenetic. The music almost loses me here, but after the chaos the pianist plays alternating B-E, B-E, B-E riffs, the tempo calms down, and Washington reemerges as if to brush it all aside. Workman's bass is actually more lyrical than the saxophone, and slows the tempo down to half before resuming. Washington reprises the broken-note motif, which again, slowly, builds up and then releases tension.

Heidi begins with a sustained trombone B that forms the base for some interesting meandering by the others. This is a sparse, slow-moving piece, and the B-base suddenly shifts down to A, though the piano, in a fit of pique, insists on B for a while, then tests other notes. This is almost more like a Minimalist piece, except that the music constantly morphs in a slow-moving way and is not repetitive (sort of like John Cage on acid). It's almost as if each player has a piece of this musical puzzle, and they spend 10 minutes trying—unsuccessfully, in the end—to piece it together. Stadler has said that he believes *Heidi* to be one of the most satisfying performances he ever worked on. (Much to my surprise, the piano note at the end is a C!)

*Bea's Flat*, a relatively familiar jazz standard written by West Coast jazzman Russ Freeman for his crony Chet Baker, is transformed here beyond recognition. Although Stadler uses a big band here (mostly German musicians who played for NDR Radio in the early 1970s), the scoring reminds me of the kind of sparse orchestration used by George Russell and Sahib Shihab, though the liner notes compare it to Duke Ellington's *Harlem*. The tempo comes to a standstill as trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff plays a soft, rhythmic, highly imaginative solo. The tempo then slowly increases as saxophonist Gary Dudek and the other instruments enter. Screaming, stacked atonal chords build up momentum, then the time slows again for a solo by Dudek. Indeed, despite this being a big-band performance, this is largely a string of solos that build on and around each other. At the 18-minute mark, cornetist Manfred Schoof plays a busy solo while the band joyously spurts out arpeggiated atonal chords around him, but the tempo slows down yet again for some relaxed yet creative playing toward the end.

"Catch me! I love you, I trust you, I love you!" exults Dee Dee Bridgewater at the beginning of *Love in the Middle of the Air*, the alternate take. This is a 20-minute duet between voice and bass, partially written-out but mostly improvised. Bridgewater is definitely using her voice as an instrument here, and by no means playing it safe, pushing it up and down the scale with not only an audacious sense of pitch and rhythm, but also tremendous harmonic daring. "Here I come, flying without wings, or parachute," she sings at one point; at another, "without a safety net!" LAB 7034, *Retrospection*, has take 2 of this same piece (the issued version) as well as take 2 of *The Fugue #2*. Everything on this two-CD set is either an unissued take or, in most cases, unissued performances.

In the interests of saving some space, I'll not go into detail on the remaining three pieces. Suffice it to say that they are equally weird in a creative way, and everything comes to an exciting if somewhat bewildering conclusion—if conclusion it may be called. Performances like these are definitely not everyone's cup of tea, nor would I recommend them for constant listening, yet they are extremely interesting and challenging works, superbly and excitingly played. My only caveat is that the sound quality lacks brightness on top, which may have been a fault with the original tapes.

Recommended to lovers of free-form or avant-garde jazz.

—Lynn René Bayley