

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Thursday, July 12, 2007

Saxophone ensemble shows off versatility

By C.J. Gianakaris

Tuesday in South Haven and Wednesday night at Brook Lodge in Augusta, Fontana Chamber Arts presented the New Century Saxophone Quartet. Its playing of a wide range of works, by seven different composers, initiated the audience in the musical possibilities of such ensembles.

The New Century features Michael Stephenson on soprano saxophone, Christopher Hemingway on alto saxophone, Stephen Pollock on tenor saxophone and Connie Frigo on baritone saxophone.

After marching in while playing Bob Mintzer's invigorating "Contraption," the ensemble turned to five selections from J.S. Bach's "Art of the Fugue," BMV 1080. Immediately impressive was the velvety aura emanating from different saxophones possessing varying ranges. Precise, synchronized playing was matched by a balanced blend, suggesting saxophones could present Bach's works as well as other instruments.

Precise, synchronized playing was matched by a balanced blend ... A total winner.

By the last half of the concert, it became clear that certain compositions lend themselves more to saxophone sound than others. The first section of Astor Piazzolla's marvelous "Histoire du Tango," arranged by Claude Vuirpy, was a total winner. Infectious tango rhythms worked well for saxes, as did tapping of the instrument's body — a technique heard often in Piazzolla's music.

George Gershwin's great American opera "Porgy and Bess" also sounded especially fine. Our ears are accustomed to hearing Gershwin played with soaring reed instruments, clarinet or sax, deliberately scored. So the sounds were warm and familiar.

B E S E N  A R T S

International Record Review

June 2004

J.S. Bach

The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080.

New Century Saxophone Quartet (Michael Stephenson, soprano saxophone; Christopher Hemingway, alto saxophone; Stephen Pollock, tenor saxophone; Brad Hubbard, baritone saxophone).

Channel Classics CCSSA20204 (full price, 1 hour 18 minutes). *Website* www.channelclassics.com.

Producer/Engineer C. Jared Sacks. *Dates* January and August 2003.

Bach's contrapuntal genius is virtually indestructible, so it should come as no surprise to learn that *The Art of Fugue* sounds as wonderful as ever when played on four saxophones, unconventional though it may seem at first (imagine doing the same to, say, Beethoven!). My first experience, too many years ago to mention, of *The Art of Fugue* was via a dour, furrowed-brow reading from a distinguished German organist of the time. My head was then so full of such choral splendours as the B minor Mass and Magnificat that Bach's staggering last musical will and testament struck me initially as the work of an old man who,

with his sight fading fast, had really lost the plot. Nowadays I can barely listen to this breathtaking musical valediction without tears in my eyes — the moment when the work's crowning Contrapunctus peters out, representing the last creative gasps of the most colossal creative genius music has ever witnessed, I still find unbearably poignant.

This is no ordinary recording, but a devotedly virtuoso traversal of some of the most mind-bogglingly ingenious and inspired examples of counterpoint ever committed to manuscript. A revelation.

So to the present recording, which presents virtually the entire work, with the exception of Contrapunctus 17, whose multi-linear complexities are beyond the reach of four voices, and Contrapunctus 18, which, although recorded, was omitted from the final edit due to timing constraints. The culmination of eight years of study and fine-timing, helped in the latter stages by Baroque flute specialist Stephen Preston, this is no ordinary

recording but a devotedly virtuoso traversal of some of the most mind-bogglingly ingenious and inspired examples of counterpoint ever committed to manuscript. The New Century Saxophone Quartet are technically unimpeachable and (unusually for a saxophone ensemble) play with impeccable intonation and coordination. As Bach's counterpoint magically interweaves, so one senses more than usual the work's linear complexity. Here the music feels less like a tour de force of technical ingenuity founded upon foursquare harmonic principles than a sublime frisson of horizontal inter-reaction that dictates the harmonic outcome as it proceeds.

Listened to in stereo this skilfully engineered performance balances the various lines immaculately, ensuring that each instrument registers with equal weight and clarity within a gentle ambience. Activate the SACD 5.0 surround track and the music takes on a further dimension as the four lines open up before your ears, cocooning the listener in a complex web of directional events that illuminates Bach's thought processes as never before in my experience. A revelation.

—Julian Haylock

B E S E N  A R T S

Christmasreviews.com

Fall 2004

A New Century Christmas

Wanting a little sax this Christmas? The always exciting New Century Saxophone Quartet (NCSQ) presents a fascinating concept album with fresh holiday sounds on “A New Century Christmas.” Have a listen (after all, one cannot have too much sax) — this saxophone extravaganza is a first-class sleigh ride.

When the NCSQ decided to assemble a holiday album, they commissioned original works by a dozen composer-friends (Benjamin Boone, Lawrence Dillon, Arthur Frackenhohl, Gordon Goodwin, Glenn Haynes, Brad Hubbard, Ben Johnston, David Ott, Lenny Pickett, Ronald Rudkin, Jeff Schiller, Ken Valitsky). The composers were free to follow or ignore the melody lines to their hearts’ content. The result is a relatively eccentric, but superbly crafted, “collection of original music that is eclectic, witty, serious, silly, and different” (as the NCSQ themselves describe it). Bravo! The NCSQ achieved their goal, and that is good news for those who love holiday music and are searching for that something special this Christmas season. In order to navigate this adventurous ground, the extensive liner notes provide an invaluable resource, laying out the thoughts of each composer for each piece.

This instrumental album is an absolute delight, and the high points are numerous. Lenny Pickett’s two tunes are genuine showstoppers: “Funkin’ with the Bells” (the opening track) and “God Rest Ye

Merry Gentle Mensch” are funny, funk-alicious wonders that immediately catch your attention. Pickett, a former Tower of Power member, describes Christmas as his “least favorite holiday” and certainly brought a twisted talent to the project.

A first-class sleigh ride.

Do not, however, imagine that “A New Century Christmas” will sit quietly gathering dust on the shelf as a bizarre novelty album. The songs are all solid holiday renderings in their own right. Although the NCSQ and this album are not for all tastes, the music is top-quality, albeit avant-garde. Some tunes are gentle interpretations that embrace the season in a creative fashion, but with largely traditional strains (these include “The First Noel,” “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” and the “Christmas Medley”). Others provide adventurous departures from the usual routes, and it’s a fascinating trip.

For pure fun, the Pickett numbers are a hoot and should not be missed. As for the rest, every song has true holiday merit and deserves serious consideration. The New Century Saxophone Quartet certainly has my attention this Christmas season. If you love stylish sax in innovative styles, “A New Century Christmas” should grab your attention, too.

—Carol Swanson

Spectator

Raleigh, North Carolina
Saturday, September 23, 2000

Tidal Wave of Sound

A surge of concerts inundates the calendar this weekend

By John W. Lambert

The season begins with a vengeance, bringing in a single week at least eight appealing programs. These include the Jerusalem Lyric Trio, appearing Thursday at the Freeman Center for Jewish Life. Friday's lineups present tough choices as the Kiev Symphony Orchestra and Chorus return to the Triangle for a concert in Page Auditorium; the N.C. Symphony offers the first of two Memorial Auditorium programs (the second is on the 23rd) featuring the premiere of a consortium-commissioned Concerto for saxophone quartet by Peter Schickele (the alter-ego of P.D.Q. Bach), played by the New Century ensemble; and Women's Voices presents in University United Methodist Church "A Room of Her Own," twice postponed due to the great storm of '00.

The Schickele piece is likely to be unusual but not "funny" per se, for when the composer's not in his "P.D.Q." mode,

he tends to be pretty straightforward. (Chances are he won't appear in clodhoppers, either - although he might need them due to construction at the site).

Doing for saxophones what Casals did for the cello and Segovia, for the guitar.

And despite their mod publicity photos, those "New Centurians," who performed at the NCMA last January, are consummate, serious artists (with strong NCSA ties) who are doing for saxophones what Casals did for the cello and Segovia, for the guitar.

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Robert Besen, Director | 508 First Street, Suite 4W | Hoboken NJ 07030-7823
T 201-386-8565 | F 201-386-8564 | Robert@BesenArts.com | www.BesenArts.com

The Washington Post

Saturday, April 5, 1997

New Century Saxophone Quartet

by JOAN REINTHALER

The saxophone is not a reticent instrument. Its presence colors the sonority of any ensemble it joins, and its voice evokes not only the sounds but even the heat and the smells of urban air or French cafes or jazz clubs.

The members of the New Century Saxophone Quartet, which performed Thursday at Bethesda's Georgetown Preparatory School under the auspices of Strathmore Hall's "Music in the Mansion" series, have a broader view of the instrument's possibilities. Their program of mostly recent pieces by American composers (an excellent transcription of three of the Contrapuncti from Bach's "The Art of the Fugue" was the only exception) offered a convincing argument for the saxophone as a stand-alone player with an attractive repertoire all its own, tinged only occasionally with hints of jazz or the rest.

The most interesting piece on the program (and a premiere) was the Quartet No. 2 by Lenny Pickett of "Saturday Night Live" fame. Its three movements focus on musical ideas rather than saxophone acrobatics, the opening movement a lovely study in blues, the

second movement a slow and pulsing opportunity for reflection and the final movement a virtuoso example of a rhythmic structure in which the four instruments begin together, slide further and further apart as each one moves at its own pace and finally come together and into focus. In this case, the musicians also wandered offstage one by one as the piece drew to a close, a little like the end of the Haydn "Farewell" Symphony. The performance was beautifully coordinated.

**So well done with so
little apparent effort
or premeditation.**

Other pieces by Frakenpohl, Schaffer and Peck called for agility, rhythmic incisiveness and careful attention to ensemble. What distinguished this performance was that all of this was so well done with so little apparent effort or premeditation.

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Robert Besen, Director | 508 First Street, Suite 4W | Hoboken NJ 07030-7823
T 201-386-8565 | F 201-386-8564 | Robert@BesenArts.com | www.BesenArts.com

Los Angeles Times

February 9, 1994

Quartet makes impact in west coast debut

by JOSEF WOODARD

Tackling brave new territory in the conservative-leaning realm of classical music tradition takes a unique blend of conviction, refined talent and a bit of damn-the-torpedoes ambition. Those qualities are amply in evidence with the New Century Saxophone Quartet, not to mention a finely honed musicality deserving wider acceptance.

While one half a house showed up at Ambassador Auditorium Monday night for the North Carolina based quartet's West Coast debut, those in attendance proved a conspicuously appreciative gathering. Polish and vitality distinguish the group - soprano saxophonist Michael Stephenson, altoist James Boatman (also the group's arranger), tenor Stephen Pollock and baritone Brad Hubbard.

Outside of jazz and theater music, saxophones have always had a rough time gaining respect in the classical world. As shown again in Pasadena, this bias is unfortunate, because this is a hybrid instrument of great luster and versatility.

Opening with the formality of Jean Baptiste Singelée's First Quartet (1857), the ensemble immediately displayed its winning voice, a warm, reedy and creamily unified collective sound. Three short

Shostakovich pieces, of marginal interest, established further connection with the classical orthodoxy. But the most refreshing music came from living composers.

They made believers here.

Sherwood Shaffer's handsome Sinfonia for Saxophone Quartet had the group contrapuntally weaving and intersecting voices, while Elliot del Borgo's Quartet featured both rampaging triplets and dark-toned introspection. Morton Gould's Pavane (from his American Symphonette No. 2) contained some of the evening's most overt jazz references but in coy, quirky style.

Better-integrated jazz ideas came with the concert's highlight and closer, Russell Peck's "Drastic Measures."

Inherently, the New Century Saxophone Quartet is a crusading unit, spreading the gospel about this maligned instrument's serious aspirations. They made believers here.

B E S E N  A R T S

THE NEW YORK POST

Friday, March 26, 1993

Saxophone Quartet as Fit as a Fiddle

by SHIRLEY FLEMING

The New Century Saxophone Quartet, first-prize winner in the 1992 Concert Artists Guild New York Competition, made its debut at Weill Recital Hall on Tuesday, in a virtuosic display of dexterity and keen ensemble work.

Soprano saxophonist Michael Stephenson, alto James Boatman, tenor Stephen Pollock and baritone Brad Hubbard, all products of the North Carolina School of Arts, have dedicated themselves to proving their instruments' mettle as a serious concert vehicle. While the pre-eminence of the string quartet remains unthreatened by this effort, the New Century puts its argument forcefully enough.

In a varied program ranging from a Fantasia, by the 17th-century organist Jan Pieters Sweelinck, and a set of Mozart variations (drawn from the piano original) to the premiere of a brand-new Sinfonia by Sherwood Shaffer of the North Carolina School, the quartet demonstrated both the liquid sinuosity and the pointillistic snap of the saxophone.

Shaffer's three-movement work sent the instruments cheerfully bubbling and looping, sometimes tumbling uphill with Poulenc-like cheekiness. A "Petit quatuor" (1935) by the Frenchman Jean Françaix displayed a delicate bounce and

A virtuosic display of dexterity and keen ensemble work.

transparent texture in the first movement (the quietest episode in a generally "forte" evening) and a presently pensive quality in the second, during which the soprano instrument remained silent. "Drastic Measures," (1976) by Russell Peck, careened recklessly but happily among what seemed like dozens of ideas, culminating in something very close to jazz.

The players handled it all with panache, and topped off the concert with a ragtime encore that fit them like a glove.

B E S E N  A R T S