



Free Jazz Collective



François Houle Genera Sextet - In Memoriam (Clean Feed, 2023)

Saturday, September 30, 2023

By [Stuart Broomer](#)

Clarinetist/composer François Houle's *In Memoriam* is dedicated to Ken Pickering, one of Canada's greatest jazz advocates, who passed away in 2018. Pickering was director of both the Vancouver Jazz Festival and Coastal Jazz and Blues Society, as well as organizing national and international tours for Vancouver musicians. Among Canada's major jazz festivals, Vancouver was unique both in the attention it paid to the city's most creative musicians while also featuring major creative figures from the international free jazz and improvising communities. I can't claim close friendship, but Pickering was a singularly warm, modest and committed man, and I was always happy to have occasion to get together with him at festivals.

Ken Pickering's special closeness to this project demonstrates his familiarity with the international community. Houle asked Pickering for recommendations for an international ensemble. Pickering's suggestions? Cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum (on this recording his place has been taken by trumpeter/ cornetist Marco von Orelli), trombonist Samuel Blaser, pianist Benoît Delbecq, bassist Michael Bates and drummer Harris Eisenstadt. Either way, it's five different countries optimally represented by a combination of skill and personality. For a recent performance

at the Guelph Jazz Festival, the international balance was retained with Jeb Bishop assuming the trombone chair.

Whether intentional or not, Houle's composition reflects the breadth of jazz that Pickering himself celebrated, with suggestions of New Orleans polyphony arising at times, something evident as well in the assortment of winds, with von Orelli sometimes playing cornet and Houle's clarinet the only reed. It's there too in the brass duet improvising on the expansive "Requiem for KP". There are definite free jazz touches in the abstract and angular dimensions of Houle's composing, most notably on "This Tune" while, conversely, there are richly orchestral textures reminiscent of third-stream music. "Ekphrasis" develops an almost ceremonial aspect with a bell-like repeating piano figure and the richness of Blaser's trombone sound.

The individual performances are consistently at a very high level, solos inevitably tied to the moods of the compositions. Several of them, including "Gish Gallop" and "Deep River", share the reflective resonance of spirituals, a quality that achieves its apotheosis in the concluding "Chorale", which is also a setting for Houle's most personal tribute, an extended solo that possesses tremendous warmth and depth of feeling, making maximum use of the clarinet's capacity for subtly expressive tonal and timbral inflections.

The most delightful element of the Genera Sextet is the absolute fitness of these musicians for Houle's requirements, both as ensemble players and soloists, an ongoing memorial to the wisdom and thoughtfulness of Ken Pickering.