François Houle Genera Sextet
In Memoriam
Clean Feed CF624CD

François Houle + Joe Sorbara
Hush
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When TD International Vancouver International Jazz Festival cofounder Ken Pickering passed away in 2018, the outpouring of affection and remembrance was immediate and copious. Just as heartfelt are François Houle's notes for this new Genera Sextet disc, and while not composed specifically as a suite for the beloved concert organizer,

Houle describes an emergent thematic connection and an homage to the joy and celebration so integral to Pickering's life and musical pursuits.

Houle's usual compositional heterogeneity is in full effect, and he's got the dream band to realize it. The rhythm section of pianist Benoît Delbecq, bassist Michael Bates, and drummer Harris Eisenstadt is rock-solid as required while always allowing time its natural elasticity. The combination of Houle's mellifluous or percussive clarinet, the alternately bold and luscious trombone of Samuel Blaser and the matching dynamism of Marco von Orelli's trumpet foreground harmonic implications in each tone and line. If a single moment of proof were needed, "Deep River"'s opening moments illustrate an overwhelming band synergy. Eisenstadt's single snare evocation and facilely swinging ride and high-hat accompaniment launch Blaser's expressive open-interval groove-and-curve melodic statement that then slopes into chamber music of enticing harmonic ambiguity. Everything shifts as Delbecq and Bates hit with unerring precision, vanguarding the music's multileveled syncopation and setting the stage for von Orelli's tenderly bluesy solo. On some other plane resides the diminutive but potent "Scarlet," with its melody floating hazily over the odd-metered groove as though Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman" wore a smile. The prepared piano and laughing trombone are masterstrokes, as is the merging of melody and solo. It's as if a conjoined apparition of Andrew Hill's evolving melodies and Cotton Club-era Ellington's growling brass inhabits the composer's consciousness with just a touch of gas-pipe clarinet antics thrown in for good measure.

Despite humor and celebration in many shades, the disc's net effect is of moving tribute, most obviously on the delicate brushstrokes of "Requiem for KP" as it first mourns and then lopes its way toward an inevitable opposite, Blaser and Delbeq's interaction particularly affecting. Perhaps most moving of all is the multiphonic and contrapuntal surprise "Chorale" affords as Houle's virtuosity, alone and unmetered, ushers in the album's closer. His subsequent solo is an extension of those devices while also soaked in blues and mildly trilled exhortation. It all prefigures the Coltranesque swing Bates brings into focus at 4:05, after a gorgeously plain-chant melody of somber beauty and space. The group slides in and out of meter with the astonishing ease of long-nourished comradery.

That final track sums up everything the disc has to offer without actually replicating it. Each piece is an homage to an obviously cherished friend and comrade in art. The music's quality is a given, but the musicianship and commitment are second to none. The sextet has crafted another wonderful disc but also a statement of intent, transcendence and ultimately of celebration.

It goes without saying that improvised music's historical multiplex is peppered with duo recordings, a field in which competition has become increasingly stiff. The fact remains that the duo of Houle and percussionist Joe Sorbara, familiars for sure, have capitalized on past experience to create a statement both unique and satisfying.

The disc opens and closes with two of the more sonically diverse offerings, both containing ambient crickets and what the liner notes affectionately call piano guts. They rumble, writhe, and pierce all layers of the register spectrum, especially on "A Veil Drawn Over." It's dark, majestic, and penetrating music incapable of being pigeonholed to a certain ensemble size or characteristic. The gothic opener, "Knocked Ambulations," does not speak musically to its title's humor, but another timbral luminary later on, the exquisitely salivary "Montgolfière," most certainly does. One could be persuaded to believe that a flute player inhabited its final moments, but what is that accompanying hue and cry? If that's a balloon, no more creative use of it has been documented, especially wild as it traverses the soundstage. The little piece is a wonderful miniature of suffering and laughter of the animalistically human variety whose implications change with each audition.

On paper, the duo would seem to imply at least a nod and a wink toward jazz pedigree, and if that's where expectations lie, they don't disappoint. Dig into the transitory pentatonics and morphing tonal centers of "Travelling by Foot" to hear clarinet and drums in swinging historical repartee, loosely flowing but tightly focused. If that's not the proverbial cuppa tea, the iridescent "What Next?" might be the ticket, with its luminescent bells, dramatic pauses, asymmetric repetitions and quietly dignified sunny clamor. Contrast all of that with the grooving complexities of "Parallelepiped," which, like so many of these tasty miniatures, ends with uncanny precision but not before the gongs and percussive tappings infect with light humor.

As always with a Hat-related production, the recording is absolutely splendid, which it needs to be for music of such detailed execution. The playing is wonderful throughout, but the notes are integral to the package. Annotators never get the credit they deserve, and Art Lange is among the best. Like the album, his notes end where they begin, no mean feat to pull off while avoiding gimmickry. Beyond that, he manages to incorporate musician biography and other pertinent information into a poetic framework! *Hush* ends up being an album as defiant of category and genre as it is delicious to imbibe if you bring your sense of whimsy to the table. In a world where duos are a dime a dozen, this one's worth its weight in gold!
–*Marc Medwin*