

New music

Reviews of this week's CD releases

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JAZZ

François Houle 4

Recorder (Songlines)

François Houle is one of the mainstays of the vibrant Vancouver jazz scene. He plays clarinet, is an accomplished electroacoustic clarinet music performer and composes extraordinary music. While he has made many contributions in the classical, new age and world categories, his jazz oeuvre is extensive, and is avant-garde within the scrupulous demands of his compositions. The notes for this new album say that it is the result of a "rigorous compositional process" specifically geared to the virtuosity and range of influences of the quartet; fellow Vancouverite Gordon Grdina on guitar, and New Yorkers Mark Helias (bass and clarinet), and Gerry Hemingway (drums). Houle's own musical influences range from classical clarinet to jazz's Jimmy Giuffre.

The music here is experimental and serious, frequently dissonant without deviating from rhythm and underlying melody. Houle's clarinet sound is simply beautiful, whether softly exploring a duet session or the powerful title track. Grdina hails from the Vancouver avant-garde scene, and his guitar offers a neat foil to many of Houle's solos and compositional demands. There are a number of brief interludes throughout the album that feature single takes of Houle and Helias both freely improvising on clarinet. These improvisations are wonderful and frequently include a strong sense of fun.

Morning Song 1 (For Ted Byrne) is a meditative tone poem, while the quirky rhythms of *Big Time Felter* are driven solidly by all four participants. This is modern, dissonant jazz that never sounds harsh or competitive. Grdina and Houle have played together for years, and their interaction demonstrates that. The wide variety of moods and obvious chemistry of the quartet is a delight to listen to, but ultimately it is the sound and dancing style of Houle's clarinet that provide the glue. This is contemporary small-group jazz at its best. Highly recommended. ★★★★★1/2 out of five

— Keith Black

