

Anthony Braxton Quartet Standards (Brussels) 2006

Amirani CDx6

There's something wonderful about the way Anthony Braxton produces CDs, documenting his work in such detail that it drives him into new territory. These two encounters with Italian musicians provide contrasting views of Braxton's diverse international practice, one a casual stand in a club playing standards with an unfamiliar rhythm section, the other a festival concert of his own orchestral music played by Italy's most established improvisers.

While some would be content to cull a single CD from a four-day stand with a new rhythm section, Amirani has released a six-CD set of Braxton's Brussels meeting with pianist Alessandro Giachero, bassist Antonio Borghini, and drummer Cristiano Calcagnite. They may not be well-known now, but that may soon change; they play lyrical post-bop jazz in the strong national tradition of Pieranunzi, Battaglia and Bollani. The repertoire ranges broadly through standards, that category expanding to include fairly rare songs (there's a beautiful treatment of "Alice in Wonderland" from the 1951 Disney film), as well as canonical tunes from modern jazz. There aren't a host of versions of John Carisi's "Israel," Eric Dolphy's "Out to Lunch" and George Russell's "Ezz-thetic," but they're pieces Braxton manages to engage with on both their terms and his own. Playing Paul Desmond's delicate bossa nova "Embarcadero," Braxton interrupts the recapitulation of the theme to insert a manic group improvisation. There are occasional lapses in execution (the head of Wayne Shorter's "Night Dreamer" is hesitant and out of tune), but Braxton seems more interested in exploring changes and the chance for dialogue than in creating "finished" versions, and it's that enthusiasm for the new that makes this encounter vital. Many of the pieces get extended treatments, moving through a variety of dimensions. Charles Lloyd's "Forest Flower" is a lyrical effusion that stretches to nearly 20 minutes; it's a particularly good vehicle for the ensemble, with Giachero moving from flowing, song-like lines to moments of intense repetition. Few musicians still find ways to engage with this material creatively, and it's fascinating to hear someone as adventurous as Braxton working with it.

The Italian Instabile Orchestra assembles the cream of Italian free improvisers and presents them in the form of a slightly augmented, traditional big

Anthony Braxton + Italian Instabile Orchestra Creative Orchestra (Bolzano) 2007

Rai Trade CD

band—brass, winds, a rhythm section with two drummers, and a violin and a cello as a kind of mini-string section. There's no question that Braxton's presence and his music can galvanize an ensemble into dynamic creativity, as evidenced by numerous recordings with university- or community-based orchestras. Sometimes, though, there's no need for it—they're already creative—and this is one of them. The results are akin to such Braxton landmarks as *Creative Orchestra (Köln) 1978* or his meeting with the London Jazz Composers Orchestra. The Instabile is a genuinely great big band, crowded with strong musical personalities. The reed section alone has Gianluigi Trovesi, Daniele Cavallanti, Eugenio Colombo and Carlo Actis Dato (the performance is dedicated to the late Mario Schiano, originally the fifth member of the section). Each brings a highly developed personal voice, a developed timbre and sense of line that ensures the music belongs as much to them as to the composer. It's true for other players as well, whether it's trumpeter Pino Minafra, trombonist Giancarlo Schiaffini or cellist Paolo Damiani. The orchestra presents a series of Braxton's older pieces, going back to "No. 59" from *Creative Orchestra Music 1976*, a slow-moving piece that's at once brooding and luminous. The sequence is unusual: the orchestra moves back and forth between pieces rather than superimposing them in what is now Braxton's usual manner. Thus the densely boppish "Composition No. 92 part 1" is followed by the omni-directional "No. 164 part 1," then back to "No. 92" for the second part and so on. It's another fascinating Braxton variation on the expected order of things, and it conjoins with the rich sounds and personalities of the Instabile to create a great performance.

Stuart Broomer