

intuition

jbbg – Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies

(Directed by Heinrich von Kalnein & Horst-Michael Schaffer)

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Give jazz a chance! The Jazz Big Band Graz is one of those large jazz formations that brought a fresh breeze to the big band landscape a few months before the turn of the millennium. On their new CD they simply call themselves JBBG. If that perhaps recalls the reduction of the name Esbjörn Svensson Trio to EST, it is perhaps not entirely unintentional. The logo JBBG symbolizes a new beginning in the virtual age and yet continuity on the basis of modern big band history. *Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies* does not exactly sound like jazz purism. On the very first track the listener is hit with hefty electro beats. The winds lie above it like astonished clouds of ambience. On the second track theremin master Barbara Buchholz gives wings to the pack. Gil Evans would have enjoyed this interpretation of big band. "We are aware of the disparity between the name and the content of the CD," notes saxophonist Heinrich von Kalnein, who together with the trumpeter Horst-Michael Schaffer has been leading the ensemble to new shores since late 2002. "We believe that it is important here to bring out the consistency of the big band. But we also want to establish a trademark with the new logo. JBBG stands for an orchestral group that you can call a big band but that also allows for very different kinds of freedom."

The two visionary orchestra leaders have achieved with their reformed big band something that appears to be impossible in politics. They prove to be diplomats without having to distance themselves from the fray. And they can orient themselves along two sides without having to seek compromises. They can say goodbye to the cliché of the big band but without sacrificing its advantages. Those who never liked big band music, and had their reasons, will be able listen to *Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies* without ever thinking of making their ears circle around a big band floor. Those who love the big band sound, however, will find complete confirmation for that in JBBG. John Hollenbeck established the direction for the formation from Graz in 2005 with the production *Joys & Desires*.

"The great age of big bands is clearly over," von Kalnein acknowledges without melancholy. "To escape this dilemma, large formations are often called jazz orchestras these days. For composers and arrangers, however, the big band is still a precisely defined ensemble form. A string quartet is always a string quartet, after all, no matter what music it plays. In the public perception, however, it is seen differently, and we have to react to that. For the production with John Hollenbeck we had already opened the doors in a new direction. We wanted to make a big band production that did not immediately trigger a fear of stuffiness. The music should be hip and contemporary but the big band should be fully occupied."

Part of that is approaching the possibilities and limits of the big band honestly. It is deadly if large formations fake the mobility of a combo, when all-star bands feign team spirit, and when every member of the orchestra has to squeeze off a solo. JBBG does not make those mistakes. "The degree of spontaneity is," von Kalnein remarks, "considerably more limited than with any small ensemble. In the orchestration, however, you can instead bring out incredibly beautiful timbres and contrast them. We always instruct the musicians to play like an orchestra because that precludes certain typical big band clichés."

The unique almost never emerges on its own. Both leaders have given considerable thought to how JBBG can distinguish itself from comparable ensembles. Von Kalnein's assessment is as follows: "One of our unique qualities is that we have both a pianist and a keyboardist. They do not get in each other's way at all. The keyboardist takes over in a sense the function of a guitarist. He is a joker who builds the bridge between the melodic and the rhythmic aspects of the group. Our percussionist, Gregor Hilbe, has a solid jazz background but then he moved into electronics. Onstage he has a laptop that he connects to the big band. For example, on the first track he uses a rhythm pattern that consists entirely of sampled sounds from the winds. The percussion substitutes for and supplements the rhythm track constructed from it. He is the only person who can pull that off. Barbara Buchholz is a special guest. She adds a special color to the production."

When you think of large-format jazz in Austria, the Vienna Art Orchestra naturally occupies the unassailable pole position. JBBG had just one opportunity if it wanted to establish a conscious aesthetic counterpoint to the VAO. Already with Hollenbeck, the musicians from Styria succeeded in realizing a concept based neither on soloists nor on the jazz sound. Playing in the champions league of big bands meant occupying a position that had not previously be occupied. With its dedications to Me'shell Ndegeocello and Django Bates on *Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies*, JBBG has identified crucial coordinates on its path to its own sound. Von Kalnein would like to expand the spectrum of influences a little more. "Hollenbeck, Vince Mendoza, and Maria Schneider on the big band side; Django Bates, Me'shell Ndegeocello, Geir Lysne, and the Trondheim scene on the innovation side. We keep an eye on both trends but we try not to plagiarize from any of our influences."

With *Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies*, JBBG has achieved far more than an exciting varied album that jazz fans can call jazz and jazz haters can just call satisfying music. Heinrich von Kalnein and Horst-Michael Schaffer have redrawn the map of European music with their formation. Central Europe once again has an innovative focus on the big band. *Electric Poetry & Lo-Fi Cookies* is nothing less than a hinge of musical history on which a door to the future opens.