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## John Hollenbeck & jazz bigband graz “joys & desires”

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If Frank Zappa was commenting on the jazz canon on account of its *funny smells* even three decades ago, this sharp criticism is no less appropriate as it applies more specifically to the big bands of today. Unfortunately, most big bands do not even make the smallest effort to clear away this resentment, but rather vacillate between managing and mutilating jazz. Only very few large jazz ensembles are exploring new directions or reclaiming those traditions which once turned the big band into one of the most important voices in jazz. However, the Jazz Big Band Graz (JBBG), founded five years ago, combines both virtues with the brilliant drummer John Hollenbeck as the master supplying the band with the appropriate pieces.

The New York drummer and composer John Hollenbeck is one of the most versatile contemporary jazz musicians. Side by side with philosophers of melodic jazz such as Fred Hersch, Bob Brookmeyer or Kenny Wheeler, he has developed a smooth, fluid way of playing, characterized by an ever-changing dynamic that combines unobtrusive, swinging rhythms with sensitive tones. He has strengthened the Klezmer avant-garde together with David Krakauer and Frank London and cultivated the Tango Nuevo with Pablo Ziegler; with his Claudia Quintet, he has joined the ranks of success among the innovative New York downtown scene, and in his collaborations with Meredith Monk, crossed the border between jazz and New Music; as a member of the Intuition family, he has supported Florian Ross and Henning Sieverts in a manner as striking as it is efficient. All of these achievements have melded together in his compositions on “Joys & Desires”, an album that has come to fruition with JBBG under the direction of Heinrich von Kalnein and Horst Michael Schaffer. Hollenbeck is enthusiastic when speaking of JBBG: “The Graz band is first and foremost a regular big band with horns and a rhythm section, yet the musicians are so open to any style of music that they can no longer be defined as a typical big band. One can explore a lot of different new territories with them. Over the years, they have developed a unique sound and are well on the way to becoming an institution in Europe similar to the Vienna Art Orchestra.”

Hollenbeck’s pieces can be approached from different angles; you can bathe and relax in waves of sound, or you can delve deep and listen wholeheartedly while feasting on the adventurous architecture of the compositions. Hollenbeck’s approach to his own music is as relaxed as the music itself. “Most people expect a kind of intellectual music from big bands. It is either associated with swing or with total freedom. There is not much leeway in between. My music is definitely full of compositional details, formulated sometimes with great effort, but these details don’t have priority. I strive to create music that is accessible to and can be appreciated by a wide variety of audiences.”

“Joys & Desires” has little in common with ordinary big band jazz. Instead of offering dense and swaggering brass sounds, Hollenbeck sensitively plays with voices and moods, spheres and atmospheres. His pieces do not sound like wind music layered on thick, but like carefully brushed paintings of sound. It is less about the individual self-realization of the musicians involved, but rather creating the greatest possible magic in a piece of music, an approach he puts into practice without compromise. Especially when listening to the heavier passages, the listeners are likely to entirely forget that this is a big band and not, say, a distorted guitar or an electronic sound. The music has to speak for itself, only then will the performers emerge from behind it. “There is a lot of improvisation in my music, but I’m not specifically creating space for solos,” says Hollenbeck. “Of course placing a solo in a piece makes sense if doesn’t go against the logical flow of the music. But basically, the music isn’t structured around solos. For this project, I’ve tried to work with only a few voices in hopes of getting the big band to sound like a smaller ensemble. In many instances, I have put a maximum of three voices on top of each other, so the voices can be distinguished clearly. In general, textures are more appealing to me than improvisations.”

Nevertheless, Hollenbeck does not see himself as being inconsistent with the principle of freedom in jazz. He, too, represents the utmost freedom of interpretation, which, however, does not start at the moment of performance, but earlier. He frees himself from categorical instructions and strives for a meta-music in the style of Gil Evans. Together with his close friend, the singer and electronics specialist Theo Bleckman, he emphasizes shapes instead of traditions or methods. “My music is, for the most part, free of style or genre. It is music which speaks for itself and gives listeners the freedom to make their own discoveries. I have to assume that there are no two ears listening to music in the same way. The pieces are mostly composed, but I create spaces where the musicians have a lot of freedom. I often work with other groups where I have to tell musicians exactly the type of sound or feel I want in these spaces, but I leave it up to them as to how they will create that sound. The JBBG musicians do not require this type of direction, they interpret these sections with a high degree of freedom.”

“Joys & Desires” builds yet another bridge: Hollenbeck has been active on both sides of the Atlantic for a long time. He has carried the spirit of New York to Europe and the new European formal awareness back to the USA. With JBBG, he has found the best possible intersection of European and American jazz. Hardly any other contemporary musician blurs the lines of demarcation between the mother country of jazz and the home of most jazz instrument as convincingly as Hollenbeck. Although his aesthetic sense pays tribute to his own personal experience. “There used to be large differences between European and American musicians. But today almost all European musicians have studied either in America or with Americans, and most American musicians either live in Europe or are constantly on tour in Europe. That is why the differences are hardly audible. Surely I find that an American big band can sight-read a composition quicker than a European ensemble, but in the end, the playing levels are absolutely identical.”

John Hollenbeck and JBBG can easily send big band aficionados into a state of ecstasy. However, their true achievement is that they get the people who have long since lost their faith in the power and beauty of the big band on their side, and what’s more, infect them with their magical sound.

Additional info you will find here:

[www.jazzbigbandgraz.com](http://www.jazzbigbandgraz.com)

[www.johnhollenbeck.com](http://www.johnhollenbeck.com)