

Frank Gratkowski Trio "The Flume Factor"

Reviews

The advantage of maintaining a minimum level of abstraction in the construction of a work of art is that creations that are too concrete, however gripping they may be, will deliver all their facets on one or two showings. Unlike nursery rhymes or top forty tunes, the best artistic creation will repay repeat visitors with new insights. On the other hand, musical compositions can also be too precious. One of the attractions of "Jazz " for those weaned on "the classics" is that the most cerebral works of Webern, Babbitt (and even Bach) can sometimes get tiring because of those composers' regular reluctance to display their emotions to the inattentive listener. To put this anatomically, sometimes we want guts along with our medulla oblongatas. "The Flume Factor" is an excellent demonstration that "brainy" music need not to be passionless or dull. Right from the hellishly complicated opening to "Epitasis", it's clear that this is an important release. Gerry Hemingway now appears on so many fine disks of this "intellectual-furnace" genre that his appearance seems almost a guarantee of excellence. With Braxton, with Graewe, and now with Gratkowski, Hemingway provides just what is needed to make improvised music timeless: accuracy, fury, imagination, depth, communicative sensibility, and whimsy. (He can also turn in a sensational solo, as he demonstrates on "Feld 1".) The music on Flume Factor betrays a great deal of "classical" influence, and Gratkowski investigates these rich 20th Century sources thoroughly, not only when he turns to clarinet (as he does on a number of tunes here), but on sax as well. His technique and sound are first rate on all three horns. He doesn't only write terrific pieces, he performs them brilliantly. Most of the pieces are about as contrapuntal as accomplished three-part writing/improvising can make them. I was reminded a bit of the trio version of Tim Berne's recent take on Hemphill, but there may actually be more here to repay repeated listenings. There are epicycles in Gratkowski's counterpoint that put early astronomy to shame. In spite of all the dense complexity and unpredictability, however, there is enough phrase and rhythm repetition here to give all the pieces an outer level of intelligibility. Like his confreres, Manderscheid is highly talented musician. He lacks the big sound of Leandre, Parker, Morris or Dresser, but he has plenty of creativity and technical proficiency. His lengthy opening solo on "Feld 1" is a miracle of Bartokian motivic development juxtaposition. The two or three segments requiring walking bass are approached by Manderscheid in a manner that is both "in the tradition" and fresh. (Hemingway is not at his best with this sort of "swing drumming", but even here he's full of surprises.) The overlong "California Roll" notwithstanding, Flume Factor is a dynamite recording.

Cadence, Sept. 99

A young reedsman out of Cologne, Frank Gratkowski is a member of various German projects and a common sparring partner of fellow Colognian Georg Gräwe. Here, he releases the second CD of his trio with German bassist Dieter Manderscheid and American percussionist Gerry Hemingway. In eight cuts - some very Braxton Quartet-esque and all but one composed by Gratkowski - the trio plays tightly, only occasionally sounding free (in moments of crescendos). Overall, the music is carefully crafted. Although Gratkowski may occasionally sound vaguely like Braxton (on alto) or Jimmy Guiffre (on clarinet), he never dwells on any one reference point. He is simply carving out his own niche from many influences. Sometimes he'll play melancholy, or in "Senga", while Manderscheid and Hemingway hold time, he flutters beautifully over the keys of the clarinet. Often, he has an angular sound, flying up and down the instrument as if playing fifths, and then interspersing pulses or staccato interjections. "California Roll", dedicated to American reedsman Michael Moore, even begins with a bebopish rhythm. What perhaps detracts somewhat from the success of this recording are the few instances when each musician plays at full power. In these moments, the music loses form and tension it has done so well to construct. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating release by a young European lion, one who is by no means reliving the past, but rather remodeling it. He should be commanding your interest.

- Bruce Carnevale

Jazziz, Oct. 98

A trio date to seek out is The Flume Factor, with Frank Gratkowski on reeds, Dieter Manderscheid bass, Gerry Hemingway drums, from a 1997 tour of Germany and Austria. Gratkowski has arrived. He delivers music of guts and grace here, puts a glowing stamp on the proceedings. Senga and California Roll are delights, while a longer memorial to Coltrane, Feld 1, is effective. Manderscheid is apt and able, Hemingway shades and swings with aplomb. Eight pieces combining passion, dynamics, tremendous interplay.

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