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CD Kritik "AirBass"

Gina Schwarz / Richard Oesterreicher | ATS Records (2009)

There could be many a slip between coming up with an unusual concept for a record and actually having the gumption to pull it off. Austrian bassist Gina Schwarz and harmonica maestro Richard Oesterreicher have indeed pulled it off on AirBass, a wonderful record where the two musicians share principal credits, although Schwarz is the main contributor in terms of compositions.

Conceptually, the record sets about the task of creating a dazzling palette of sound colors, often bracketed by the pedal point of Schwarz's dark, woody bass and the high and mighty undulations of Oesterreicher's harmonica. And there is something else: apart from the bass clarinet—played almost classical concert style, and rarely above the musical midriff of bubbling harmonics—there is no other lead melodic instrument or solo voice other than the harmonica. Every other instrument—piano, vibes and guitar—is rhythmically oriented, despite regular soloing. This preponderance of rhythmic instrumental orientation makes for music with an unusually soulful warmth and mighty swing.

Schwarz is a virtuoso bassist who handles the great bull of an instrument with surprising muscularity. She is also a composer of depth and sensitivity. She is able to turn observation and opinion into meaningful pieces. Her European sensibility melds well with her bluesy instincts. As a result, her work is a full-blooded display of not only musical intellect, but also a vibrant sense of dance.

This record is a perfect example. It inhabits the deepest recesses of the mind as it provokes an irresistible urge to suddenly sweep across the floor in great swirling circles. There are myriad variations of tonal color from song to song. Tempos are simple but maddeningly polyrhythmic. There is always a danger of music becoming trite and sentimental when it sets about to deliberately describe emotions, but here on AirBass, the music appears to serve a higher purpose when it examines emotions with a greater sense of depth and profundity.

At its heart, AirBass appears to revolve around the premise that the glorious center of all music is "song"—this from the classical translation of the word "air". In a deeper sense, the Latin "aria" may also be blended into the title, for the strong sense of almost "sung" melody by the harmonica. "Sound of Air" is an exquisite example of this.

Other tracks, though less deliberately aria-like, are wonderful examples of programmatic skill and recall some of the best of Oregon's music in a very (sonic) painterly manner.

"Cape Cod," "Caps & Rags," and "Noce Italiana" are wonderfully vivid; the last of which purports to relive the fictional experience of a young composer who will preview a concert work for the first time. "Ududuction," a wild romp for Schwarz and percussionist Iris Camaa, as well as "Orient Sun" and "Caps & Rags" all swing with abandon.

Swing is the big surprise, because often music that is so obviously narrative can ignore the danceable elements of song. Happily, AirBass rises far above the serious and flirts with the puckish in the rarified space that it seeks to inhabit.