

MICHAEL MANTLER

EDITIONS

VOLUME ONE

THE ORIGINAL JAZZ COMPOSER'S
ORCHESTRA
AND ITS
UPDATE

INTRODUCTION

— BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

Drama is the signature element of Michael Mantler's music, whether expressed in towering walls of darkly gleaming brass, low-lit strings simmering with tension, or fragile, isolated human voices grappling with fugitive poetry. Right from its beginnings, in the 1960s, Mantler's music has given the impression of rising through layers of emotional struggle, striving for release while relishing the drive to be heard, aided by the composer's willingness to exploit the gamut of resources from symphonic and chamber ensembles through advanced jazz techniques to the intimacy of art song and cabaret.

The evolution of his music is a fascinating study, and nowhere more so than in the juxtaposition of the original versions of the pieces written for and recorded by the Jazz Composer's Orchestra in the 1960s and the revisions of the same material undertaken with different performers four and a half decades later. As you would expect from such an exigent musician, the Update – as Mantler called it -- is very far from the sort of limited and pre-defined adventure usually denoted by such dead words as revival and tribute; instead it offers a reconsideration both thorough and rigorous, a new iteration more than capable of standing on its own.

Born in Vienna in 1943, Mantler was barely into his twenties when he arrived in New York, having studied the trumpet and composition at his home city's academy and university

before leaving in 1962 for Berklee College in Boston, where the jazz course was attractive to students with inquiring minds. His move to New York two years later was perfectly timed to enable him to make common cause with a generation of musicians intent not just on expanding the language of their idiom in order to create new means of expression but breaking the grip of established promoters and producers through building new platforms in a bold bid for self-determination.

The celebrated coffee-house season in 1964 that became known as the October Revolution in Jazz led to the founding of the Jazz Composers Guild, whose charter members included Bill Dixon, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, Roswell Rudd, John Tchicai, Burton Greene, Paul Bley, Carla Bley and Mantler himself. A series of concerts at Judson Hall that December included the debut of the Jazz Composers Guild Orchestra, performing works by Mantler and Carla Bley. A concert in April 1965 at the Contemporary Center in New York City included performances of Mantler's "Communications #4 and 5", which were recorded and released, alongside Bley's "Roast", by the Dutch Fontana label later that year.

By the time the ensemble reassembled to make its first studio recording three years later, the Guild had disintegrated. Mantler and Bley, now partners, were the guiding forces of

what would henceforth be known as the Jazz Composer's Orchestra. The founding principles of the organization were reflected in their desire to function outside the perimeters of conventional music industry, finding the backing of supporters to make and distribute their own recordings.

The first fruit, released in 1968, was devoted entirely to Mantler's compositions and included some of the best-known names from the avant-garde as featured soloists. A two-LP set in a silver-faced box with a large pamphlet including scores, photographs and essays, it amounted to a statement of intent, a declaration of presence at a time when many representatives of the new jazz were finding it difficult to be heard at all. By giving this music the sort of presentation normally accorded to the most celebrated contemporary classical musicians, it forced the world to look at it through different eyes.

For many listeners, the music would also require different ears. Mantler was taking on a challenge whose scale was only just becoming apparent: that of finding a way to integrate the improvisers of the new jazz with the requirements of a large ensemble. Free blowing had increased in scope and format from the early small groups to the double quartet of Ornette Coleman's Free Jazz and the eleven musicians assembled by John Coltrane for Ascension, but only Sun Ra, at that point, had reconciled the needs of composition and improvisation within the instrumental format of a conventional and permanently functioning big band. In Europe, Mike Westbrook and Alexander von Schlippenbach would soon be doing something similar, respectively with their Concert Band and Globe Unity Orchestra.

Mantler was interested in a riskier adventure. His ambition was to bring everything he had gathered from his studies – including a knowledge of the work of 20th century European composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Edgard Varèse and Olivier Messiaen – together with the history of writing for large ensembles within the jazz tradition by Duke Ellington, George Russell, Charles Mingus and Gil Evans. What he produced, while still in his mid-twenties, was something far more successful than the well-intentioned but mostly tentative and unsatisfactory music produced in the previous decade under the label Third Stream.

For Mantler, the way ahead was to be defined not by synthesis but by a process through which all the constituent elements were metabolized before emerging as something genuinely new and authentic to itself. A compelling and sometimes hair-raisingly audacious affair, the music on Communications answered that description in full, demanding a thorough reorientation of the listener's expectations and perceptions. The reward was a sensation of breaking through into a new world.

Over four days scattered throughout the first six months of 1968, the musicians convened on the ground floor of 155 East 24th Street in New York City, where RCA's studios offered state-of-the-art eight-track recording facilities operated by engineers with no experience whatsoever in recording this type of music – excusably so, since at the time hardly anyone had such experience. On the eventual pair of 12-inch 33rpm discs, the five compositions were programmed in chronological order.

At the first session, on January 24, the make-up of the 21-piece orchestra was notable for the inclusion of five double basses, played by five of the most creative bassists of the new generation: Kent Carter, Ron Carter, Richard Davis, Charlie Haden and Reggie Workman, who brought with them experience in the bands of Coleman, Coltrane, Miles Davis, Eric Dolphy and Paul Bley. Their presence, along with that of the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, the baritone saxophonist Charles Davis, the trombonist Jimmy Knepper, the tuba-player Howard Johnson and the drummer Andrew Cyrille, gave a clear indication that Mantler was assembling an orchestra capable of interpretation as well as execution.

That first piece, “Communications #8”, featured a pair of outstanding soloists: Don Cherry on cornet and Leandro “Gato” Barbieri on tenor saxophone. Cherry had arrived in New York from Los Angeles with Ornette Coleman in 1959 to set the jazz world aflame. Barbieri’s arrival from Argentina had been preceded by a spell in Europe, where he and Cherry toured with a quintet. In 1967 Barbieri joined Mantler in the band heard on Gary Burton’s *A Genuine Tong Funeral*, an extended work composed by Carla Bley.

New listeners dropping the needle on “Communications #8” soon discovered that this music would be taking no prisoners. The relatively primitive recording technology of the time meant that some of the detail of the writing and playing (the five bassists, for example) would merge, but the overall impression is shattering as the slow-moving blocks of brass and reeds alternate with passages of boiling rhythm section work before Cherry’s opening fanfare announces the presence of the first soloist, the cornet splashing notes like the scribbles

of Cy Twombly over the sombre orchestral colours until joined by Barbieri’s sandpapered upper-register ululations.

With the second piece, “Communications #9”, recorded on May 8, Mantler introduced an instrumental sound that would become a staple of his work. The featured soloist, the electric guitarist Larry Coryell, had come to prominence with Gary Burton’s successful quartet; he would be succeeded in subsequent phases of Mantler’s music by the likes of Terje Rypdal, Mike Stern, Chris Spedding, Rick Fenn and Bjarne Roupé, each of whom would bring his own post-Hendrix vision of the instrument’s possibilities. Here Coryell extends his instrument’s vocabulary much as the likes of Cherry and Barbieri were doing with their horns, making imaginative use of the spaces offered by waves of orchestral sound which shift in tone and colour as they advance and recede.

That day in May was a full one, with two more pieces committed to tape. “Communications #10” is introduced by Steve Swallow’s ardent pizzicato bass solo before a natural echo effect between the brass and reeds leads to the entry of the featured soloist, the trombonist Roswell Rudd, another innovator who, as he moved from a Dixieland apprenticeship to membership of the avant-garde, also changed the way his instrument would be heard and played. Pharoah Sanders did as much for the tenor saxophone: his furious opening to the comparatively brief “Preview”, goaded by the orchestra’s staccato stabs, blowtorches the music as he had so strikingly done while a member of Coltrane’s last group.

Two consecutive days in June were required to capture the album’s magnum opus, the two-part “Communications #11”,

featuring the pianist Cecil Taylor – a player of towering genius who, following his first major exposure to the public at the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival, had remained a divisive figure even among those ready to acknowledge his extraordinary technical gifts. In the slight figure dancing on the piano stool and jabbing at the keys with inexhaustible inventiveness, Mantler found a soloist to match the weight and intensity of his orchestral structures. Every rumble of thunder is answered with a flurry of lightning bolts, each looming storm cloud with a volley of hailstones. More than 50 years later the listener again emerges, drenched in sound but utterly exhilarated, with the feeling of having been exposed to something completely new.

In 2012, after countless further adventures in sound, including collaborations with the likes of Jack Bruce, Marianne Faithfull and Robert Wyatt on songs built around the words of Samuel Beckett, Mantler was going through the process of digitising his library of scores when the idea of revisiting these pieces began to occupy his thoughts. It would be an opportunity, he decided, to revise and improve certain aspects of the “Communications” series (including a couple of earlier pieces in the series, #1 and #5 from 1963-64), recasting the balance between composition and improvisation and taking advantage of raised levels of technology and performance. These developments are clearly evident in the recordings made over three nights the following year at Porgy & Bess, the long-established Viennese jazz club, whose artistic director, Christopher Huber, helped bring the new project to fruition.

Rather than attempting a direct comparison of the updates against the originals, a better strategy would involve appreciating both on their own merits. The shock of the new is one thing, and nothing can dull the enduring impact of the group of soloists assembled in New York on those four days in 1968 or the settings provided for them. But their successors in 2013 – the altoist Wolfgang Puschnig, the pianist David Helbock, the guitarist Bjarne Roupé and the tenorist Harry Sokal – have voices of their own, with a verve and eloquence to match the memory of the past and the challenge of the present. Mantler, too, steps forward to take his place among the soloists, his playing confounding his statement in a recent interview that he sometimes goes several years without touching the instrument. The conductor’s baton is passed to Christoph Cech, directing his Nouvelle Cuisine Big Band and the radio.string.quartet.vienna. Eight years old in 1968, Cech leads the expanded ensemble through revised scores that reveal vastly increased levels of detail and dynamic variation in the hands of hugely accomplished musicians completely familiar with approaches and techniques once considered outlandish.

Even those most attached and loyal to the original recordings will find, as they listen to the new interpretations, that there is no sacrifice in substance or effect. Mantler’s music remains true to itself, cliché-free and assertive in its absolute independence from generic boundaries. This music, which never died, lives and breathes anew in both its temporal dimensions.