



NO ANSWER / SILENCE

WATT 2/5

Originally released on LP WATT/2 and WATT/5
re-released January 2000 (double CD)

COMMENTS

Two albums from Michael Mantler's back-catalogue, repackaged. "No Answer" and "Silence", early instances of Mantler's experiments with the setting of literary texts, from 1973 and 1976 respectively, are issued now as a double album.

"No Answer" was a bold step into new territory. Jack Bruce, bassist/vocalist from rock group Cream, had proven himself much more than a pop singer on the epic "Escalator Over The Hill", Carla Bley's "chronotransduction", produced by Mantler between 1968 and 1971. On "No Answer" Bruce was given Samuel Beckett's tense/intense texts from "How It Is" to sing, Beckett is celebrated by some commentators for his grim humour. This, however, was never his appeal for Mantler: "I don't care for what people see as the satirical side of Beckett. I don't like the way the plays are produced, for instance. I like to see Beckett's work on a page, printed almost graphically - as a series of events. True, 'Watt' itself is a very funny book, but I never considered putting it to music. I was always so much attracted by the dark side, that was always enough. Enough material for a long time, to stay with that."

Bruce's voice, multi-tracked, soars and dives through Beckett's blackest moods, tellingly set by Mantler. An extraordinary performance. There is also intense keyboard work from Carla Bley, without a trace of the whimsy cultivated in later years, and bubbling, speeding trumpet work from the late, great Don Cherry.

For "Silence", Michael Mantler turned to an author often regarded as an English counterpart to Beckett, dramatist Harold Pinter. The mood of alienation that distinguishes his playlet, set in its entirety by Mantler, is emphasized by the approach taken to recording. Mantler absented himself from the majority of the sessions, Carla Bley produced the album, and two of the main protagonists - singers Kevin Coyne and Robert Wyatt were never in the studio at the same time.

Although its stripped-down instrumentation might suggest otherwise, the album is built up in layers - the vocalists sang to tape rather than to each other. This was artistically and aesthetically appropriate since, as JAZZ. FORUM noted, "The work deal with loneliness and people's inability to communicate. The music has a static feeling, well-attuned to Harold Pinter's words, and even the piercing guitar sounds like a cry."

Long out of print, the re-emergence of "Silence" will be of interest not only to Mantler completists but also to the new audience that has discovered Robert Wyatt only via his critically-acclaimed album "Shleep". "Differences between Robert Wyatt and Jack Bruce are immense," Mantler notes of his longest-serving star vocalists. "Robert can't read a note of music but has an unusual voice, a very good ear and will work hard until he gets what is needed. Jack's a very talented musician with a great voice who hardly has to work at all. He'll sight-read the music and very often get it exactly with the first take. They're totally different, but I really appreciate what each has brought to the music."
