

Maria Schneider Orchestra

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by Cynthia Mullis

It's been a good time for big bands in Seattle recently: along with the Tula's stalwarts, Jim Knapp's Monday nights, and the Diva Jazz Orchestra (from NYC) in January, this two-night appearance of the Maria Schneider Orchestra at Jazz Alley continued the showcase of creative jazz orchestras either living in, or passing through Seattle. This stand at Jazz Alley was a serious and rare chance to see this group at work "on the road." The economics of supporting a group like this in its travels make the opportunity to see the group outside of New York quite rare, plus it is rumored that Schneider intends to do even less traveling with the orchestra. The band was on a brief West Coast tour with another stop in Los Angeles to premier a composition by Schneider. This was one of two nights in Seattle not to be missed and it was a spectacular musical event.

Jazz Alley was packed on both nights with an audience of Seattle musicians and a "who's who" list of local aficionados and jazz dignitaries. The back area at Jazz Alley was full of the working stars of NYC jazz milling around before the show: Frank Kimbrough, George Flynn (chatting on the phone), local favorites Jon Wikan and Ingrid Jensen, the sound of an impromptu Cajon and trumpet jam, Steve Wilson warming up on flute—and standing in the corner in the dark, a woman who looked she was either praying or crying. On second glance, I realized this woman was Maria Schneider getting centering and focusing in a pre-gig ritual. It was thrilling to be around this New York energy as if it were a show at The Village Vanguard or The Jazz Standard. But that was what was so special about the night: the chance to hear the top-tier professional musicians from New York playing the music of one of the most profound composers in jazz today.

The set started with Jim Wilke introducing the orchestra and Schneider by quoting a line that compared her music to "a wind sweeping across the plains." This was an apt comparison for a musical journey that started with "Hang Gliding," a composition about hang gliding in Rio de Janeiro. For me, this is the piece that defines what makes Maria Schneider's work so superlative. She captures the drama, exhilaration, and motion of hang gliding in a way that feels like watching a movie instead of listening to music. This piece featured Donny McCaslin on tenor saxophone who always sounds great but had an unfortunate fascination with a repetitive scale pattern on this solo. Also featured was the work-horse trumpet player Greg Gisbert.

For this performance Schneider delved into South American rhythms, especially the Tango, Choro, and Lando, and featured Peruvian Hugo Alcazar on Cajon (a South American "box" drum). "Concert in the Garden" featured Rich Perry's off-center bebop phrasing and quirky tenor sax lines over an Americanized Tango. "Buleria, Soleá y Rumba" again featured solos by Donny McCaslin and Greg Gisbert in addition to a Cajon showdown with Alcazar and Jon Wikan. The two percussionists were traveling with the orchestra to Los Angeles where the group was premiering another composition with South American influence.

One criticism often levied against Schneider's work is that it doesn't swing in a traditional sense. On her "Days of Wine and Roses" CD she proves that she can swing, although she tends to stay close to traditional Thad Jones/Gil Evans roots. What distinguishes her work is the way she has transformed the jazz big band into a clearly orchestral vehicle. While the main elements of jazz (improvisation and swing) are present in her music, it is her use of impressionism, emotion, dynamics and color that makes her one of the most influential jazz composers on the scene. On this set, Schneider's music demonstrated these elements, flavored by the South American influences and underscored by her association with Gil Evans.

Despite the Latin elements, her music is thoroughly American and influenced by her mid-western upbringing. The third tune of the Tuesday Jazz Alley show highlighted this aspect of Schneider's music. While introducing this composition, "The Pretty Road," Schneider (whose speaking voice sounds similar to Mary Louise Parker) gave an entertaining explanation of how the elements of the piece were influenced literally by her childhood growing up in Windham, Minnesota. The tune pulled together childhood memories, folk melodies, and the story of viewing "the bright lights" of her small home town from a ridge on the plains. Other pieces in the set that demonstrated her connection to Gil Evans' American impressionism included "Coming Home," which had workman-like solos by altoist Charles Pillow and trombonist Roc Ciccaraone, plus a beautiful extended solo on her ballad "Sky Blue" by lead alto Steve Wilson.

The line up of personnel for this tour included Rich Perry, Charles Pillow, Steve Wilson, Donny McCaslin and Scott Robinson (who was featured on baritone sax on the last tune of the night while balanced on crutches) on saxophones and an arsenal of woodwind doubles. The trombone section was Roc Ciccaraone, Keith O'Quinn, Larry Farrell and George Flynn. Trumpets were Ingrid Jensen (an integral trumpet voice in the band), John Owens, Greg Gisbert and Scott Hara. The rhythm section was Clarence Penn, drums, (who Schneider described as "grace, beauty and air"), classicist Frank Kimbrough, piano, Ben Monder, guitar, Jay Anderson, bass, and Jon Wikan and Hugo Alcazar on percussion.

The second most exciting thing about hearing Maria Schneider's music performed live is seeing and hearing the musicians who comprise the group in action. Each musician brings a particular voice to the group that blends into the color of the overall orchestra. The solos were all top-notch and the prolific woodwind doubling was impeccable and impressive. It was half-way through the set that I realized that the trumpet section was not engaging in the usual muscle-flexing: they added the tone colors of a brass ensemble, never veering into the realm of screeching that passes for high emotion in many bands. The group maintained an orchestral aesthetic throughout the entire set and the outstanding musicianship of the individuals coalesced into a dynamic and emotional organism. The Jazz Alley audience was mesmerized and paid attention without the usual jabbering that seems to accompany most concert performances these days.

Above all, the most wonderful aspect of the night was seeing Maria Schneider herself in action. The compositions and the musicianship can be thoroughly appreciated on recordings but seeing the interaction and direction of Schneider with her orchestra is what makes a live performance of the group a transcendent experience. Hopefully this will not have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Seattle audiences, but those fortunate enough to be at Jazz Alley for this show had a concert experience that they can hold in memory for a long time.