

Virgin Venture, one year on continued

exquisitely short cello/oboe/viola intro 'Picardie Four', followed by the aching ballad 'Une Fenêtre Où Se Pencher' again sung with total passion by Kate. How does one sum up such a work? Well to my mind the production by Fiachra Trench in places leaves a lot to be desired. Also the scale is far too big and so dense that only by scrutiny of the enclosed booklet and dedicated listening can one enjoy. Yet for the fan it's definitely a necessary purchase. For those interested in innovations in orchestral settings it's also mandatory. It's scope, execution, dedicated vision and sincerity cannot be denied either. It's sheer uniqueness and presence deserves more than a nod of approval.

Declan Colgan: "This is by far the most expensive and largest scale project I've taken on. It's a very important album for me and a very important album generally. It's something he's been building up to for years to an extent. All of his compositions tend to be large pieces of music which last two or three albums. The important thing about him is that the barriers just sort of fall by the wayside, there's nothing to compare it with, it just smashes preconceptions - it's not jazz, it's not classical, it's not what you could call 20th century music. I don't know what it is but if anything could be called new, this is it. It's going to be difficult for people to relate to it because terms of reference aren't all that many. Duke Ellington's influence is the strongest discernible in Mike's writing but he puts it in such a European context. I feel if Duke Ellington had been the consummate European he'd have sounded like Mike Westbrook."

Ellington's influence is also discernible on another large group recording, 'Country Cooking' (VE 17) by Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath. This is clearly evident in the over ten minute long 'Maxine' which features spacious solos by Steve Williamson (sax) and Harry Beckett (trumpet and flugelhorn). Sonorous and full of lyricism yet icy this has all the hallmarks of the Duke. Born of Scottish parents, McGregor grew up in South Africa listening to hymnals and tribal music in equal doses. While in Capetown music college he got heavily into Schoenberg, Bartok and Webern but at night hung out with the township groups. Formed the racially mixed 'Blue Notes' with such players as Dudu Pukwana and flew in the face of then widespread racism by touring Europe in the early '60s. Followed the 'free' expression of Don Cherry and Albert Ayler and was helped by fellow South African Dollar Brand in finding regular self financing gigs. Landing in the UK in 1965 Chris McGregor was hailed as a musical and humanitarian example of the new '60s spirit in the flesh. Two albums 'Brotherhood' and 'Live at Willisau' in 1970 brought the newly formed Brotherhood of Breath ensemble enormous respect and critical accolades. The music was a finely honed brew of African, free jazz and the larger group ideas of Count Basie and The Duke.

Unfortunately practical problems forced the unit to disband and McGregor retired to a quiet life in the French countryside. In the 1980s he was tempted out of retirement by the growing interest in African music and got together a new line-up of the Brotherhood. A tour of Mozambique in '84 brought him back to the front-line of vital, committed musicianship. 'Country Cooking' sounds like light relief after listening to the extremes of Mike Westbrook but on its own terms it has the master touch. With McGregor on piano and thirteen others, mostly horn players including Westbrook man Chris Biscoe (alto sax/clarinet) and rising trombonist Annie Whitehead, we get seven crafted compositions that don't suffer from the usual rough edges of big band music. Instead there is a warming smoothness full of African colour, gliding changes, fulsome orchestration and deft solos. Like master tailored suit, the music of Chris McGregor fits perfectly. Also it has one of the most beautifully designed sleeves an lp record can have.

Included in the same batch of releases as the Mike Westbrook and Chris McGregor albums were two exotic records by women vocalists Flora Purim and Mae McKenna. The former was born in Rio De Janeiro to a Rumanian father and Brazilian mother, both classical musicians. By six she could play piano, by twelve acoustic guitar and by 17 she was singing professionally with Aíro Moreira and Hermeto Pascoal. For a woman so acclaimed in the Americas it is fitting that VE 21 is Flora Purim's first bonafide British release. Titled 'The Midnight Sun' it is incredibly rich, both in terms of chosen compositions written by such people as Stanley Clarke, Lionel Hampton, Milton Nascimento, Jaco Pastorius and Egberto Gismonti; and in its range of stylisations

Music + Musicians (A Classical Music Mag)