“Maria Schneider’s Concert in the Garden”—Maria Schneider (2004)

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Essay by Fred Kaplan (guest post)*

Maria Schneider

Maria Schneider’s “Concert in the Garden” (2004) stands as a path-breaking album in so many ways: in American big band music, in jazz record distribution, and in Schneider’s career. She was 43 when she wrote and recorded its music; this was her fifth album leading the Jazz Orchestra, as she has called it. Before forming the band, in the early 1990s, she worked as an assistant, copyist, and arranger for Gil Evans and Bob Brookmeyer, and her early compositions reflected their influence, especially Evans’ lush harmonies. If the span of big band music can be divided into the vertical (like Evans’ stacked chords) and horizontal (say, Count Basie’s propulsive rhythms), Schneider clearly dwelled among the vertical. “CitG” was her first piece of music that straddled both approaches and in a style that was unmatched, in originality and immersivenss, since Ellington and Strayhorn. There is a muscularity to this music, yet also a floating spaciousness and a sizzling romance.

Since she was very young, Schneider had loved Ravel’s ballets and Fred Astaire musicals, and, in the years leading up to this album, she fell for Argentine tango and Brazilian choro. With “Concert in the Garden,” she managed to tap into all those influences, at least rhythmically (the harmonies remained distinctively hers), fusing them with jazz traditions, instrumentations, and idioms. She also brought in voices--an accordion, cajons, and a vocalist (Luciana Souza), the last just for texture, not to scat or sing lyrics--that she had never used before. (The accordion has remained a staple of her music since.) This is dance music, in a sense that absorbs all its generic roots (jazz, classical, Tin Pan Alley, Latin), while preserving the integrity of each.

Schneider has called this the first piece of music--and it is a single suite of five movements, each through-composed, distinct but merging into the next without interruption--that made her feel like a *musician*. It is certainly a remarkable display of her sophistication as a composer. One of the movements (“Choro: Dancado,” the first of the three middle tracks, titled “Three Romances”) modulates through every key, major and minor, except for Eb minor--and then the next track (the second part of the trilogy, “Pas de Deux”) is entirely in Eb minor. But there is nothing showy about it; the music shifts with no disruption to melody or rhythm or pace or swing. And this, more than any games with musical keys, is what makes Schneider’s music shine: the interplay

between the sections; her blending of harmony, dynamics, and melody; her knack for crafting rich inner voicings. The soloists, of course, improvise (this is also the first album in which her band members matured as soloists, especially saxophonists Rich Perry and Donny McCaslin), but they play on different parts of the music, with different harmonies, different moods; they don't just riff on the same themes and variations. This is not a "blowing" record, though the blowing is impeccable.

Nor, in these respects, did "Concert in the Garden" turn out to be a one-off. Schneider's next three albums--"Sky Blue," "Winter Morning Walks," and, especially, "The Thompson Fields"--built on its breakthroughs: the fusion of jazz, classical, Latin, and, increasingly, a new ingredient, Americana, rooted in her rural Minnesota upbringing: threads of Gershwin in "Sky"; of Copland and Bernstein in "Thompson." "Winter" was a collaboration with opera singer Dawn Upshaw (who was drawn to her by "Concert in the Garden"), set to the poetry of Ted Kooser, and arranged for some of her band members fronting the Australia and St. Paul Chamber Orchestras.

"Concert in the Garden" is also the first album that Schneider made for ArtistShare, a record label that gives its musicians total independence, letting them finance their projects however they desire--and letting them keep all the royalties (minus 15 percent to pay for overhead). It was the music industry's first instance of what came to be called "crowd-sourcing," and it was the first label to sell its wares entirely over the internet, on the label's and the artist's websites. (The wares, though, are CDs, not downloads. In the years since, as iTunes, Spotify, and YouTube dominated the music industry, Schneider has resolutely kept her music off those platforms and has lobbied against their abuse of artists' copyrights and fair share of income from their own creations.) All of her albums since "Concert" have been for ArtistShare, and, from the outset, she has devised novel techniques of financing them: for instance, selling extras (such as copies of her scores or video clips of rehearsals) and giving producer credits to anyone who donates a large sum of money for the recording sessions. Her albums' budgets are extraordinarily high, owing to extensive rehearsals, generous pay to the band members (more than half of whom have been with her since the start, or nearly so), and high production values. (Several of them, including "Concert," rank among the best-sounding big band albums; many audiophiles regard them as "reference recordings.")

Schneider continues to write new music for her Jazz Orchestra—as well as commissions for various other ensembles. She leads her band, and others, all over the world. In New York City, where she lives, she and the band play, to great fanfare, every Thanksgiving week at the Jazz Standard, as well as for a week in the spring at Birdland. All the sets are sold out weeks ahead of time.

Fred Kaplan is a columnist for "Slate," a Pulitzer Prize-winning former staff reporter for the "Boston Globe," and the author of six books, including "The Bomb" and "1959: The Year Everything Changed." A record reviewer for "Stereophile," he has also written about jazz for "The New Yorker," the "New York Times," "New York Magazine," the "Washington Post Magazine," "GQ," and others.