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Vienna Art Orchestra

The Five Spot

Since it was founded in 1977, the Vienna Art Orchestra has usually played music by its conductor, Mathias Rüegg. But for a rare United States engagement, four nights that ended on Sunday, the 19-member band offered jazz repertory: music associated with Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington. It was both a homage to American jazz and a European challenge, because the band wasn't shy about putting its own personality into the pieces.

The orchestra prizes virtuosic precision, with each part cleanly articulated and each ensemble precisely

balanced. The group also has a slightly prankish affection for the speed and noisy dissonance of 1960's free jazz; given a chance, soloists streak and sputter above the band's backdrops.

The program was called "Original Charts," but only to emphasize how much flexibility a jazz arrangement can encompass. The Mingus scores, transcribed Mr. Rüegg and Sy Johnson, a longtime Mingus associate, were "Hobo Ho," "The Shoes of the Fisherman's Wife," "The I of Hurricane Sue" and "Don't Be Afraid, the Clown's Afraid Too." The compositions, played as an unbroken suite, were brawny and volatile, shifting from blues riff to zigzagging be-bop to waltz to swinging polyphony. On Sunday night, the orchestra showed off its meticulousness and muscle, approximating all but the bass parts of Mingus's groups; it also filigreed the arrangements with hyperactive saxophone, trumpet and trombone that made the pieces sound as if they were overflowing.

The Ellingtonia — Ellington's own "Red Shoes," "Madness in Great Ones," "Asphalt Jungle" and "Come Sunday," along with Billy Strayhorn's whimsical transformation of "Anitra's Dance" and Cat Anderson's "Gato" — emphasized the composer's modernist, angular side and his brassy one. The orchestra took even more liberties, especially in "Madness in Great Ones," which featured a futuristic-toned electrified vibraphone. Just when it seemed as if the group was all muscle and no heart, Klaus Dickbauer on alto saxophone played a solo that traveled from bluesy tenderness to avant-garde overblowing and back, as if insisting on their emotional continuity.

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