

Each month we test a musician with a series of records which they're asked to comment on and "mark out of five" – with no prior knowledge of what it is they're hearing! This month: John Harle takes the test with Philip Watson.

A SELF-CONFESSED "musical magpie", saxophonist John Harle has always borrowed freely from a very eclectic range of sources. Yet he has also carved out a very singular niche as a soloist and composer, championing saxophone music in areas such as contemporary classical and chamber music where it has been traditionally neglected.

Classically trained at the Royal College of Music and the Paris Conservatoire, and now professor of saxophone at Guildhall, Harle is a 34-year-old alto and soprano player whose current repertoire takes in everything from Eric Satie to Gunther Schuller, Chick Corea and Philip Glass. Much of it has been specially written for him by the likes of Luciano Berio, Harrison Birtwistle and Richard Rodney Bennett. Harle also leads a jazz-rock group, The John Harle Band (the successor to his 80s Berliner Band devoted to the Brecht/Weill/Eisler repertoire), and he has worked on two film scores with Stanley Myers, *Prick Up Your Ears* and the forthcoming *Voyager* directed by Volker Schlöndorff.

Recently signed to EMI Classics, Harle has already recorded two albums for the label, set for release later this year. *Dukish*, a collection of Ellington compositions, was recorded with such players as Stan Tracey, Tony Coe and Pete King, and he has also produced an album of classical concerti by Debussy, Ibert, Glazunov and Villa-Lobos with Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. This month he can be heard touring south-west England with the Bournemouth Sinfonietta premiering three new saxophone concertos by Mike Westbrook, Michael Nyman and Gavin Bryars.

JOHNNY HODGES

"Prelude To A Kiss" from *Ellington Indigos* (CBS). Hodges (as) with Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.

Hodges with Ellington. This to me is one of the greatest, most human and alive sounds in



John Harle. Photo by Nick Sinclair

the history of music, never mind just the saxophone. It's great because the guy couldn't improvise fast, really, but he's instantly recognisable; you only have to listen to three notes with the Ellington band and he's ripped your stomach out. What I deeply admire in his work is the vocal quality. Everybody says that the saxophone sounds like the human voice, but bloody hell, there's nothing more like the human voice than Johnny Hodges. Five stars.

STEVE LACY

"Trinkle Tinkle" from *More Monk* (Soul Note). Lacy (ss).

Is it Evan (Parker)? Lol (Coxhill)? Oh, it's Wayne Shorter. No? Well, it's solo soprano, so is it Steve Lacy? I can't mark something by Steve Lacy; it's not right, the guy is such an original. I feel the same about Evan Parker, Christ, it's like a colossus placed in front of you. You may not like all of these guys'

output, but there's no point at which you can ever question their integrity. I admire Steve Lacy because he has always had his own vision. It isn't a vision that I share, because it's almost entirely atonal – I don't know where lots of these notes come from – but that doesn't mean that I don't relish sharing the same language. Marks: 4.9.

BRANFORD MARSALIS

"Prelude" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Ravel from *Romances For Saxophone* (CBS Masterworks). Marsalis (ss) with The English Chamber Orchestra directed by Andrew Litton.

Percy Grainger? Could be a French player, but it's not, it's English. Vaughan Williams? If it's any guide, I hate the sound of the soprano, it's crawling. Honegger?

It's Branford Marsalis.

Oh, I know this record. I think it sounded like a nice piece, which it would if it was



Ravel, but I don't like the sound because it's not smooth. I thought it was a French classical player because they always seem to use too much spit and sawdust in the sound. In classical music it very often doesn't suit to use that kind of grainier saxophone tone; what really suits is a bright, in tune, very clean, modern sound, and to me I didn't like that because it didn't suit the music. Jazz musicians can play classical. The Benny Goodman Mozart with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Woody Herman Prelude, Fugue and Riffs were completely appropriate for their time. This album was inappropriate because it put too many demands on the soloist.

Marks?

Zero.

OLIVER LAKE

"In A Sentimental Mood" from *World Saxophone Quartet Plays Duke Ellington* (None-such). Lake (as); Julius Hemphill (as); David Murray (ts); Hamiet Bluiett (bs).

Is it Bobby Watson on alto? No? The World Saxophone Quartet? But I don't know the soloist.

It's Oliver Lake.

I don't really like this. What I can't understand is why a tune like "In A Sentimental Mood" needs to sound like this, like an avant-garde exploration of the non-existent outer territories of the harmony. Why do we need to feel like we've been pulled through a hedge backwards? I remember talking to the Guildhall Saxophone Ensemble about the WSQ and many of them

thought they were so out of tune they were unlistenable. I think I agree, but still, I'll give it 3.33 recurring.

CHARLIE PARKER

"What Is This Thing Called Love" from *Charlie Parker With Strings* (Verve). Parker (as); Al Haig (p); Tommy Potter (b); Roy Haynes (d) plus strings.

Bird With Strings. Bird was the greatest improviser ever. The important thing about Bird is that as he improvises you can understand him immediately, it's completely natural. He may improvise with great complexity, but there's an immediate communication; however fast he's playing, you always know what's going on, it retains a sense that really holds an audience. And I'm just in love with this record; the inclusion of the harp and oboe is absurd, but I love it for that. I love the contrast between one of the greatest musicians that ever lived – he just flies over these sequences – and the grinding of the harmonic cogs of the orchestra. Five stars.

THE BERLIN SAXOPHONE QUARTET

"Saxophone Quartet Op 109" by Alexander Glazunov from *Saxophone Quartets* (Schwann). Detlef Bensman (ss); Rainer Ehrhard (as); Christof Griesse (ts); Friedemann Graef (bs).

I know this (*sings melody*). I've played it, but I can't remember what it's called. Is it the Schmidt Quartet?

It's the Berliner Saxophone Quartet playing Glazunov.

It's quite respectably played, especially

compared to the intonation on the other quartet record. I admire Glazunov because he gave the saxophone very, very pure classical lines to play. The differences between the Glazunov concerto and the Ibert or the Villa-Lobos is that the other pieces are more bravura, more to do with virtuoso technique. The Glazunov is about the ability to stand completely straightforwardly in front of an audience and play an absolutely pure classical line like a violin concerto. It makes you present a clear image of the saxophone as a classical instrument, and at that point it becomes more difficult. I'd like to separate the marks here: 3.33 for the performance, 2.99 for the composition.

DAVID SANBORN

"Priestess" from *Priestess* (Antilles). Sanborn (as) with the Gil Evans Big Band.

Sanborn. With Carla Bley? Some of it's more like Steve Swallow or Mike Gibbs. Gil Evans? Sanborn upsets me, but in a nice way. There are certain things about him that I completely fall in love with every time, like his timing for example, but he's like a favourite drug. Some people think Sanborn is a loud player, but close-up he can be very gentle – he's a surprisingly sensitive soloist. And Gil Evans, as I've said before, represents the highest form of what I'm trying to do. To see that band on *The Sound Of Miles Davis* programme – that's the period I really love, the *Porgy & Bess*, *Sketches Of Spain* period. So because you've picked slightly the wrong period of Gil Evans for me, I'll give it 4.99 again.