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Music Review: Joel Harrison String Choir - The Music of Paul Motian

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BLOGCRITICS.ORG

In music, as in most creative endeavors, there's a dynamic tension between the new and the familiar, the avant-garde and the comfortable. Even the free jazz that blossomed in the '60s and '70s relied on implicit instrumentation and patterns. This framework is needed to keep the listener grounded and give some context for what is to come.

Joel Harrison is a guitarist/composer/arranger who continually shifts the assumptions and framework underpinning his art. While he is described loosely as a jazz artist, his influences take in such diverse sources as Appalachian folk music, Charles Ives, the Beatles, and Hindustani classical music. He has made a career of arranging instruments in unconventional groupings and styles. As he states on a video on his website, joelharrison.com, "I think the new frontier for me are these mixed ensembles—groups of instruments that aren't used to playing with each other."

This approach is fully on display on *The Music of Paul Motian*. Motian is a jazz drummer who has played with many of the greats (Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Lennie Tristano, among many others). He is also an important composer, showcasing his compositions with his trio, which includes saxophonist Joe Lovano and guitarist Bill Frisell. Many of Motian's compositions don't swing, in the mainstream jazz sense; instead they have an ethereal, open, lyrical feel.

Harrison takes Motian's compositions and places them in the setting of a string quartet accompanied by two guitars. Besides Harrison, the personnel consists of Christian Howes and Sam Bardfeld on violin, Dana Leong on cello, Mat Meneris and Peter Ugrin splitting the cuts on viola, and Liberty Ellman on guitar.

The approach works quite well on the haunting Motian melody, "It Should Have Happened A Long Time Ago." It is introduced by interplay between the two guitars. The theme is then articulated by the cello, while the guitars and the other strings join in to provide a countermelody and rhythmic support. The strings then provide variations on that initial theme. The guitars take a brief solo, followed by a mixed plucked string/bowed string interlude. Finally the theme is restated, with one of the guitars and a violin taking the lead.

The only non-Motian song included on the CD, the Thelonious Monk standard "Mysterioso," gives a good indication of the possibilities and variations of this format. It begins with a plucked-string version of the theme, followed by different alternate expressions, including a bowed rendition, plucked-string

improvising, and a dual-guitar version, accompanied by varying degrees of dissonant soloing. All this while staying within the 12-bar blues framework.

How much does Harrison play with the rules? Well, how about taking a tune called “Drum Song,” which originally consisted of largely atonal interplay between piano or tenor with Motian’s drumwork, and presenting it in the string quartet plus two framework ... without drums?

Does this approach work? Because the settings and arrangements are so outside the norm of what we expect, the answer is going to depend upon the viewpoint of the listener. The first time I heard this CD, I was not terrifically impressed, but it has grown on me with each listening. At times, I found myself wondering why I connected to some selections and not others. Generally, the songs with a stronger theme, more explicit rhythmic and counter-melodic support (such as “It Should Have Happened,” and “Owl of Cranston”) are the more compelling cuts. They give a glimpse of the possibilities of these imaginative arrangements and settings. Those cuts that don’t have that strong underpinning (such as “Mode VI”) tend to meander and drift.

But that’s my impression now. This is the kind of album that I’m going to return to several times in the next few months, and I’m not sure my answer then is going to be the same as today. And that illustrates the value of this recording. Perhaps this is what Harrison intended—to challenge one’s assumptions about the nature of music and what we program ourselves to respond to.

In short, *The Music of Paul Motian* is an adventurous, complicated album that for many mainstream jazz listeners will not be appealing. Its non-traditional instrumental lineup, lack of the typical rhythm section, and forays into atonality will quickly turn off many. But for others, its willingness to bend musical boundaries and turn assumptions upside down will make a fascinating musical mix. If you fall into this latter category, *The Music of Paul Motian* is definitely worth the purchase.

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Featured Artist: Joel Harrison

CD Title: String Choir – The Music of Paul Motian

Year: 2011

Record Label: Sunnyside Records

Style: Other

Review:

Joel Harrison is an illustrious guitarist and composer in the jazz circles and not to mention a great bandleader and he has put his many talents on his latest compilation called *String Choir – The Music of Paul Motian* which was released on January 23. Recapturing the music of straight-ahead jazz musician Paul Motian is no easy feat especially when the interpretation is within another genre; in this case classical. But Joel has pulled it off on this fully-stringed compilation that offers music on another plateau.

As with everything else, chamber music such as what is encapsulated here is indeed an acquired taste. If you are not into classical music you would find yourself struggling musically to grasp the pure intelligence and musical heights of this recording. The CD's opener is the dreamy "It Should Have Happened a Long Time Ago" a track that gets its shine from a vulnerable sounding violin. Hear the quirky "Drum Music" a track that puts the drums and strings center stage in a piece that can well be labeled as musical art; it would work perfectly at a dance recital. Listen for the beguiling melodies on Beethoven's "Cathedral Song" and "Owl of Cranston", the latter with an arrangement that seem to mimic a bird in flight. Elsewhere on the CD are the futuristic-sounding moments that are within "Mumbo Jumbo" followed by "Split Decision" and the CD's closer "From Time to Time".



Reviewed by: [Asha Brodie](#)