

FUCHSTHONE ORCHESTRA LARGE ENSEMBLE WITH DOUBLE FEMALE LEAD

The album "Structures & Beauty" by the Fuchsthone Orchestra is a milestone in the field of orchestral jazz - with fluid transitions to classical, rock and avant-garde. However, it is also a statement on the Corona period, about society, climate change, art and philosophy - as well as possible new approaches towards the world.

Christina Fuchs and Caroline Thon have known each other for a long time and have occasionally played in the same ensembles. They are both saxophonists, composers and experienced orchestra leaders. Fuchs, who studied with Maria Schneider and George Russell in the USA, has led many of her own bands and was co-leader of the United Womens' Orchestra. Thon, who is also influenced by the music of Bartók and Hindemith and studied at Berklee College, is best known for her Thoneline Orchestra.

In 2017, Cologne-based musician Georg Ruby invited the two to create a joint concert program for his Blue Art Orchestra. It worked out so well that Fuchs and Thon (after careful consideration) decided to form a large ensemble together: the Fuchsthone Orchestra. In November 2019, their project had its debut in Cologne. A regular concert series also took shape.

And in the meantime, their first album, "Structures & Beauty", is available. It is a substantial, proud work - two CDs with a total of eight pieces with an average length of over 10 minutes. The Fuchsthone Orchestra performs with a five-piece woodwind section, four trumpets and four trombones, plus a violin, a singer, electronics and a four-piece rhythm section.

The interview with Christina Fuchs and Caroline Thon was conducted by Hans-Jürgen Schaal.

What are the advantages of a jointly conducted orchestra?

Thon: *Lots! Apart from splitting up the organizational areas, there are also great advantages in terms of content, for example initial feedback on new compositions - since the co-leader is always the first listener - or on the subject of conducting. And because we take turns not only at the concert, but also at rehearsals, the other one can recharge her batteries in the meantime.*

The Fuchsthone Orchestra made its first appearance in November 2019 - and then Corona came along. Did you feel held back by fate?

Thon: *The premiere concerts were a huge success. It was already clear that we were extremely lucky with the choice of musicians, since the atmosphere within the ensemble is very positive and supportive. This has continued to develop steadily. On the other hand, we first had to find our audience anew when the corona pandemic hit, which was extremely annoying.*

Fuchs: *The crucial point is how you deal with it. So we decided not to let it hold us back and continued to work in order to keep the band community alive and develop new perspectives. This attitude has got us through the pandemic quite well. Of course, it would have been better without COVID!*

A big band with two leaders is not entirely unfamiliar, but normally one leader stands in front of the band and the other leader takes part. Two female bandleaders who don't play in the band themselves, but who play the same instrument - is that something that actually connects them?

Fuchs: *Naturally, there was a debate at the very beginning about which functions we would take on in this orchestra: Composition, conducting, instrumentalist, orchestra management, organization, application, copyist and so on. We considered this carefully and decided together that "less is more". The decision not to be an instrumentalist was a difficult one for me personally, I am prepared to admit that.*

"Caroline is writing more linearly"

What are the most important differences in your individual styles as big band composers?

Fuchs: *This is very difficult to generalize. Maybe I can put it like this: I often compose from a rhythmic point of view, in other words a bit more vertical, while Caroline writes more linearly.*

Thon: *Arches and, above all, musical progressions are very important to me. For instance, I am fascinated by Béla Bartók's "central motif theory" - developing an entire composition from a single motif or using a vocal melody transposed as a bass line. What unites us, however, is the interplay between ensemble passages and freely interpreted solos, as well as the political and social themes that we address. This is something that is really close to both of our hearts.*

So what are the main differences in the way you conduct the orchestra?

Fuchs: *Probably the biggest difference is in communication. Caroline explains a lot, she communicates much more than I do. I focus on playing together because I'm convinced that the best way to get a feel for the composition is by playing, especially with the rhythm section and soloists. After all, a lot of things only emerge during rehearsals, and the musicians are definitely involved in the way the compositions are performed and interpreted.*

Thon: *Ha ha, that is exactly what I would say about Christina! It's important to me that the flow of playing isn't disturbed by too many formal obstacles the first time, which is why I prefer to go through the problem areas of a new composition verbally so that we can concentrate on the music. It is important to have answers when questions arise about a groove or even a "cue", i.e. which conducting sign I use to indicate the next formal part.*

Your music is not just big band jazz - there is a lot more to it: rock guitar, electronics, vocals, spoken word, literary and philosophical references... Do you consider the live performance to be a complete work of art?

Fuchs: *Big band wouldn't be the right term anyway, it's no coincidence that we use the word "orchestra" in our name. We definitely don't want to commit ourselves to genres, we prefer to break them up as we find appropriate at any given moment.*

Thon: *So where does big band jazz stop and contemporary music begin? I've never really been able to understand these questions about specific boundary lines, because for me they don't exist. It all intertwines! I personally like to play with the fact that with the Fuchsthone Orchestra you seem to see and sometimes hear a traditional big band line-up with a few additional soloists, but then again the ensemble sounds more like a new music ensemble or you have associations with electronic music or rock music.*

Why are lyrics important to you in your music?

Fuchs: *It is not my conviction that there always have to be lyrics, but they can be used in certain contexts as a means of providing a clear message. Lyrics can be incredibly poetic. But they should always convey the content of the composition or add a new aspect to it.*

Thon: *To me, the spoken word is both a carrier of content and a sound in itself. By this I mean that speech also has a rhythm and, in the form of timbres and formants, an acoustic mix with wind instruments or soloists.*

The album is about topics such as the lockdown, the climate crisis and social interaction. How would the album have turned out without the social developments of the last three years?

Fuchs: *We are always part of a social reality. The topics might have been different, yet they too would have reflected the reality.*

How do you organize this work?

Fuchs: *We concentrate on our work before the concerts. It wouldn't be possible to do much more. Since everyone in the orchestra is also working in other ensembles, it's realistic and difficult enough. Dates are usually planned a year in advance, around six to ten concerts a year and five to eight rehearsals. We also have a backup team of subs for everyone - with one exception: the electronics player Eva Pöpplein is very difficult to replace, her work is so specialized.*

The orchestra is renowned. In my opinion, the following stand out as "particularly experienced": Roger Hanschel, Matthias Bergmann, Jens Düppe, Matthias Muche... Are these also the "anchor people" within the band for you?

Fuchs: *The line-up is well thought out and not at all random. We have given a lot of thought to creating a balanced field of individual soloists and set players. With 22 people, there are of course a few important anchor positions. But actually I could list them all now, because each one is important.*

Hans-Jürgen Schaal