

Pauli Lyytinen Magnetia Orkesteri @ Brilliant Corners Festival, Belfast (IE) 6.3.2019

Finland is not short of noteworthy contemporary jazz/improvising bands but there's arguably none more exciting than the Pauli Lyytinen Magnetia Orkesteri, which was making its first appearance in Ireland. There was a late-change to the line-up, with bassist Eero Tikkanen replaced by Ulf Krokfors, who was the only member of the quartet following sheet music. Composed lines were clear only in the unison motifs of tenor saxophonist Lyytinen and trumpet Verner Pohjola, which served to bookend tunes, besides which much of the music felt improvised.

Krokfors's mazy momentum, Mika Kallio's lithe stickwork, and the free-spirited back-and-forth between Lyytinen on soprano saxophone and Pohjola announced the opener, "Village Fool." Pohjola's audacious opening solo was as boldly imaginative as it was technically brilliant, giving way to an arresting and soothing harmonic exchange with Lyytinen. Throughout the set the interplay between the two horns was never less than absorbing, blues-inflected for sure, but often exhilaratingly unrestrained.

Kallio's dancing drum intro announced "Triangulum," a rhythmically driving number that saw Verner push the trumpet to its limits with a breath-taking solo that left him visibly short of puff. Lyytinen's response on tenor saxophone was more economical but no less compelling as he forged a hypnotically unpredictable route. Krokfors briefly detoured away from the sheet music before the quartet returned to the head. High-flying improvisation was just one side of the coin, however, as a serpentine slower number demonstrated. From the deft harmonics of the intro the two horns criss-crossed in phrasing characterized by extended notes, their interplay teetering on the precipice between lullaby and freer excursion.

The melodic heads to nearly all the tunes could almost have come from the hard bop tradition, but the quartet's greater rhythmic elasticity and unrestrained, cliché-free improvisations made for a much more challenging proposition. The slow tempo of "Dreamer's Dance" invited meandering percussive soundings from trumpet and saxophone, with Kallio sculpting a mallets solo of poetic subtlety.

Fiery unison horns announced "Ljubliana," an atmospheric number of shifting tempi that featured Lyytinen on soprano in thrillingly exuberant form. For the encore, the quartet threw off any remaining shackles in a marvelously chaotic circus romp—and thinly veiled political barb—entitled "Mr. President."

The Pauli Lyytinen Magnetia Orkesteri's tremendously exciting performance epitomized all that is good about contemporary jazz. Hopefully it won't be too long before the quartet makes a return visit to these shores.

by Ian Patterson, All About Jazz 19.3.2019