

WIRE

Adventures in Modern Music

From *The Wire*, United Kingdom

Brian Morton is stunned by an eloquent musical argument for John Coltrane's free improvisation landmark *Ascension* as a composition.

ROVA :: ORKESTROVA

ELECTRIC ASCENSION

ATAVISTIC CD

BY BRIAN MORTON

What possible rationale for another remake of a Coltrane classic? The results answer that question triumphantly. This is a record we were never intended to hear, for the simple reason that ROVA have already released an interpretation of John Coltrane's *Ascension*. On that occasion, marking the 30th anniversary of the classic recording, Bruce Ackley, Steve Adams, Larry Ochs and Jon Raskin called in trumpeters Dave Douglas and Raphe Malik, the late Glenn Spearman as a fifth saxophonist, and bassists George Cremaschi and Lisle Ellis, a rhythm section completed by Chris Brown on piano and drummer Don Robinson. The last pair reappear here, but retasked as part of a rhythm and noise ensemble that also includes electric guitarist Nels Cline, Ikue Mori on drum machines and samples, turntablist Otomo Yoshihide and Fred Frith on electric bass. Brown has shaken off any remaining comparisons with McCoy Tyner by switching to electronics.

There's a difference perceived between scored composition ^ susceptible to nuanced change and shifts of emotional temper ^ and a minimally shaped free improvisation. But Larry Ochs,s liner note is devoted to the notion that *Ascension* is a great modern composition, an aural score that can be "absorbed, analysed, worked on, thought about, discussed, improved,,. Almost all of those processes had been at work in ROVA,s initial interpretation, recorded live and released by Black Saint in 1995. Spearman was so fired up with the project that he barrelled up to Ochs during the applause and shouted "Every year, man! This should be played annually around

Christmas like Beethoven's Fifth." Who wouldn't be for that?

However, as with *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane showed no strong urge to make *Ascension* a repertory piece, even if resources had stretched to it, and by the last couple of years of his life they surely would. The work's release history is inane muddled. Coltrane had originally approved the first, 40 minute take, issued as *Ascension* in late 1965. Then the saxophonist decided that the "wrong" master had been put out and the second take was substituted, leaving the first as a fragment of discographical apocrypha until GRP put them together on *The Major Works of John Coltrane*, a title evidently aimed at repositioning these pieces as canonical compositions rather than "free jazz" eruptions. But *Ascension's* nature as composition is still questionable, even given those two versions. There are oceans of possibility in its familiar five-note phrase ^ reminiscent of the fanfare/call to prayer on *A Love Supreme's* "Acknowledgement". But played in loose counterpoint by Coltrane's sprawling ensemble, it doesn't present quite the kind of structural imperative as Beethoven's V-for-victory motto. Still, the old improvisation v. composition simply defeats objective listening. The extraordinary reality is that this version, broadcast live in February 2003 by KFJC and bluntly recorded with no thought of CD release, is indeed absorbed and absorbing, the product of much thought and analysis and, dare I say it, "improved", not just compared to their own previous effort, but even to the iconic original.

For every Coltrane disciple who knows every note and inflection of *A Love Supreme*, or *Expression*, or even *Interstellar Space*, how many spend more than a token hour on high days with *Ascension*? It is a dour, sometimes ugly listen. Its greatness commands effort and a shift of aesthetic expectation. Compare *Ascension* with the other great ensemble work of the New Thing, Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz*, and certain differences emerge. Where Ornette's soloists emerge out of the melee and try to impose some kind of normative order, like Bolsheviks trying to bring a meeting to order, Coltrane's seem to be making internal commentaries on the progress of a music that is desperately (and in those original versions I'd say unsuccessfully) striving

for transcendence.

The passage of 40 years has allowed that transcendence almost to be taken for granted. Unlike the conservatives (Archie Shepp, Freddie Hubbard) in the original version, there is no one in the Orkestrova version who hasn't a long history in free improvisation and a long absorption in the structural logic of Coltrane's piece. Their contributions underscore Ochs's hope that "we'd be able to take Coltrane's beautiful piece and intuit implications for it that the original sound-explorers could not have realised at that time". The remaining members of the cast are the most obvious aural "improvement". Unlike Albert Ayler, Coltrane seems not to have heard the potential for string players in free jazz. The key to *Electric Ascension*'s success is the inclusion of violinists Jenny Scheinman and Carla Kihlstedt. They provide the complex harmonies, long glisses and sudden punctuations that Coltrane couldn't get from his horn(s). One misleading complaint about ROVA's original version is that Ochs doesn't sound like Coltrane; Spearman did, which simply complicated things. Here, after the head, Larry floats in over the ensemble and this time it clearly doesn't matter that he doesn't have the broad tone to go with Trane's iron lip. This is something new. That's confirmed when Cline and then Kihlstedt, Ikue Mori, Brown, Frith and Otomo Yoshihide join in. It's stunning, almost literally so. The bones of the musical argument are clearer when Ackley, Scheinmann, Frith and Robinson play a group Improv. Each member of ROVA takes the logic on a step, listening hard, thinking fast, playing with egoless abandon.

By the time the final head comes in, *Electric Ascension* has a deep structure that reshapes any notion of musical freedom,. The only thing like it I've heard in recent times is the magnificent *Above Our Heads The Sky Splits Open* by Steve Harris's ZAUM, a new guttural language that defines its own canon of beauty as it goes along. Coltrane's *Ascension* is a magnificent torso, an unfinished carving. Forget all those mimsy, respectful, reworkings of *A Love Supreme* that clogged the market and the festival programmes a year or two back. Set aside ROVA's first version of this as confidently as Coltrane tried to set aside the "wrong" take. This is *Ascension*'s long-awaited

apotheosis and a masterpiece of the truest kind.