

New York Presence

ERSKINE: When You are Old; GOLDENTHAL: Brass Quintet 2; MOONDOG: Instrumental Rounds 1+2 in Snaketime, Pastorale; SHARP: Arterial, DOUGLAS: Private Music; BROWN: December 1952, LOEB: Sephardic Quintet, CAGE. 5

Extension Ensemble Summit 389-63 minutes

The Extension Ensemble is an award-winning brass quintet based in New York City, and this is my first exposure to them. Much like Meridian Arts Ensemble, the group specializes in new music and makes it sound wonderful.

Everything on this album is about four or five minutes long. In Brian McWhorter's setting of Peter Erskine's 'When You are Old', originally written for the Hilliard Ensemble, the trumpeters play flugelhorns, and I have never heard a creamier brass quintet sound. It's the product of mellow timbres, superb intonation, and excellent balance. A case in point: if you don't listen carefully at 0:24, you won't realize that the unaccompanied melody is a perfect unison between horn player Theo Primis and one of those flugelhorn players.

If Erskine's piece is like a warm bath, then the opening of Elliot Goldenthal's Brass Quintet 2 is like sharp nails. While not completely abstract, the three-movement work is quite free, sometimes showing similarities to landmark modern quintets by Alvin Etler and Jan Bach, but sometimes sounding much wilder.

Louis Hardin (1916-99) gave himself the name Moondog in 1948 while becoming a famous street performer in New York City. Blinded in an accident at age 16, he lived his last decades in Germany. He is represented here by three miniatures. 'Instrumental Round 1 in Snaketime' (so named for its constantly shifting meter) is sinuous and subtly tinged by jazz, while the tinge isn't so subtle in 'Instrumental Round 2'.

Elliott Sharp's 'Arterial' is a contemporary study in hocket, the centuries-old device where a line or contrapuntal texture is formed by alternating, single-note entries by a variety of instruments or voices. Dave Douglas's two movement 'Private Music', commissioned by the Extension Ensemble, speaks a blues language but is often quite free-form. Earle Brown (b 1926) writes abstract, experimental stuff that gives the players much say in the final outcome. Thus the two readings of 'December 1952' bear little similarity.

David Loeb's three-movement 'Sephardic Quintet' is a very creative setting of Spanish Hebrew melodies, while John Cage's 'Five' (1988), originally scored for piano and string quartet, is essentially an electronic piece once it is recorded and manipulated by an engineer. The remarkable program ends with Moondog's gentle 'Pastorale'.

The members of Extension Ensemble are trumpeters Sycil Mathai and Brian McWhorter (no longer with the group), horn player Primis, trombonist Mike Boschen, and tuba player Andrew Bove.

KILPATRICK