

JAZZ

ELAN MEHLER displays his confident command of the keyboard; **MARIA SCHNEIDER** continues to hit new orchestral heights; plus the live takes that you won't have heard from UK jazz stalwart **CHRIS BARBER**

Instrumental insight

ROGER THOMAS *applauds Maria Schneider's big band disc*



MARIA SCHNEIDER ORCHESTRA

Sky Blue
artistShare AS 0065 63:07 mins
BBC Music Direct £14.99

Anything new from Maria Schneider is always welcome, but this recent release on the unique *artistShare* label (recordings are funded by subscription-like 'micropayments' from supporters) is almost more than we deserve. At a time when any band with more than ten players tends to

be passed off as a 'jazz orchestra', Schneider not only musters a 21-piece unit covering over 50 instruments but writes and arranges for this behemoth with an orchestral sense that borders on the astonishing, particularly in the case of the band's eight-piece brass section. The pieces themselves range from euphonious anthems and folksy ballads to a pleasantly wobbly tango, but in each case the arrangements' elegance belies the intense activity going on below the surface, with rich chord structures and insinuating melodies to the fore. Performed with commitment and sonically faultless, this CD is easily one of the year's best so far.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★



CHRIS BARBER

Can't Stop Now
 Chris Barber (trombone & vocals),
 Andrew Fairweather-Low (vocals),
 Chris Barber Band
Classic Studio T-5048X 66:26 mins
BBC Music Direct £11.99

It seems appropriate that this disc from UK jazz stalwart Chris Barber was remastered at Shepperton Studios, also a surviving name from pre-Beatles Britain. Trombonist Barber, now 77, who anticipated pop's impact on the jazz scene, has long steered a course embracing the blues elements of jazz. In this mix of unreleased live takes dating back to the '80s, Barber's trad jazz anthem 'Petite fleur' and trademark trombone-slide homages to New Orleans, share a billing with the bluesy vocals of Amen Corner's Andy Fairweather-Low.

A highlight is 'Big Noise from Winnetka', a riveting 10-minute bass marathon from Vic Pitt, with mandatory drumsticks on strings, which breaks into Cream's 'Sunshine of Your Love'. Although purists may prefer vintage Barber recordings, the performances here have a rawness that amply reflects Barber's enduring live success. *Neil McKim*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★



FLORATONE

Floratone
 Matt Chamberlain (drums),
 Bill Frisell (guitar), Tucker Martine,
 Lee Townsend (production)
Blue Note 393 8792 48:27 mins
BBC Music Direct £12.99

The practice of recording several hours of improvisation and leaving it to producers to mould into something saleable goes back to the partnership of Miles Davis

and Teo Macero, although only lately have producers claimed equal billing, as Tucker Martine and Lee Townsend do here. Although this method sacrifices the immediacy that has traditionally characterised jazz, it's unobjectionable if it produces impressive music. Bill Frisell, capable of creating beauty of unbearable radiance or shuddering your bones (often simultaneously) has held my attention during most stages of his odyssey through Americana and beyond, but this mostly seems to be on autopilot. The producers reduce elegant tunes to mush and the occasional glimpses of what Frisell is capable of, as in the glorious smokestack-lightning of 'Louisiana Lowboat', only serve to intensify the disappointment. *Barry Witherden*

PERFORMANCE ★★★
SOUND ★★★★★



ELAN MEHLER QUARTET

Scheme For Thought
 Elan Mehler (piano), Andrew Zimmerman (trumpet), Tod Hedrick (bass), David Moore (keyboards)
Brownswood BWOOD021CD-P 62:14 mins
BBC Music Direct £12.99

On his website, young US pianist Elan Mehler compares his 'compositional touch' to Bill Evans and Debussy. Confident speak, but then it helps to have self belief when you're playing in this rarefied area of modern jazz. His reflective jazz works because it is so assured. He chooses notes with care, weighting them tenderly.

There are no real tunes to hang on to in the programme, so instead you immerse yourself in a chilled pool of Mehler's controlled, rather detached abstraction. If it all feels meditatively different it is also because there are no drums. Instead, keyboards are used for colour illumination. Zimmerman's velvet tone on tenor sax plays a more conventional role, beautifully balanced against Mehler's still chording and Hedrick's bass.

Garry Booth
PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★