Eric Dolphy’s Playing Style in the Vienna Art Orchestra’s Performance

Alexandra Hettergott

Koflergasse 19/9, A–1120 Vienna, Austria

Abstract: Aiming on the very musical expression intended, “tone colorist” Eric Dolphy in his developed avantgarde-jazz playing style on alto sax and bass clarinet as well as on flute makes use of several extraordinary playing techniques (e.g., multiphonics). In musically portraying him (“Nine immortal evergreen for Eric Dolphy,” Amadeo 537 096-2], the today 20-year-old Vienna Art Orchestra in a postmodern way renders Dolphy’s compositions in its very performance style, adopts and adorns his melodies typically performed in a highly expressive, noise-inducing way with the own instruments’ rich means of expressions—allowing also for brass instruments. Consequently, the bass clarinet in “Hat and Beard” is given in solos of trumpet, trombone, and alto sax, the flute in “Gazzelloni” reflected in both trumpet and f-horn solos, or the alto sax in “Straight Up and Down” expressed in solos of either trumpet, trombone, and alto sax, respectively.

The paper compares several of Dolphy’s playing techniques in his original late recordings (1964) [“Out to Lunch,” Blue Note 0777 7 465242 1] with the recent performances by the Vienna Art Orchestra (1995), focusing on the wind instruments’ (unusual) sounds as part of the personal aesthetics of expression in both model Dolphy and the Vienna Art Orchestra.

Founded in 1977 by Swiss composer Mathias Rüegg and although not even really “Viennese” in its composition, the Vienna Art Orchestra (henceforth VAO) yet also very much provides Viennese sense of humor and Austrian musical elements, as waltz or laendler. And it is thanks to Rüegg’s wealth of ideas that the orchestra became quite famous in the last twenty years with the ingenious combination of composition and improvisation in mostly long suites giving rise for a postmodern mixture of different Jazz styles, in which it on a high level explores musical sources from Mozart to Mingus. In its “Nine Immortal Evergreens for Eric Dolphy” recorded in 1995, the VAO featured the famous and early exited windwood virtuoso and tone colorist. However, as “orchestra” indicates, this implies a more “big band”-like sound, the thematic treatment of several selected pieces by the late Dolphy tries to stay close as possible to the originals, yielding no mere adaptations but arrangements rather, up to free association. Where Dolphy did choose his favorite woodwind instruments to express his very personal ripe style and intention, the soloists of the VAO use the particular sound color and characteristics of their very instruments to individually feature him. This becomes especially manifest in comparing the original woodwind solo parts with the brass renditions by the VAO, for instance, the trombone in “Hat and Beard” (Dolphy: bass clarinet; Fig.1+4), the French horn in “Gazzelloni” (Dolphy: flute; Fig.2+5), and the trumpet in “Straight Up and Down” (Dolphy: alto sax; Fig.3+6). Even if, quite naturally, the VAO’s rendition changes late Dolphy’s original free tonal and frictional aesthetics of expression, his compositions are provided with an interesting new facet in that its soloists allow of a sound expression corresponding to their own instruments’ peculiarity, which, in effect, resembles a (often) more brassy, big band-like one. However consequently it is one single person who expressed himself, and however consequently he was looking for new, extraordinary, and often noise-inducing techniques in the need for more expression and an adapting to speech-like sounds, Dolphy’s performance so rich in emotions also sensibly met each of his instrument’s typical features: While giving the flute more clearer, sometimes almost through-looking, bird-like lightness, he favored a lively, breakneck expression bursting with energy on the versatile alto sax, whereas the improvisations on the bass clarinet, even in his highly developed playing style, kept the darker, more ponderous and pain-laden part. In their very individual way, meeting their own instruments’ typicality applies also to the VAO’s soloists: In the three pieces focused on, it is, too, the French horn’s straight, sonorous, velvety sound (“Gazzelloni”), the more flexible trumpet’s brilliance as well as mellowness (“Straight Up and Down”), and the trombone’s great range in sound production from blaring to stuttering (“Head and Beard”) that become manifest, including techniques typical of Jazz, like wah-wah or growl. While crossover tendencies and a postmodern, all-including mixture of styles are a sign of our time, it is important to see also Eric Dolphy’s fields of musical interests: His liking for Schoenberg’s free tonality, his being intrigued by Indian ragas and the singing of the Pygmies, his being inspired by bird songs (not being discussed here, the last two influences on his flute performance can be observed, for instance, in his “You don’t know what love is” of his Last Date of 1964 [EmArCy 510 124-2]). His apparent genuine inclination for multiphonic, even dissonant sounds led him to his mature playing techniques, polished and perfected in order to sound out the possibilities of sound production on the respective instrument up to its outermost boundaries—to increase expression, to adapt to speech or to sounds of nature. That the presence of noisy sound components does increase a sound’s expressiveness, can frequently be observed in Jazz, not only in the often smoky or creaky singing voices, but also in an instrument’s adaptation to speech in sound and playing style, which does not consist of pure, steady melody, but of intermediate tones and inflected syllables, and, to a great amount, of noises.
The uppermost row on the left hand (Fig.1) shows an FFT spectrum (displayed 1 frame = 1024 samples at 44.1 kHz sampling rate) interspersed with noisy and heterodyne components, an excerpt from Dolphy's bass clarinet performance in "Head and Beard," yielding a very rough and scratching sound; the corresponding right hand example taken for comparison from the trombone's part (Wolfgang Muthspiel) of the VAO's rendition of the same piece, is from a series of muffled honking sounds shortly cut off, characteristically damped in the higher spectral components (Fig.4). The center row compares FFT spectra from the flute's (Dolphy, left) and the French horn's (Claudio Pontiggia, right) "Gazzelloni" solos; whilst the flute's breathily whistling sound is apparent in a very disfigured spectral structure (Fig.2), in the flatly hooting French horn, by contrast, the original harmonic pattern can quite clearly be observed (Fig.5). The left spectrum of the bottom row distinctly shows harmonic (f0=1027Hz/C6) and multiphonic spectral components (Δf=320Hz) of a screeching and noisy alto sax sound of Dolphy's "Straight Up and Down" (Fig.3), whereas the right one (Fig.6) stems from a mute-induced wah-wah sound in the trumpet's (Bumi Fian) solo of the same piece. — Contrasting and common features in both particular instrument sound and individual playing style, intentionally each time comparing one of Dolphy's woodwind with a brass instrument of the VAO's soloists' individual rendition in corresponding (yet sufficiently free) solos of the same piece of music.