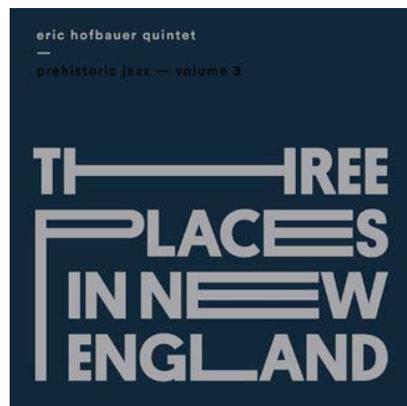


JAZZ & BLUES



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Eric Hofbauer Quintet
Prehistoric Jazz—Volume 3:
Three Places in New England
 Creative Nation Music, CD

The first two volumes in Boston guitarist Eric Hofbauer's Prehistoric Jazz series, *Rite of Spring* and *Quintet for the End of Time*, are bold reimaginings of Stravinsky and Messiaen for a five-piece ensemble that walks a fine line between jazz and 20th-century classical music. The melodies get jazzed up a bit, opened out with focused improvisation, or ingeniously orchestrated, for trumpet, clarinet, cello, guitar and drums. All risky business the group pulls off with aplomb.

So it goes with Hofbauer's take on Charles Ives' orchestral suite that took form over the 20th century's first three decades—music inspired by communal and personal memories of three specific sites. Ives' American tunes are steeped in the ragtime, marches, pop songs, and theater music that also helped shape early jazz.

He quotes tunes in passing and paraphrases them at length, and muddies up the harmonies—the kinds of things jazz cats do all the time. But only recently have jazz arrangers begun to delve into his repertoire, and with mixed results. Ives' ever-mutable mix of deep feeling and brainy playfulness, and his music's broad allusive range, can be hard to bring off.

Hofbauer's crew is akin to one of those tiny theater troupes that act out all the characters in a long novel: The players remain adept at plenty of quick role changes. The leader, on acoustic, shifts among myriad functions, picking or strumming chords or bass figures, or joining in the counterpoint, without losing his rhythmic bearings when changing hats. But the whole band

excels at the feat. At certain moments, cellist Junko Fujiwara inhabits the part of a country fiddler or walking bassist. She has a few occasions to do the latter. Hofbauer likes the release that comes when somber melodic material gives way to exuberant swingtime, and drummer Curt Newton amps up the beat. (Minor criticism: Sometimes we wait for the latter to happen a little too long.) Trumpeter Jerry Sabatini and clarinetist/bass clarinetist Todd Brunel frequently trade phrases or overlap in chattering dialog, or take pocket solos.

Ives' places dot the local map: The monument to a black Civil War regiment in Boston Common; the Connecticut site of a military camp one Revolutionary War winter; a river in Western Massachusetts along

which Ives and his beloved new bride walked in the mist one Sunday morning, hearing music from a distant church. That last movement serves as an occasion for quiet, layered playing, the leader's gentle guitar ostinato portraying the rippling river. And then, just as Ives wrote it, that quiet builds to a mighty crescendo, as if the composer's heart had been bursting with feeling at the moment this music recreates.

Those New England places triggered Ives' love of patriotic tunes and hymns for their associative qualities. Ives quotes "The Battle Cry of Freedom" in the first movement, and Hofbauer's quintet takes up that tune for a loose collective improvisation toward the close. "Putnam's Camp" recycles a couple of Ives marches designed to mimic an amateur band's excesses and hesitations, and really gets the quintet jumping. (The ensemble had a high mark for which to shoot: ICP Orchestra's rowdy "Close Encounter with Charles's Country Band" covers the same material.) There's also a funereal section, with bugle-call echoes, and then—in a crazy move that makes perfect sense—Hofbauer interpolates Albert Ayler's 1964 free-jazz spiritual "Ghosts," the sort of catchy, referential tune Ives often injected into a composition.

The turn stands as one of the many ways Hofbauer's quintet devises living music of a suite completed in 1929. His Prehistoric Jazz series is less about jazzing the classics than situating the last century's classical music and classic jazz in the same modernist continuum.

—Kevin Whitehead