

Michael Dessen

Lineal

Michael Dessen, composer, trombone

Tracks 1, 4, 5: Jorge Roeder, bass; Bob Weiner, percussion

Track 5: Terry Jenoure, violin

Tracks 2, 3, 7: Vijay Iyer, piano; Mark Dresser, bass (also track 6); Susie Ibarra, percussion (also track 8)

Circumvention Music 048

Michael Dessen is a thinking trombonist's thinking trombonist. He has entrained with his heart and mind that ancient horn to speak more of its own than we knew we'd won. He's grounded it and himself in the fellowship of likeminded spirits, both present and elsewhere, and that in his own new musical lines drawn from and on an old and hallowed lineage. This CD's grains and sheaves of sound suggest some fertile community garden in a Brooklyn plot, cultivated most meticulously.

Indulge the wax poetic; Dessen's one-line titles draw it in and out of me, intentionally, with their fine precision and heft. "What space can hide the liberty of a line" is the all-important tone-setting first of a double quatrain of tracks that, listed on the back cover, read (not intentionally) like a poem that scans. Here flies the ear-relevant bone, calm and supple even when thrown high and meaty; hear it sing off a groove you might call funky... though (Peruvian) bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Bob Weiner unpack so deftly funk's chunkplex groove into some higher flight of funk. This personnel winds up the quatrain it began, on "not minutes, but breaths," a four-three-triplet kind of sevenly groove the horn gets to ride on and grace.

Poetically just, they trio up with the composer-poet to launch his second quatrain, "the eye is the first circle," joined by violinist Terry Jenoure. All circles start as lines, and this one has curved and cycled through the first four tracks seeming relatively straight, only to spire all out of and into control (the lines of a spider web, so violin-evocable) from here to the end. A maze meant to mean might best describe the meeting of the big fat bone and the little scratched-out strings. They lope and lumber through Dessen's written lines, and jump and dance through both tied-up and loosened knots of their gestural cosign-offs on same.

The titles of all tracks stem from contemporary poetry and painting, etymological intrigue, musical tribute and function. The players on the other five comprise a rich array for a single-line instrumentalist who, as Dessen seems to, wants to combine voices to shadow and play off each other in points and counterpoints more than to be overshadowed by some group sound or compositional statement sucking its parts into some whole greater than their sum.

Vijay Iyer plays his part now like a single-line more than a chordal player, now like a gentle (left-) hand drummer of the keyboard (“levity in detail”); now like a piano balladeer (“lineall”), now like a post-tonal composer working something out (“flecha”): seldom with the more overtly groove-based music of much of his own oeuvre, reminding us of his range. His fleet sensitivity brings out in Dessen lip slurs, growls, flutter-tongues that span from butterfly whispers to bats and raptors in flocks.

Mark Dresser’s perfect foil lies in the way he can turn on a dime from generic bass beauty to bowing-and-plucking-that-clatters-and-buzzes, sometimes breaks into the vocal, always tangs up all others, like some satisfyingly abrasive salt-and-spice rub applied to steak before broiling. He and Susie Ibarra play on the most tracks; she complements his coarsings with her own unique ways of making cymbals and other metal sing, brushes speak new words to the timbres of others, taut skins kiss a line unfurling.

All metered lines, both poetic and musical, turn to circles when, as here, they turn into form, via recursion. Along those lines, one of Dessen’s general musical strategies is a kind of composting-up of the composed and the improvised; the written statements here are mulched in with and through the spontaneous ones, and vice versa, to fine effect. You can always tell them apart, but your ears relish their mix as gardener’s hands do the feel of her soil.

Another rich mix to revel in is the community. This is Dessen’s recording debut as a leader. He’s defined the nature of that not only by teaming up with equals but also with his inclusion of acknowledgments of his mentors and models in the liner notes. As in a debutant’s balls, these show the elders of the community in which he is “coming out”—his (and Lineal’s) lineage (think AACM and similar groups and their people, the best of player-academics, and New York from Downtown through Columbia to Harlem). Dessen and some of his bandmates are new acquaintances to many in the creative-music scene, but also instantly (familially) familiar.

They dazzle me here like some new hybrid blooms of some favored perennials in my own hothouse and open fields.