

Ryan Meagher
Tango In The City Of Roses

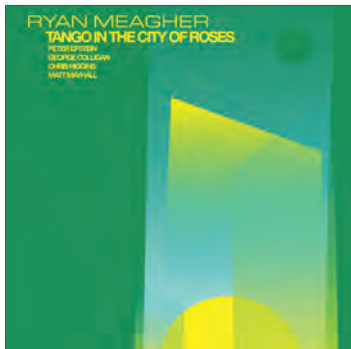
PJCE RECORDS 010

★★★★½

The Ocular Concern
Sister Cities

PJCE RECORDS 011

★★★★★



The beautiful city of Portland, Ore., promotes tourism with the slogan, “Portland is happening now.”

And that’s certainly true of the city’s fertile jazz scene. Now, the young Portland Jazz Composers’ Ensemble (PJCE) label is spreading the good word on emerging progressive voices from the City Of Roses. Each of the label’s monthly album releases is recorded live in a single session. The label originally evolved from a workshop collaborative of the same name, which networked composers and musicians for the development of new forward-looking works.

An outstanding example of the label’s pioneering platform is the captivating *Sister Cities* by The Ocular Concern. Featuring guitarist Dan Duval, pianist Andrew Oliver, drummer Stephen Pancerev, clarinetist Lee Elderton and vibraphonist Nathan Beck, the category-defying chamber quintet constructs and deconstructs intriguing pyramids of texture, counterpoint and harmony. It’s a worlds-within-worlds canvas. If M.C. Escher had led a band, *this* would be the sound of it. The group weaves in jazz, neo-classical, African dance, tango, pop, twang, blasts of crunch-rock and subtle odd-metered funk. Minimalism is a strong influence in the music’s pointed rhythmic layers, but the band delivers it all with a fluidity and warmth that minimalism often lacks.

The centerpiece is the entrancing four-movement suite “Sister Cities,” augmented by string trio and bandoneon. Composers Duval and Oliver heartily savor the offbeat instrumentation, orchestrating a cinematic spree. Although exacting and sometimes brainy, the Ocular Concern’s music ultimately charms with a melodic and almost innocent sense of wonder.

A more recent transplant to the city via New York is guitarist-composer Ryan Meagher. His third disc, *Tango In The City Of Roses*, was recorded live at Ivories Jazz Lounge and the date’s on-the-spot, heartfelt energy is robust. While Meagher refers to his previous albums as “modern jazz for the indie rocker,” this outing is decidedly rooted in jazz. It’s fitting that the one composition not penned by Meagher, “Hard Times,” is a Stephen Foster tune. There’s a strong element of folksong in Meagher’s compositions, expressed by his singing melodies and commitment to the gravity and beauty of a balanced lyrical arc. The band makes sure that solo improvisations and shifting alternate harmonies enrich and transport the songs, rather than subvert them. For the country-like sway of the Foster number, Meagher switches over to his Telecaster baritone guitar for a thicker accompaniment sound and then wraps up a sweetly swinging solo in the Duane Eddy territory.

Pianist George Colligan, who made waves last year with his disc *The Endless Mysteries* (Origin), is an electrifying counter-balance to the guitarist with his rapid-fire runs and stabbing, rhythmically intense McCoy Tyneresque left hand. Saxophonist Peter Epstein is exquisite throughout and gets raw when the moment’s right. The ballad “Greenwood” was composed with the reedist specifically in mind: The haunting melody is a poignant wonder due to his mastery of the alto’s upper register. Bassist Chris Higgins is solid in tandem with drummer Matt Mayhall’s probing, interactive pulse. Whether Meagher chooses to draw from indie rock or folk, his music is undeniably modern—because it holds no preconceptions. —Jeff Potter

Tango In The City Of Roses: Walther’s Pond; Hard Times; Empty Spirits; Greenwood; Tango In The City Of Roses; Elle’s Lullaby; College Town Blues. (63:26)

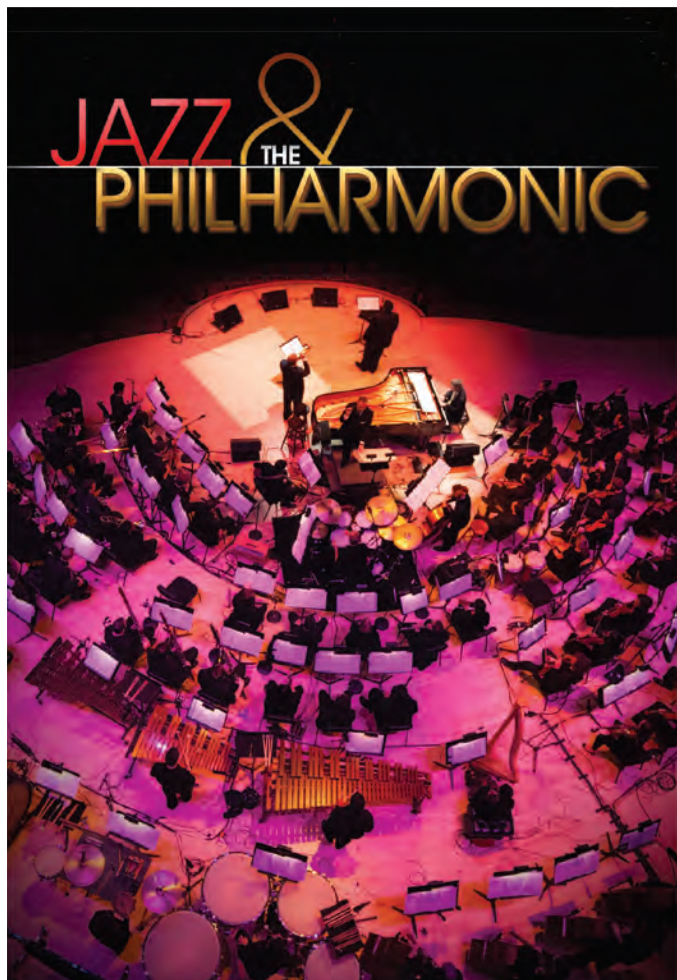
Personnel: Ryan Meagher, guitar, baritone guitar; Peter Epstein, soprano, alto saxophones; George Colligan, piano; Chris Higgins, bass; Matt Mayhall, drums.

Ordering info: pjcerrecords.org

Sister Cities: Oxygen Lake; Sister Cities Suite: Sister Cities; Portland In Reverse; Ghost Town City Council; The Island Milonga; The Ocular Concern; Lafayette; The Eclectic Piano; William S. Burroughs/Let’s Go! (50:42)

Personnel: Dan Duval, electric guitar, toy piano; Andrew Oliver, electric piano, percussion; Stephen Pancerev, drums; Lee Elderton, clarinet; Nathan Beck, vibraphone, mbira (4, 8); Erin Furbee, violin (2–5); Brian Quincey, viola (2–5); Justin Kagan, cello (2–5); Alex Krebs, bandoneon (2–5).

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