



Heiner Stadler

Brains on Fire

(Labor)

Besides sporting one of the truly great album titles, Heiner Stadler's *Brains on Fire*, originally released in 1973, sounds remarkably new. Reissued on CD for the first time,

along with previously unissued material, the music could have been recorded this year.

Stadler, a more-than-competent pianist, was primarily a composer who fixated on ways to blend composition and improvisa-



tion seamlessly. The performances on this two-disc set reflect the personalities of both the composer and a large, revolving cast of players. For example, it's often impossible to distinguish between written and improvised melodies in the sextet pieces "No Exercise" and "The Fugue No. 2."

"Love in the Middle of the Air," an astonishing duet for vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater and bassist Reggie Workman, vacillates naturally between composed and improvised passages. Abstract yet lyrical, structured yet remarkably free-flowing, Stadler's pieces take many of the players in directions they never pursued elsewhere. Trumpeter Jimmy Owens seems especially inspired by the challenging music on the sextet tracks. And Tyrone Washington, who achieved fame as a fusion saxophonist, plays with unsuspected fire and intricacy.

A European big band performs a previously unreleased arrangement of Russ Freeman's "Bea's Flat," and features vivid solos from trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, trumpeter Manfred Schoof and saxophonist Gerd Dudek. When the album was originally issued, the jazz world wasn't ready for what was then a novel concept — the music of one composer, and an unknown one at that, played by several different ensembles. Even with the presence of heavy hitters like Joe Chambers and Workman, it was likely a tough sell. However, judging by the recent critical acclaim for *Brains on Fire*, and the 2011 reissue of Stadler's *A Tribute to Monk and Bird*, the jazz world may be ready now. —Ed Hazell