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## Miroslav Vitous

### Live in Vienna [DVD]

(MVD)

US release date: 15 May 2007

by **Jennifer Kelly**

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Go to an orchestra performance and you'll hardly even catch a glimpse of the string bass, shoved to the back among the timpanis and tubas, ceding precedent to rows of higher-pitched instruments, violins, flutes, trumpets and clarinets. Even in a jazz club, where fewer bodies intervene, it's easy to lose touch with the acoustic bass, whose subtle tones are more felt than heard in amongst the clatter of drums, the sudden flights of solo.

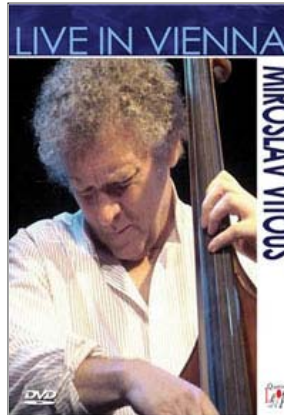
So to see string bass master Miroslav Vitous hunkered alone alongside his gleaming instrument, leaning into its curving neck, fingers of both hands fluttering over its strings with not a whisper of accompaniment . . . that seems unusual. This 2005 video shows the longtime sideman, jazz academic and Weather Report founder taking the stage alone and evoking a whole orchestra's worth of sound out of double bass and occasional laptop. He is extraordinarily skillful.

Vitous has spent most of a lifetime playing the bass. Born in Soviet-controlled Prague, he started on violin at nine-years-old, moved to piano at 10, but found his true calling one weekend visiting an uncle. A string bass leaned against one wall. Vitous asked if he could give it a try. The uncle said sure. Vitous began fooling around. At the end of the visit, the uncle said "Take it with you."

An unusual career began that weekend, and Vitous eventually won a scholarship to Berklee School of Music. He stayed there only one year, however, soon ditching the academic music world for the more informal one brewing in clubs in New York City. He played with everyone worth one knowing during that era: Stan Getz, Herbie Mann, Miles Davis, Chick Corea. In '70, he Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul formed Return to Forever, the jazz trio that pioneered the concept of fusion. Yet, by 1974, he was out, his playing not fitting with the band's new funk direction. Vitous formed his own band, then played with another series of jazz greats, before settling on the classical / jazz solo work that this DVD documents.

The first 10 minutes of the concert are pure improvisation; just Vitous and his double bass. The camera angles focus on Vitous' face, so you see mostly his left, fretting hand, fluttering effortlessly up and down the strings. You can infer an equally rapid plucking hand in the bursts and runs of notes, yet you often can't see it. That's a shame, because when the camera pulls back, allowing a full view of Vitous' body, the two hands work in fascinating counterpoint, dancing toward and away from each other in rapid succession, the plucking fingers cupped over the strings occasionally, to shape and draw out the sounds, is wonderful to watch.

In the midst of this composition, Vitous leans over and switches on a laptop, eliciting a bit of orchestral violin music. He picks up the melody, echoing its lush tones with rapid, staccato plucking, underlining key notes, commenting, conversing with the sample. And then the electronic sound



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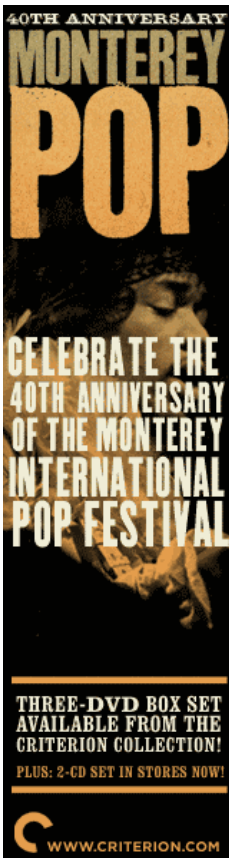
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fades away and it is just Vitous, playing a rhythmic underpinning on the low strings, answering it with the higher ones, drumming on the wooden case of the string bass with his fingers. It is a phenomenally layered and complex sound...all coming from one person.

There's something very jazz-centric about the melodies and rhythms Vitous coaxes out of his bass, but he clearly draws as much inspiration and influence from the classical repertoire. The two next cuts are called "Beethoven" and "Variations on Dvorak's Cello Concerto in B Minor", and they incorporate more orchestral sound samples. It is not that Vitous is "playing" these pieces; he emphatically is not. What he seems to be doing is reacting to them, using them as a starting point for musical meditations. His phrases weave in and out of the main themes, sometimes echoing them, sometimes in counterpoint. And all through them, there is a sense of jazz-like inquiry and rumination, rather than the structured melodies and harmonies of written music.

Vitous says, during an interview included on the DVD, that he feels that he's poised midway between jazz and classical music. Moreover, he makes a controversial statement about the future of jazz. "In my opinion, jazz is finished as far as development is concerned," he says. "It cannot go any further. It has happened. There are many different branches that came off it, but there is no place else to go." He adds, "The only possible way I think is that the jazz will combine with the classical form. These two will come together....Somehow I am trying to bring back the creative force into the classical music and bring more form into the creative music." He contrasts a jazz master like Miles Davis, who was continually improvising, with a classical giant like Rostropovich, who can only interpret what's written on the page. His view is that even orchestral music must grow more improvisatory to continue to develop, but that this will require a vast infrastructure of teaching, training and music writing and arranging.

Vitous himself seems to bridge this gap, interacting with the classical repertoire, while leaving room for free flights of thought and improvisatory melody. Leaning into the bass, eyes closed, enrapt in the flurries of notes that he makes, he's neither a jazz bassist nor a classical one, but something else altogether.

The concert drags a little toward the end. Although he gets a wide range of sound out of it, it is still only one instrument with a well-defined array of possible notes. Yet it's well worth watching, especially if you're interested in the bass, but even if you're not. Very seldom do you get to see one person carry an audience as Vitous does, "composing", as he puts it, "in real time on the stage."

Peter Erskine - Jan Garbarek - Miroslav Vitous

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

— 29 June 2007

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