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New Recordings

Redd Volkaert

Reddhead
(Telehog ***)

He has been a member of Merle Haggard's Strangers, so you know Redd Volkaert has to be quite a musician. On *Reddhead* this master of the Telecaster again shows his virtuosity and range.

Instrumentals such as "Raisin' the Dickens" and "Send It Back" show Volkaert's fluid approach to hillbilly jazz, while "Call the Pound" and "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line" show this twang-banger can rock as well as swing. If his singing is not up there with his guitar-playing, the unassuming Volkaert still gets the most out of his froggy baritone, enhancing the emotional truth of such perfectly realized originals as the anti-cheating "I Know How I'd Feel" and the cutting "Just Because I Don't Care" ("doesn't mean I don't understand").

- N.C.

Jazz

The Microscopic Septet

Lobster Leaps In
(Cuneiform ***)

The Microscopic Septet is back. The group disbanded in 1992 after more than a decade of solid work, and last year released all its LPs from the 1980s. Its new CD is a lot like the old records, only more so.

Led by soprano saxophonist Phillip Johnston and pianist Joel Forrester, the septet finds the normal in the idiosyncratic. Or maybe it's vice versa.

The work is swinging, infectious, and full of wit.

A lot of jazz is very weighty these days and CREATIVE, but the septet takes turns tweaking the music's self-importance. "Disconcerto for Donnie," which features some modest band crooning, is said to document a disastrous Caribbean vacation by alto saxophonist Don Davis, while "The Big Squeeze" could be a wacky film noir soundtrack.

The amount of caffeinated interplay can be overwhelming. But it won't put you to sleep.

- Karl Stark

Amina Figarova

Above the Clouds
(Munich Records ***)

Pianist Amina Figarova is a native of Azerbaijan, the former Soviet republic set between Russia and Iran along the Caspian Sea. She trained at the Baku Conservatory there and at the Berklee College of Music in Boston before settling in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, with her husband, flutist Bart Platteau.

Her publicist describes these cuts as refreshing the post-bop idiom of the Blue Note label, among others, and that's partly true. "Sharp Corners," a swift blues, has some post-bop feel, as does "Blue Wonder."

But the set is broader than that. Figarova's "Above the Clouds" was inspired by composer Maria Schneider's *Sky Blue*, and it's pretty expansive.

"Nico's Dream" poses an elegant opportunity for trumpeter Nico Schepers, while "River of Mountains," Henry Hudson's original name for the Hudson, creates a mystical beauty.

Some of this music sounds placeless, which is understandable given Figarova's wide influences. Figarova is a strong technical player who finds some winsome things to say.

- K.S.

Classical

David Lang

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conducting
(Naxos ***)

Corey Dargel Other People's Love Songs

(New Amsterdam ***1/2)

Were the great 19th-century songwriters (Schubert and Schumann) alive and working today, would they compose for operatic voices? Maybe not. Might they echo current rhythms, forms and urban sounds? Rather likely. Such is the best way to hear these two invigorating, innovative but immediately approachable discs by current composers.

The title cut on David Lang's *Pierced* disc is a concerto that sounds like an urban funeral train surrounded by car accidents. Lou Reed's unflinching lyrics about a drug overdose in the Velvet Underground song "Heroin" are reset in a deeply insinuating, slowed-down melody sung with detached, uninflected purity by Theo Bleckmann, with only a Bach-like cello accompaniment. Other works have this eerie spareness, but more often Lang is full of stark musical juxtapositions and pop-music punchiness. All are absorbingly well performed.

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