



WORK SMOOTHLY

NILS WOGRAM & NDR BIGBAND

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Nils Wogram - Work Smoothly

Nils Wogram may be a lot of things, but he is certainly not this: uninspired. As intensely as he may devote himself to each of his numerous projects, he's always finding new markers on the horizon of his imagination. Those who know the trombonist know that he never chooses the path of least resistance. Indeed, he often chooses the route least expected of him. And yet the choice turns out to be consistent, especially because he prepares himself so well for each of these trips that they become a very pleasant challenge for all passengers.

This gifted leader of small ensembles has actually recorded his new album *Work Smoothly* with a large jazz orchestra. And not with just any bigband, but with one of the flagships of the scene: the NDR Bigband. This is not, however, his first encounter with the renowned orchestra – in 2007 he released *Portrait of a Band* in this combination. However, on the new CD, he doesn't write a sequel to this episode, but rather takes on a whole new approach that does justice to his current horizon. If one wanted to agree on the often-used phrase, "it should not become an ordinary bigband album," one would only do it partial justice because basically it is exactly this: a genuine bigband album.

But it is precisely in this respect that it differs from the flood of productions that do not want to be just that. Wogram pulls out all the stops of the bigband. In the beginning he thought about what it means to write for a big formation. His passionate postulate on this subject also provides the answer to the understandable question of why he ever made a bigband album. *"I listened to a lot of historical bigband recordings, and many of my colleagues write for bigbands. There are now many free bigbands. Most of the music is incredibly well done; the players have a high technical level. Colors, structures, the frame, everything fits."*

What I often miss, though, is the substance. Something that really gets stuck with the listener. That you do not just see such a wall approaching and are impressed by it, but that there are melodies which speak for themselves. I just wanted to write real pieces and not just dig up some material from a germ cell to make up an impressive arrangement around it."

Wogram's claim is to feature the classic sections and functions of the bigband and still make something very personal. He uses these structures in a highly variable and dynamic way. It's about the story that wants to be told musically, not the medium that tells it. The self-confidence with which a freelancer like Wogram writes his stories into a long-established ensemble like the NDR Bigband is impressive. He does not cut the sound colossus at any point in his power and brilliance, and yet the story lines are very small parts. The variety of colors and voices becomes possible in the first place because, in addition to the band as a whole, Wogram also resorts to a multitude of individual ways of formulating his story with the soloists. Above all, he allows himself the luxury of working slowly, giving room to every tone, every chord, and even when writing, not to get fixed on what is offered, but to search until it fits best.

At no time was he interested in reinventing the bigband concept. Wogram and the NDR Bigband have deliberately chosen each other and consequently accept each other as they are. Because they do this, they are able to create a natural and lifelike flow of intentions and images. However, Wogram's intense preoccupation with the possibilities and history of the bigband has another side effect that is not intended in this form. Regardless of the specific compositions that the trombonist wrote for the band, he also tells the story of the bigband. George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Henry Mancini, Quincy Jones, Gil Evans, Carla Bley, and Django Bates all seem to be looking over Wogram's shoulder, unobtrusively. He does not copy or imitate anything, but he allows these references intuitively. Everything sounds surprising and new, and yet it also seems familiar and corresponds to a progressive musical memory in Wogram's work as a whole. *"It was important to me that, as a result, I not only see myself as a front man, but that all the participating musicians feel comfortable with it as well. I had previously discussed with the orchestra how I want to set up the band and was allowed to bring my own sound engineer. I invited the whole bigband to dinner. That's not to be underestimated. If you just go there and say, 'My music is like this, now you have to play it perfectly,' problems inevitably arise. I did not want to fail because in the end it would have meant that my music is so exhausting and difficult. No, the musicians should identify with each other and feel at ease."*

Well-being and recovery – not least in the sense of the listener – informs Wogram's decision to include well-known musicians from his environment in the production. He has brought in a fellow kindred spirit, French-born pianist Bojan Z, whose musical open-mindedness inspired Wogram on the duo album *Housewarming*. When it comes to playfulness, humor and emotional intelligence, the trombonist and the pianist are on the same wavelength. Drummer Jochen Rückert, thanks to his membership in Root 70, is one of the musicians most familiar with Wogram's way of thinking. The saxophonists Steffen Schorn and Niels Klein have also played with Wogram many times before. In Rainer Tempel, Wogram decided on a conductor who leads the bigband with the same ease with which he composed the pieces himself. Tempel agrees with Wogram that spirit is more important than precision.

Only those who prepare for life can take it as it comes. This also applies in full to *Work Smoothly*. Nils Wogram took it one step at a time, thought through and prepared all the components as well as possible from many perspectives, in order to finally fall into playing the pieces at the moment, with all involved, without hesitation. That's how a bigband album came into being, one that has everything a bigband album needs, and yet, or perhaps because of that, one that is quite different from anything we know in this segment.

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