



artist bio

JOE LOVANO

The saxophone maestro Joe Lovano has enjoyed a stellar career recording for Blue Note Records, launching into new territory with different sized ensembles from album to album while rarely retreading the steps of his past musical adventures. Whether he's been in a trio fascination, a quartet marvel or a killer nonet setting, Lovano has upped the ante with each album, not only furthering his reputation as one of the world's premiere saxophonists but also forwarding jazz expression with imaginative might.

And now, in his 20th album for Blue Note, Lovano delivers a milestone recording, **Symphonica**, a bold and beautiful orchestral project recorded largely in concert with the WDR Radio Big Band and Orchestra from Cologne, Germany, with the music arranged and conducted by Michael Abene, the musical director of the big band. The album marks the first time in Lovano's career that he has recorded an entire album with a full symphony. Additionally, all the music consists of Lovano compositions save for one piece (Charles Mingus' "Duke Ellington's Sound of Love" where Lovano sustains his tenor saxophone lines to hover over the haunting melody). In that sense, Symphonica stands as a full-sound, best-of collection that traces the breadth and plumbs the depth of Lovano's career.

"Michael's orchestrations are beautiful and full of imagination," says Lovano, who plays both tenor and soprano saxophones on the album, "leaving me a lot of room to be myself and explore." The music includes lush melodies, upbeat numbers with exhilarating solo passages and gently swinging beauties. In addition to Lovano's extended saxophone lines that bob within and over the strings and brass are support improvisations by various members of the WDR Big Band.

There were four full days of rehearsals and shows, with the second evening's live performance at the Kohner Philharmonie in Cologne included on this album. Only the dreamy swing tune "His Dreams" was recorded at WDR Studio 4.

The genesis of Symphonica came about based on the friendship that Lovano developed over the years with Abene, who teaches jazz composition at the Manhattan School of Music and who had arranged music for Joe's vocalist wife Judi Silvano's 2004 solo release Let Yourself Go. "Throughout the years we knew each other, and worked together during my stay in the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra where Michael contributed some gems to Mel's library," says Lovano. When Abene took over the WDR Big Band in 2003, the two got together and this project was born.

Lovano chose several of his compositions and together they played through them as a saxophone-piano duo to get a feel for what might work. From that session, they agreed on a handful of tunes for Abene to write arrangements to.

"It was exciting to be able to draw from my own history," says Lovano. "I had done orchestral projects such as [1995's] Rush Hour with Gunther Schuller, [1997's] Celebrating Sinatra with Manny Albam, and [2001's] Viva Caruso with Byron Olson. What makes *this* project unique is that these compositions are from my personal songbook."

Symphonica opens with “Emperor Jones,” which originally appeared on Lovano’s debut Blue Note album, 1990’s Landmarks. The Jones being hailed in the tune is drummer Elvin, with whom Lovano toured in 1987. “This was one of the first ballads I ever wrote, at some time in the mid-’80s.” Of course, the emperor title can also extend to Thad Jones, with whom Lovano played in his jazz orchestra co-led by Mel Lewis, as well as to Hank Jones, who has been an integral part of the saxophonist’s life in the past few years in their quartet and duo recordings. “The whole Jones family was so inspirational and influential to me,” says Lovano. “This was an important tune for me to be played by the orchestra. It’s amazing what Michael did, how he created this beautiful orchestration for large ensemble but still made it feel like it was a quartet.”

The gleeful “Eternal Joy” was an original from the 1998 Trio Fascination album (with Elvin Jones on drums and Dave Holland on bass) that Abene arranged with “a different energy and edge,” says Lovano. “It’s not a pad of strings, but the arrangement incorporates the strings and percussion with a lot of energy that makes for tension-and-release sections. It’s a great tune to play soprano on.” There’s also an invigorating take on “Alexander the Great” (in tribute to saxophone legend Joe Alexander from Cleveland) which is based on the changes of “Bye Bye Blackbird” that Lovano gave a new melody line for his 1999 album Friendly Fire, which he co-led with alto saxophonist Greg Osby. This tune is also included on the Saxophone Summit’s release Gathering of Spirits which features Dave Liebman and Michael Brecker.

“His Dreams” was composed in 1987 on the passing of Lovano’s father and mentor Tony “Big T” Lovano: “This is all about my dad and his dream for my development. He heard me moving in the right direction, and I fulfilled his dreams. I’ve always wanted to have an orchestra on this tune. Michael embraced this harmonically and contributed some beautiful ideas of his own.”

The upbeat “The Dawn of Time” was originally written by Lovano as a free ballad, but as he continued to play it he realized it could embody many changes. “You can play this in a thousand different ways with different tempos, different energy, different attitudes,” says Lovano, who notes that the tune is on the ScoLoHoFo album Oh! with John Scofield, Dave Holland and Al Foster. “It also sounds great with a calypso feel like in this version.” The interchange between Lovano on tenor and WDR guitarist Paul Shigihara is exhilarating on this track.

Symphonica closes with the romantic “I’m All for You,” Lovano’s tune based on the changes to “Body & Soul,” which served as the encore each evening the band performed. Again, Abene brought the tune to a deeper harmonic place while Lovano’s in-the-moment tenor saxophone sustains the mood throughout.

“The entire experience of playing with the orchestra was thrilling,” says Lovano. “Everything I played had to be a part of the arrangements that Michael wrote. I was feeding off the written material while still playing creatively and free.”

Symphonica is a pivotal album for Lovano and also a project that he takes great pride in. “These are some of my favorite and most personal tunes,” he says. “They give you a sense of who I am and the journey I’ve been on through the years. It was exciting to pick these tunes from my catalog, work on them and bring them into a new light.”

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