

... a truly great bandleader and composer, who for some reason is a new name on me, the Californian Brian Woodbury. In his music there are shades of Nino Rota and Zappa. But he has a wonderful sound distinctly all his own. The music is angular and challenging, but somehow at the same time, gentle and melodic.

The Variety Orchestra [is an] excellent album. [with] great instrumentation and orchestrations. How on earth has [Woodbury] managed to escape our attention this long?
BBC Radio 3 *Mixing It*, June 25, 2004

Here's an odd one. What do you get if you mix up hillbilly banjo, classical strings and a jazz brass section? An unholy row? Not necessarily. Brian Woodbury has assembled an extraordinary confection.

The opener, *Take the J Train*, moves from a ska rhythm to a Hawaiian guitar melody to classical strings before a flourish on electric bass, all within the first 80 seconds. What keeps the music focused is a big-band jazz core, played by veterans of the New York and LA experimental scenes.

Some tracks, such as *Jesus Christ Almighty*, stay close to jazz-rock fusion, others lean towards contemporary classical. Another, *Long May She Wave*, with its vibes and sudden changes of metre, recalls Frank Zappa. But the most obvious comparison is with England's own Penguin Café Orchestra. The eight tracks here sound more durable, swing harder and generally transcend gimmickry. Surprise your dinner guests; flummox the music anoraks; and enjoy.

John Bungey, *The Times (London)*, June 12, 2004

Pushing the play button after slipping Brian Woodbury's disc into the CD player is like stepping inside *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. You never know what to expect or what the next bar will bring; everything is disguised in outrageous ways; even the most familiar objects adopt a warped shape. The first few seconds of "Take the J Train" might suggest an avant-garde jazz big band, like a postmodern version of Duke Ellington's band, but soon the accordion comes in, then the banjo and the pedal steel, and you suddenly realize that you're not in Jazzland anymore. Woodbury seems to draw inspiration from everything within his vicinity: The Duke, Spike Jones, Charles Ives, John Zorn, Frank Zappa, traditional Mexican bands and Rock in Opposition. Every time a particular name comes to mind, a hitherto unheard element comes in, simply to contradict your impression. The music is often fast-paced, even frantic and exuberant. In the slower passages ("Mom," "Venice, Italy," the finale of "Threnody for Kennedy and Connally,"), the jazz leanings shine through, while the more complex sections immediately bring to mind Zappa's *Grand Wazoo* and *Waka/Jawaka* albums. Then again, try to compare Zappa to the mad Mexican polka of "Garbanzo Beans," or the flooring Caribbean-spiced rendition of "Shenandoah," a heartland American ballad. The cast of musicians is an impressive roll call of LA and NYC experimental sidemen (including Mark Feldman, Guy Klucevsek, and Frank London), but musicianship aside, what shines throughout the album is Woodbury's witty sense of humor and indubitable talent for writing intricate, whimsical music. Highly recommended if you believe that humor belongs in music.

François Couture, *All Music Guide*

Brian Woodbury could not have chosen a better title for *Variety Orchestra*. Combining elements of Mexican-inflected polka, roots Americana, big band, romanticism, Lennon Sisters vocals and much, much more, this music feels strangely alluring for all its swings through a diversity of styles. Eclectic is a word often used to describe music that cannot be pigeon-holed, and clearly there is no way to classify what Woodbury and his Orchestra do; but as varied as the programme is, there seems to be an underlying philosophy, which is to blend genres in new, interesting and engaging ways.

There are other artists who blend styles, but none quite so seamlessly and with complete abandon as Woodbury. “Take the J Train” begins with a ROVA-style saxophone rhythm; a faintly Mexican accordion/violin passage is introduced; then a banjo picks out a bluegrass solo. And all this within the first ninety seconds. There is a certain Zappa-esque irreverence in the way that Woodbury mixes things up. By the end of the piece, genres integrate in a cacophony with saxophone wailing and pedal steel seducing over a broken-up rhythm. One precedent for this music would be Fred Frith’s ‘70s band Henry Cow, although Cow was considerably more difficult. As challenging as Woodbury is he never loses site of captivating his audience. “Jesus Christ Almighty” merges warped organ, distorted guitar and horns over a move-your-body R&B backdrop.

Another antecedent would be some of John Zorn’s early work, like the *The Big Gundown*, with its episodic nature, but Woodbury manages to rapidly introduce, discard and then sometimes return to ideas in a way that is equally absurd but completely accessible. There is something oddly appealing about this work, despite its obvious intention to keep one perpetually off guard.

Recorded over the course of thirteen years, the album features performers including violinist Mark Feldman, accordionist Guy Klucevsek, violinist Sarah Parkins and trumpeter Frank London. The music is highly orchestrated—it would have to be—but there *are* opportunities for improvisation. On “Venice, Italy,” which opens with a solo accordion that leads into a pastoral keyboard/violin/banjo passage that could easily be found on a Gentle Giant disk, before the trumpets take over and move the piece into Cuban territory, again all within the first minute, trombonist Dan Levine gets the opportunity to explore the many nooks and crannies that Woodbury’s shifting rhythms provide.

Listeners looking for something that is challenging, while at the same time full of captivating melodies and rhythms, would do well to check out Brian Woodbury’s *Variety Orchestra*. Clever without being coy, this album is remarkable for its ability to sound focused despite itself.

John Kelman, All About Jazz, April, 2004

My mother used to tell me not to sit too close to the TV, or “you’ll ruin your eyes.” Brian Woodbury is the result of sitting too close to his parents (and everyone else’s) stereo regardless of what records (that’s right, records) were playing. This Woodbury fellow is a sonic sponge who’s soaked up American classical music a la Gershwin and Lenny Bernstein, big band jazz (Swing Era and contemporary), tangos, Tex-Mex, mambos, rock, polkas, country, soundtrack music to movies great and bad, you name it, then cuts-and-splices it all in his head. In many ways, he reminds me of Van Dyke Parks at his most expansive, and of Frank Zappa in his less ascerbic moods. *Variety Orchestra* is a plush, kaleidoscopic crazy quilt that playfully, intrepidly skewers all manner of Americana of the last half of the 20th century as much as it pays loving tribute to it.

Mark Keresman, primetime, May, 2004