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**Kenny Werner with the Brussels Jazz Orchestra – Institute Of Higher Learning – Half Note Records
HN4548, 69:33 [8/23/2011] *****:**

(Kenny Werner – piano & arrangements; featuring the Brussels Jazz Orchestra/ Frank Vaganee, artistic director)

Kenny Werner is a shining example of the versatility and evolving mosaic of jazz. He is a talented inventive pianist, and has performed music in a wide variety of ensembles. Since his emergence in the Mel Lewis Orchestra, his uncanny compositional skills have provided opportunities to write for several jazz orchestras and wind ensembles across Europe. His work with Toots Thielemans and Broadway star Betty Buckley (*Cats*) has expanded his artistic reputation. Since 2010, he has released two projects for Half Note Records, *No Beginning*, *No End* and [Balloons](#). It seemed like a natural progression to collaborate with the renowned Brussels Jazz Orchestra.

Institute Of Higher Learning is a complex, exhilarating musical statement. Four original compositions (by Werner) and one surprising cover are performed with the Brussels Jazz Orchestra. The opening thirty-minute suite, “Cantabile” is complicated and multi-textured, constructed in three parts. “The First Movement” is rendered by a precise, jaunty chorus of horns and reeds. At the 1:30 mark, the swing mood is jarred by the addition of Peter Hertman’s acid-tinged guitar solo. As the orchestra builds and recedes, Werner delivers his customary melodic piano lines. Shifting to waltz signature, Bart Defoort injects a tasteful solo on tenor. A transition to a ballad reverie defines “The Second Movement”. Pierre Drevet contributes smooth trumpet solos that are framed by Werner’s delicate piano and the orchestral accents. With bop swing energy, “The Third Movement” features the sonic flourishes of the orchestra. Werner hammers out a percolating solo, before handing it over to trumpeter Nico Schepers.

The arrangement of “The House Of The Rising Sun” is unforgettable. After a two minute introduction of pulsating fanfare, the melody begins to take shape. Keeping the throttle open, all of the instruments cultivate a gradual intensity, aided by solos on baritone sax (Bo Van der Werf) and drums (Martijn Vink). An emotional connection is established on “Second Love Song”. The song pays tribute to mentor, Bob Brookmeyer’s “First Love Song”, and is lyrically fluent. Marc Godfroid’s extended trombone work is rendered with tender elegance.

Werner’s compositional imagery resonates throughout the album. “Compensation” (originally written for the Mel Lewis Orchestra) is launched by a clever piano introduction (with a hint of “Singing In The Rain”) that morphs into a mid-tempo blues groove, featuring an expressive solo by Kurt Van Herck (tenor saxophone) and a saucy one by Jeroen Van Malderen on flugelhorn. The title track, commissioned by the MIT festival Jazz Ensemble concludes the album. Werner, Joe Machtel (doublebass) and Vink get to explore trio dynamics within the big band aesthetics.

Institute Of Higher Learning is a testament to the exultant harmonics of orchestral jazz. The primary emphasis is on the larger ensemble interaction. The liner notes by Maria Schneider are fascinating and revealing. This CD will be uplifting to big band aficionados, and should attract new ones too.

TrackList: Cantabile (First Movement, Second Movement, Third Movement); Second Love Song; The House Of The Rising Sun; Compensation; Institute Of Higher Learning