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A Green Man Review

Elina Duni's A Time To Remember



A new Elina Duni album is always cause for joy, and *A Time To Remember* is no exception. This time out she follows up her 2020 quartet recording *Lost Ships* with a varied program of 12 songs ranging from American standards to melancholy songs of remembrance in at least three languages.

Duni's voice is a force of nature, crystalline and intimate, capable of expressing powerful emotions without overpowering volume or histrionics. I've been a fan since her first ECM release, 2012's *Matanë Malit* (Beyond the Mountain) and 2015's *Dallëndyshe* (Swallow), both in a quartet with pianist Colin Vallon, bassist Patrice Moret and drummer Norbert Pfammatter. I've also reviewed her 2018 solo piano and vocal album *Partir* and the aforementioned *Lost Ships* with guitarist Rob Luft, Matthieu Michel on flugelhorn and Fred Thomas on percussion and piano.

Not normally a big fan of vocal jazz but a big fan of Balkan folk music, I was originally drawn to Duni by her performance of Albanian and Kosovan repertoire in a sensitive modern jazz setting on *Matanë Malit* and *Dallëndyshe*. Four tracks on *A Time To Remember* are from the repertoire, three traditional and one by the Albanian singer Rashid Krasniqi, and all are attractive. The gentle "Hape Derën" has a place of honor as the second track, a beautiful melody that highlights the sense of simpatico this quartet has, Duni's vocals floating in and out through the interwoven accompaniment

of horn, guitar, and woodblock percussion; amid the restrained verses, the sense of release from a brief instrumental bridge is palpable. “E Vogël” begins with a pretty traditional feel, Duni’s breathy vocals in stop-start lockstep with Luft’s guitar; as elsewhere her wordless vocalizing rides the border between jazz scat and folk singing. The guitarist’s nimble solo comes with a tone and warmth that evokes the tropics, at least to these ears. “Mora Testinë” puts guitar, flugelhorn and vocals on equal footing, giving this traditional song a startling immediacy.

Rashid Krasniqi’s song “Mallëngjimi” though in Albanian has a more pop or jazz sound and feel to it. I know nothing about this 20th century musician, but this one in its arrangement comes off like a cabaret or night club song, with distinct verses and chorus, accentuated by Luft’s use of the fader pedal. It’s title can mean “Nostalgia” or strong emotions, and the lyrics as translated in the booklet speak of longing for homeland:

Oh, my homeland, I am longing for you
Here, only this song keeps me alive
Anywhere I look
I can’t find a thing that compares to you,
My darling. ...

I am a stranger, I am unloved
The sun doesn’t rise for me anymore
Oh, my homeland, all around me is contempt
Why did I leave you and go into exile.

Duni is impressively multilingual, and begins the album with “Évasion” in French, a song she and Luft cowrote to lyrics by the Belgian-Israeli poet Esther Granek (1927-2016), with striking images of desert and ocean.

The theme of nostalgia is apparent from the music and arrangements alone, but come to the forefront for me as an English speaker on the title song, a wistful look back at a time when love burned stronger. On this one and the following song “Whispers Of Water” especially, the way Duni’s voice blends with Michel’s horn provides moments of sublimity. Similarly, Luft’s guitar and Thomas’s cymbal washes create a nearly onomatopoeic shimmer on “Dawn.”

In the final third of the album are three striking songs: the original “Sunderland,” has perhaps the most upbeat feel to it; Luft and Duni, who now live and work together in London, cowrote this one about the English port town. The two most recognizable to most listeners will be Sondheim’s “Send In The Clowns” in a restrained cover, and the devastating standard “I’ll Be Seeing You,” which ends the program on a suitable melancholy note, a stark guitar-vocal duet that shows why a song like this became and remains a standard, durable enough for infinite interpretations.

I like that cover a lot, but my favorite is the delightful take on Charlie Haden’s “First Song.” The arrangement is superb, and the improvisations exquisite, particularly Michel’s horn solo that in its restraint suggests a perfectly wistful spirituality and

tender love. Luft's solo brings a bit of hazy distortion that suggests one of Haden's collaborators, Bill Frisell.

Nostalgia, the ache you feel for times gone by, knows no season. This album is flawless and moving now as spring turns to summer, but I suspect it will gain an added poignancy come autumn and winter. Look for some of these delicious songs on my year end favorites list for 2023.

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