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Recording of the Week, Elina Duni & Rob Luft - *A Time to Remember*

by Barney Whittaker



Elina Duni & Rob Luft (Images: Artist's Own)

The past few years have indeed been fruitful for the musical partnership of Elina Duni and Rob Luft. Her, an accomplished Albanian-Swiss vocalist with several prestigious music prizes under her belt, and him, one of the most in-demand young guitarists currently knocking about in this country. Since meeting at a workshop in Lausanne in early 2017, their collaborative efforts have brought them both experience and acclaim in equal measure. Encapsulating the magic they conjured up on *Lost Ships* (2020), *A Time To Remember* comes as a timely sequel to the pair's pre-pandemic outing that features the same personnel, also on ECM.

On the whole, it's the theme of time that ties this album together. With the majority of the crew having emerged as ECM-artists in their own right, this small but economical combo succeeds in its role as a weightless balloon that keeps proceedings grounded as it oscillates like a free but loyal timekeeper. The record progresses at a steady pace, its momentum not depending on one sole performer but on the weaving coalescence of the rhythm musicians' accompaniment and the melodic phrasing of the lead players. Along with their co-leaders, further praise must be given to tactful Swiss flugelhornist

Matthieu Michel along with Fred Thomas, a dedicated performer who alternates his duties of ivory-tinkling and pot-stirring with a pensive responsibility.



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Every musician brings their unique and personal share to the table of this banquet of emotions, with each member of the lineup contributing to a sum that remains *greater than* for the duration of the record. For instance, the soft touch of Michel's brass is the perfect addition to the album's featherlike melange, never outstaying its welcome. Similarly, Luft's key skill being his thoughtful balance of rhythm and harmony makes him an ideal partner for a project as introspective in its scope as this one. His guitar breaking through the uncertain clouds on 'Hape Derën' is a truly blissful moment. Another highlight is the handsome inclusion of five original songs penned together by Duni and Luft, with the first, album-opener 'Évasion', sung in a rich French croon that evokes the 'tormented sky' of its source text by poet Esther Granek with a dreamlike clarity. That it takes three tracks before we hear English text is of no great concern - it's as if, through Duni's mellifluous articulation that she sings in a language of her own making. And what an appealing tongue it is. The soothing vernacular on display here is a comforting blanket you could wrap yourself up in for hours as it harbours feelings of harmlessness and protection from ominous foes.

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The softly enticing tracklisting is a flavoursome affair. ‘Whispers of Water’ is a luscious embrace that surrounds the listeners from both sides in an all-encompassing sensory massage. ‘E Vogël’, just one of the handful of traditional songs from Albania and its neighbouring Kosovo that makes its way onto the album, is an upbeat example of the wordless riffing that skirts its way around the silky passages of musical exploration before landing in the safe milieu of reassuring and friendly tones. In contrast, there’s ‘First Song’, with its pendulous composure and distorted guitar outro that falls somewhere between a Bond-theme and the *Libertango*. As mentioned, the real treat is Duni’s handling of folk songs from her native Balkans, which sees the vocalist restoring the lyrics once bowdlerised under communist-rule to their former glory and to which audiences have reacted with delight. Delicately convincing, the album closer ‘I’ll Be Seeing You’ is the most trad-sounding number – no surprise there, given the standard’s close association with Billie Holiday. A stripped-back duet of reverberating guitar and sensitive vocals, it just goes to show how the co-leaders, as independently established as they may be, are wholly reliant on each other and the connection they share. This album feeds back into the deep creative bond of its performers as it reiterates the obligation to cross superficial boundaries and borders. In essence, it seems to be recordings like these that prove the unifying sway of music, its ultimate power to build bridges and to enfeeble those who wish to divide us.



A Time to Remember

Elina Duni & Rob Luft

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