

Sirkis/Bialas International Quartet

BILL BRUFORD – LINER NOTES ` OUR NEW EARTH

CD1



Drummer-led groups have traditionally been associated with fireworks and bombast rather than Olympian levels of creativity. But with Asaf Sirkis behind the kit

we are in safe hands. In his depiction, the creative performance requires the music to be reduced, focused and “taken to the next level”. Anything superfluous to the expression is jettisoned; technical concerns evaporate as individual performance is seamlessly connected to the whole in the interpretive moment. His idea that “you don’t play what you practiced anymore” neatly describes the creative approach of the expert jazz musicians you hear on this album.

Sirkis' co-leader in the International Quartet is the equally creative Sylwia Bialas. Both musicians bring individual but complimentary compositional and performance approaches. Rather than go the 'singer-plus-band route', Sylwia is here completely integrated as the fourth instrumentalist. She has her being in the ethereal wordless vocal; in the improvised interaction of voice and piano that concludes (and perhaps is the) ***Message From the Blue Bird***; in her timeless Polish language songs such, as the engagingly-titled ***Nocturnity*** or ***Pegasus***; and in her sumptuous sampled or multi-tracked harmonies on, for example, Asaf's piece ***Letter to A***. Her voice is by turns yearning and sensitive, poetic and powerful: the 'devotional intensity' - already noticed by critics - is palpable.

Asaf inhabits the sombre spaces of the sometimes melancholic organ-writing reminiscent of his earlier work with Steve Lodder in 'Inner Noise' and the joyful places of his preferred slow tempo 6/8 or 12/8 metres that form the perfect springboard from which to double, or treble the intensity of the music. His interjections are always intelligent, and he has the capacity to surprise not only us but also - arguably more important - himself.

Often two or more of these elements run concurrently, taking their time to build before fusing into a boiling mass of joyfulness. The heraldic opener ***Pegasus*** sets out the performance space by introducing several of the group's strongest components: the surefooted piano performance, the sinuous bass in support of the passionate delivery of the Polish lyric, the 'tutti' passage in closing.

Letter to A has it all in spades. The sombre organ introduction, cleverly highlighted with crotales, gives way to the achingly beautiful melody. Pianist Frank Harrison settles in to one of those smouldering triple-pulse passages that Asaf revels in before it catches light and the heat threatens to consume an elegiac restatement of the melody with Sylwia's own soaring backing vocals. I'm with critic Ian Patterson: "With music this uplifting, so sensitively and passionately rendered, it's hard not to be seduced".

Sirkis has matured into one of the great drummers from any continent. On the opening of ***Reminiscence*** note particularly his clean articulation on his dark, dry cymbals and his effortless dynamic control - a welcome contrast to the flattened dynamics of the radio-friendly popular music world. Further on in the track Harrison,

a constant delight throughout, is equally spirited both rhythmically and harmonically as he leads us to the joyous ending that channels the spirit of early Flora Purim and Chick Corea, as Sylwia calls and responds across vast geographical space and from left to right stereo. At the higher end of young British jazz we are used to Berklee Scholars such as Harrison and astonishingly experienced, though youthful, musicians such as Kevin Glasgow, but they haven't always been so unafraid of the demands of highly interactive music such as this. Glasgow's opening solo on six-string bass over the windblown landscape of ***Land of Oblivion*** and his fearlessly edgy contribution to CD2's ***Nocturnity*** displays a maturity that belies his years.

Of all instruments, the human voice is perhaps the most sensitive, and the one with the ability to communicate in the most direct way possible. Yet the much-vaunted 'voice as an instrument' idea has too frequently remained a chimera - often promised, seldom realised. Sylwia's highly personal interpretation of that idea, informed by her Polish roots, comes to the fore on the beautiful blues-drenched long notes of ***Chiaroscuro***.

CD2

Familiar now with the group's potent musical armament, we relax as the players explore their chosen terrain. Asaf explains the conceptual thread that binds their musics together: "Sylwia and I wanted to reflect the change and turmoil that are happening globally right now and in the last years and the drastic shift that we all have to go through, each person in his own world and collectively. We wanted to express the wish that when all the madness subsides we will have a better place to live in and hence the name of the album: 'Our New Earth'. ***The Earth Suite*** comprises Bialas' ***Rooting*** followed by a group of Sirkis pieces beginning with ***Our New Earth***.

In ***Rooting***, Bialas again evokes ancient folkloric roots in what one might imagine as the call and response of the lonely goatherd across the vast emptiness of the Tatra Mountains. Accompanied by Frank's arpeggios and Asaf's crotales, the harmonic fabric of vocal timbres gently gives way to the shapes of Indian rhythm. An additional string to Asaf's bow is his recent and growing facility with the Konnakol, the art of performing percussion syllables vocally in South Indian Carnatic music, pioneered among UK drummers by Pete Lockett, performed by voice and here accompanied by the kanjira frame drum.

In as far as he continues to develop his own voice on drums, both ***Message from the Blue Bird*** and ***Spooky Action at a Distance*** demonstrate Sirkis' growing individuality as a composer. His predilections and melodic choices are all on display in these two pieces. The music of Carnatica, Olivier Messiaen, Tony Williams, Sylwia Bialas, jazz and progressive rock influence and inform his choices. In ***Our New Earth***, Glasgow's bass solo dissolves to wordless scrabbling from which emerges one of Sirkis' bleakest passages of highly emotive writing - for voice, organ and crotales - on the entire album.

The closing piece ***Picture from A Polish Wood*** has one of Asaf's short, strong, timeless melodies expanded by a thoughtful Rhodes solo from Harrison in a glorious passage of trio playing. The melody's restatement comes feather - bedded in Sylvia's harmonies. Her last utterance on the album is the little upturned 'Bulgarian' yelp that brings in the leader on drums to finish the suite with a virtuoso performance of unison Konnakol voice and drums.

Everything benefits from connection to something else, and music benefits from connection to place. Bela Bartok and Wynton Marsalis, for example, drank

thirstily from the wells of folklore of Romania and Louisiana respectively. European jazz is promised a virtually limitless future if it continues to stick close to its European roots embedded in the subsoil of specific regional cultures, and it continues to be performed by bands as imaginative as the SBIQ.

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May 2019