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Album Review - The Sirkis/Bialas International Quartet - *Come To Me*



The use of vocals in a textural and compositional context is certainly not a new idea in jazz. However, it is one that could be explored further. On *Come To Me*, the vocals of Sylwia Bialas deliver the lyrics passionately whilst also taking on the traditional role of an instrumentalist.

The peaceful, slow moving melody of the title track is performed over a bubbling drum groove. Harmonically static, the emphasis in the piece is on melodic development and depth of sound. Pianist Frank Harrison weaves a web of beautiful melodies which Patrick Bettison answers on the bass guitar. Although the harmony of the composition is dark, Harrison finds space for soulful blues inflections. Moving in a meditative direction towards its conclusion, Bialas delivers the first of many moving improvisations.

Dreams Dreams opens with a flowing piano line which subtly shifts from minor to major. The harmony is unusual but engaging. Bettison takes a solo which moves effortlessly around the instrument. His tone, use of space and melodic development brings to mind the playing of long time Allan Holdsworth associate, Jimmy Johnson. Sirkis uses light cymbal rolls to keep the music moving. He builds the texture with the gradual introduction of crashes and tom rolls.

Bialas contributes a wordless melody to *Vortex*. The influence of Norma Winstone's work with Kenny Wheeler is evident in the texture and the harmony. The band accent elements of the melody before they lock in to a 6/8 groove that brings a new intensity to the album. The vocal solo is nimble and full of rhythmic variety. Sirkis takes a fire breathing solo at the end of the track. His wall of sound drum fills only occasionally pause for breath. The pulse of the hi-hat stays tightly locked in with the bass.

Ismael has a melancholic feel. The words are softly sung and almost spoken at times. The lyrics make way for a vocal improvisation which flows across the register up to dramatic high points. Microtonal inflections give the piece an Eastern feel and the introduction of the harmonica brings a comforting, folkish quality.

There are more harmonic soundscapes on *A Hymn*. The vocals take on a textural role and the vocal harmonies towards the end of the piece create a dream like cushion of sound. The drums bubble away like lava in a volcano before exploding as the piece climaxes.

The harmonica playing of Bettison has a lonesome feel on *Mandragora*. Long melody notes take shape over mournful piano arpeggios. The rest of the band introduce a unison melody with shifting rhythms. Sirkis demonstrates his virtuosity with rampant flurries around the kit.

The 5/4 groove of *Magnolia* sits comfortably and is powered on by an infectious bass line. Low notes and muted rhythms drive the groove along and blend perfectly with the rim shot drum sound. The bass and drums develop the rhythms as a unit & Bialas's vocals join the groove for Sirkis's solo.

The closing track *Orgon* has a noticeable Allan Holdsworth influence. The drumming has all of the inflections associated with Chad Wackerman. Harrison switches to the keyboard, creating a new sound for the ensemble. As the piece develops into a heavy rock groove, Bialas uses her vocals to create screeching sounds akin to guitar feedback.

Come To Me has all of the instrumental prowess one would expect of the musicians involved. However, technicality never dominates the beauty and depth of the compositions or the ensemble interplay.

John Marley.