



BIRD'S EYE VIEW / BALAKRISHNAN: Aeroelasticity: Harmonies of Impermanence. Squawk. Rebirth of the Holy Fool. KONITZ: Subconscious-Lee. DAVIS: Miles Ahead. PARKER: Dewey Square. VON GUTZEIT: Propeller. LEWIS: Django / Turtle Island Quartet: Alex Hargreaves, David Balakrishnan, vln; Benjamin von Gutzeit, vla; Malcolm Parson, cel / Azica ACD-71318

I was a bit surprised to discover that the famed Turtle Island String Quartet no longer uses the word "String" in its name. Apparently this dates from their tenure on the Telarc label several years ago, when they were told that jazz listeners and club owners might shy away from a string group. I guess they're supposed to be surprised when they show up with violins, a viola and a cello.

But the music on this disc, due out February 9, is classic TISQ. Ostensibly a tribute to Charlie "Bird" Parker, who first introduced extended chords and overtones up to a 13th into jazz, it covers a fairly wide range of musical styles, including the cool jazz of Miles Davis, John Lewis and Lee Konitz that was built around Parker's innovations but took it a couple of steps in a different direction. We should also bear in mind that Bird wanted desperately to study classical music with Stefan Wolpe, and was ironically granted permission to do so a few weeks before he died at age 35.

The opening suite, *Aeroelasticity*, is a tribute by Balakrishnan to both his own father, who was a mathematician, and Parker. The music is very modern and almost classical, leaning towards the kind of music that Wolpe wrote, while still using the kind of extended chords that Bird pioneered. I loved the calypso-type rhythm in “Backlash,” the opening movement...Balakrishnan is as inventive as ever, the music changing both mood and rhythm, then just as suddenly ending in the midst of a phrase. “Lonesome George” has an edgier, harder-sounding opening before shifting gears towards the kind of swinging bluegrass style that has also been a Balakrishnan trademark. This piece is meant to depict the life journey of a giant Galapagos turtle who was too old and tired to mate, and so his species died with him. As a result, the music continually shifts in all three respects, melody, harmony and rhythm, yet the underpinning of new cellist Malcolm Parson keeps poor George’s musical story swinging—at least until the end, when he dies and ends up on a taxidermist’s table.

The third movement is titled “Pralaya,” a Sanskrit word for dissolution. This has absolutely nothing to do with Bird, but it’s still a wonderful composition, and in fact even closer to classical sensibilities than to jazz. (Would those club owners who don’t like jazz string quartets allow them to play this? I dunno!) Despite the title, the music is quite busy at times, not at all “dissolving” as much as one might assume. The suite ends with “Flutter Point,” a lightly played but wildly uptempo romp in which the quartet shows off just how much they’ve changed forever the concept of string jazz. Despite the entirely different style, some of the writing here reminded me of the string arrangements that the great but vastly underrated Jimmy Mundy wrote for Paul Whiteman (“I’ve Found a New Baby”) and for Bird himself when he formed his string band in the early 1950s (“Easy to Love”). The ride-out is particularly uptempo and uproarious.

Following this suite, we embark on three jazz classics written by others, *Subconscious-Lee*, *Miles Ahead* and Bird’s own *Dewey Square*. Imaginative and beautifully played, they show off the quartet’s jazz chops in pure jazz material, harking back to their early days and such arrangements as *A Night in Tunisia*. I particularly liked Parson’s cello solo in the first piece, which eventually morphs into a double-time obbligato behind the other strings, as well as von Gutzeit’s writing in the ensuing ensemble chorus which sounds based on an improvisation.

Davis’ *Miles Ahead*, according to arranger Alex Hargreaves, is configured in such a way that “the dialogue between musicians” is more important than the individual solos, making every performance of this piece “different and not without some pleasant surprises.” Of course, I only have this recording to go by, but it is indeed a well-crafted score, allowing more “space” than usual in the quartet’s playing. Conversely, Parsons’ arrangement of Bird’s *Dewey Square* is a lesson in having the melodic line, harmony and rhythm all move together simultaneously. This is a neat trick all-too-rarely pulled off well by jazz composers, a style of writing initiated c. 1926 by innovative arranger Bill Challis. You have to “hear” all three elements moving together as one. which generally means that your melody line has to be a tight, moving one that can tie itself to the rhythm and harmony fairly easily. There’s a nice touch in the middle where the tempo briefly shifts to 6/8 before going back again.

Balakrishnan’s strange composition *Squawk* is based on a true event, when a small town in Arkansas awoke to find flocks of birds lying on the ground and dying for no explainable reason. This is impressionistic music, informed by his jazz sensibilities but largely structured and planned. I dare you to play this piece without identification for your friends who like modern classical string quartet

music and ask them to analyze the piece. The variance and juxtaposition of themes alone will have them puzzled but fascinated. It's the kind of piece that bears repeated listening (I listened to it twice in a row while reviewing the CD.)

Contrasting this is von Gutzeit's *Propeller*, meant to depict the "duality of propeller based flight" as opposed "to the ultimate nightmare of any migratory bird" caught in the path of "rotating metal blades." Perhaps he overthought the subject matter a bit, but the music itself is ingenious and interesting, having a surprisingly strong bluegrass flavor about it, particularly in the first and last sections. The swinging tempo, on the other hand, has an almost Caribbean sound to it, and the harmonies used are fairly modern.

We then reach John Lewis' *Django*, which appeared on the very first MJQ album. I've always liked the tune but never could figure out what it had to do with Django Reinhardt, whose music was nothing like this. Balakrishnan's arrangement, however, brings it much closer not only to Django but also to his longtime musical partner, violinist Stéphane Grappelli, who seemingly lived forever and was still active when the TIQ was in their first decade. The tempo is brought up to a medium swinger, Parson plays a great pizzicato cello solo reminiscent of Fred Katz, and the piece takes off before a return to the slower pace for the close-out.

The closer is Balakrishnan's original, *Rebirth of the Holy Fool*. This really does kick into a bluegrass groove, or at least bluegrass combined with a strong jazz-funk beat and varying sections which dovetail together nicely. It's a rousing conclusion to what is, in my view, one of the very finest Turtle Island Quartet records.

Thus we find that this "tribute to bird" is in fact a tribute to a few different kinds of birds, and not just the Charlie Parker variety. If you're a Turtle Island fan, you need to add this one to your collection!

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