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Gwilym Simcock: Blues Vignette

Publisher: **Basho Records**

I had a strange association while listening to the latest album from **Gwilym Simcock**, **Blues Vignette**. It reminded me of an argument I had long ago with my then girlfriend, an accomplished classical pianist. Time must truly heal all wounds, because I can only recall the argument had to do with arguing the merits of jazz versus classic styles. Her argument boiled down to the notion that jazz (the music and its performers) had yet to attain comparable sophistication, and was somehow less evolved than what is traditionally labeled as Western Classical. My response was to break out a few Keith Jarrett records and try to show her how a classical aesthetic, instrumentation, and technique could coexist with jazz tonality. Not that these midnight lovers' arguments are ever really won, but I claimed victory on the basis that classical musicians had fallen behind jazz musicians in the area of improvisational technique.



Gwilym Simcock, like Jarrett, represents a confluence of classic and jazz influence, sounding at times like a combination of Glenn Gould and Oscar Peterson. When he improvises, what comes out sounds very much in the tradition of modern classic music, with snatches of what could pass for Scriabin, Copeland, or Morricone. **Blues Vignette** is a double album, which I always find a bit audacious, but there are enough albums preceding this one to establish bragging rights for **Gwilym Simcock**. Instead of feeling like an overblown studio session, **Blues Vignette** feels almost like three albums for the price of two. An album's worth of solo piano is combined with a selection of tunes featuring a trio that includes Yuri Goloubev on bass, and James Maddren on drums. Goloubev has real talent with the bow, matching Simcock's concert-hall mood perfectly. Maddren is tasteful, but solidly swinging when required. Finally, the addition of Cara Berridge on cello rounds out the offering with an original composition for cello and piano. *Suite for Cello and Piano* is cut from traditional cloth, while the trio pieces are instantly recognizable as jazz material. The solo piano work is somewhere in the middle, sounding at one moment like a snippet of classical repertoire and reminding you at others of the stereotypical smoke-filled bar in the last hour before closing... Still more interesting is the inclusion of a much overplayed tune, *On Broadway*, a staple of lounge singers and piano bars worldwide. What **Gwilym Simcock** does for *On Broadway* is a bit like what John Coltrane did for *My Favorite Things*. Simcock starts with prepared piano and turns the heat up slowly, deconstructing *On Broadway* in a way that reveals a bumping, funky side to the tune, mixed with breathy running lines that betray Simcock's prodigious talent.

At all times, **Blues Vignette** constantly jars its listener out of preconceived notions about what classical or jazz piano should sound like, drawing us away from comfortable standard repertoire, and lulling us with how *easy* **Gwilym Simcock** makes everything sound. A cynic might say that Simcock likes to frequently reacquaint himself with the location of every note on the piano, and I'd agree that Simcock is anything but spare in his playing. This may be a maturity issue, but it may also just be his stylistic bent. Going back to the analogy of Coltrane, one gets the distinct impression that **Gwilym Simcock** has a surplus of musical expression bottled up inside him.

-Fridtjof, GameVortex Communications
 AKA Matt Paddock

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