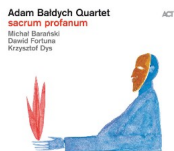


Adam Baldych Quartet – Sacrum Profanum (2019)

Written by bluesever (Bogdan Marszałkowski)

Friday, 09 October 2020 15:37 - Last Updated Friday, 09 October 2020 19:24

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1 *Spem In Alium* 4:56 2 *O Virga Ac Diadema* 6:12 3 *Profundis* 4:49 4 *Concerto For Viola And Orchestra* 5:11 5 *Bogurodzica* 5:47 6 *Miserere* 4:54 7 *Repetition* 5:30 8 *Longing* 4:32 9 *Miracle Of '87* 6:37 10 *Jardin* 2:48 Double Bass – Michał Barański
Drums, Crotales, Bass Drum [Gran Cassa] – Dawid Fortuna Piano, Upright Piano [Prepared], Toy Piano – Krzysztof Dys Violin, Violin [Renaissance Violin], Arranger, Producer – Adam Baldych

A landmark album from one of jazz's first rank of new masters – the 33-year-old Polish violin virtuoso's fifth release as leader on ACT records. His virtuosity has not been in question since he burst on the scene: "Without doubt the greatest living master of violin in jazz. His potential knows no bounds" said the FAZ after the 2011 Jazzfest Berlin. I'd say his potential is realized here with authority, confidence and genius to spare.

Virtuosity is, of course, no guarantor of musicality, and his pyrotechnic style and firebrand attitude draw mixed reactions. Defining his genre is futile, as he freely uses and extends classical and (Polish) folk idioms, while if you were expecting jazz violin à la Stephane Grappelli (or the more contemporary style of Jean-Luc Ponty) think again! His music is technically astonishing, but also deeply lyrical and rhythmically complex. Classical listeners may find his tone reedy and "skaty", while many find his work overpowering and over-emotional. I was stopped in my tracks on first hearing the staggeringly beautiful "Letter for E" from *The New Tradition* (2014). The first albums indulged Baldych's passion, with no concessions to the listener. This release is notably more disciplined, with shorter (from 1:14 to 6:28), well-crafted and varied tracks, resulting in a more accessible and effective package, while retaining the power, emotion and jazz chops of previous outings.

This album matches Baldych with well-established, self-confident players from native Poland.

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Although previous piano partner, the Norwegian Helge Lien, was a complementary and responsive foil, I sense this quartet is a more balanced and powerful vehicle, with all the players allowed space to contribute and shine. The main departure here, though, is the material, with five originals paired with five “classics”, ranging across nine centuries! The selection strongly reflects the title, with medieval sacred works to the fore.

The opener is a short version of Tallis’ Spem in alium (1570), more usually performed by eight choirs of five voices. While the polyphonic complexity is inevitably absent, here (and in other tracks) the spacious and lingering feel, and purity of voices of the originals, is retained and amplified, framed with rich contributions from the band, including the sonorous thunder of the gran cassa. The second is Virga ac diadema, by Hildegard of Bingen (c 1200 believe it or not). This brings the piano of Dys to the fore, with a first full-on workout for the whole band.

The third is an original despite the title, Profundis, and takes off in syncopated, loping folk style. Concerto for Viola and Orchestra is then a complete contrast, starting with dark percussion, and more free form throughout. This is based on the complex and challenging piece by the little known (to me at any rate!) Tartar composer Sofia Gubaidulina, from 1996.

Track 5 is a return to smoother waters, based on Bogurodzica, a Polish hymn from the 13th century, with a catchy and familiar theme, closing with a high energy work out propelled by some excellent drumming. Next is a suitably languid, elevated version of the well-known Allegri Miserere, with piano and violin both perfectly capturing the rarefied vibe. Repetition fast forwards 600 years, with an up to the minute jazz-rock style of arpeggiated violin underpinned by meaty, shuffling percussion (the family drummer tells me this is because the underlying sub-division is odd, 5/16 ...). The album closes more contemplatively with Jardin, with contrasting pizzicato violin.

While this album is as far from straight ahead jazz as you can imagine, I would strongly recommend it to any music listener, as an excellent and varied introduction to the remarkable music of Adam Baldych. I can only hope he is on Sage’s shopping list before he gets too big!
---Chris Kilsby, anyjazz.com

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