

## Nils Frahm □ – Solo (2015)

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1 *Ode* 4:35 2 *Some* 4:14 3 *Circling* 3:45 4 *Merry* 4:08 5 *Chant* 5:13 6 *Wall* 4:45 7  
*Immerse!* 10:46 8 *Four Hands* 5:20 Nils Frahm - Performer, Mixer, Recorder

For many music obsessives, a first close listen to Erik Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies* changes everything. The French composer's three 19th-century piano works serve as an introduction to one kind of minimalism—maximum emotion created with the fewest ingredients—and they show what can happen when you have the right note in the right place at the right time. The formal elegance of the pieces, along with the underlying sense of yearning and clear surface beauty, have made them a natural fit for advertising and film, and the *Gymnopédies* long ago became ubiquitous, their structure a sort of auditory cliché. But even with the overexposure, the power of Satie's pieces are still there inside of us, guiding how we respond to simple piano music that leaves a lot of space. Whenever contemporary composers—from Chilly Gonzales to Eluvium to Jandek to Grouper to Aphex Twin—use a piano in this way, they tap into these buried associations.

German composer and producer Nils Frahm's most recent full-length, his fine 2013 album *Spaces*, featured plenty of piano but found him putting the instrument into a number of different contexts and adding electronics (the set also included live tracks). But among the earliest works of his career were two albums of solo piano work, and he returns here with a third, an album he gave away free on Twitter two weeks ago. *Solo* is almost exactly what you might expect from a record like this one; it's spare, it's lyrical, it's generally quiet, and it's very pretty. Your mileage will vary based on whether that is enough.

Sometimes solo piano albums can get too sentimental, and can begin to sound like bad TV cues; sometimes they can be a little dry and academic, and can come over like an instrumental exercise. This one mostly fits into "just right" territory, balancing general loveliness with space

and suggestion. Frahm's piano is creaky and there's a percussive tone coursing through some of these tracks, an extra "pling" that marks time with every keystroke. That extra texture gives a piece like "Merry" a tiny bit of grit to offset a gorgeous melody that might otherwise be overbearing, and gives the more downcast "Some" an extra ounce of dark weight. During its best moments Solo brings to mind some of the lower-stakes work of Harold Budd, where melody and mood become two sides of the same coin.

The album's second half finds Frahm playing more with form, but oddly the variety, rather than being welcome, actually breaks the spell of the album's first half. "Wall" is a loud, pulsing piece that is interesting enough on its own but derails the album's gentle mood, while "Immerse!" leans toward meandering abstraction, foregoing melody and in no way justifying its almost 11-minute length. Still, for a free album that sounds very nice in a room, Solo mostly delivers, tapping into that very specific identification with the solo piano as an expression of wistful sadness. ---Mark Richardson, pitchfork.com

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