

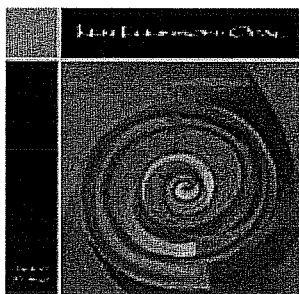
Wind and Wire

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KEN ELKINSON

Opal

August Sun Productions
(2004)



review by Bill Binkelman

This is Ken Elkinson's third solo piano offering and it's a slightly new direction for him, or at least to my ears it is. The ten selections herein (while retaining Elkinson's economy of notes and accessible compositional style) seem to be somewhat more somber than his past recordings. He accomplishes this emotional resonance even when the song is not particularly "soft" or "slow." In fact, sometimes the music is actually forceful and laced with power, yet the melodies are still tinted with regret or reflection. "Circle" is a good example, as the refrain unwinds at a midtempo pace, with subtle shifts in octaves, but always in a way that suggests a sense of something not wholly upbeat. "Opal" is even more sprightly in tempo, but still contains musical elements that distance it from, e.g., the more happy go lucky style of a Jim Chappell or a Wayne Gratz. Of course, Elkinson has never approached composition in the same way as those two, preferring a sparser motif, where the refrains repeat more often yet in shifting ways. That Elkinson's music is undeniably accessible even when he eschews the more conventional verse-verse-chorus-bridge structure is a tribute to his keen ear for blending his repeated phrases with his embellishments.

Not that there aren't more "typical" new age music selections on *Opal*, e.g. "Glance" which paints a slow-tempo musical painting of fading afternoon sunlight in autumn. There is a hint of sadness in the air, but also warmth and fond remembrance. There is little mistaking the longing or sorrow in a track like "Sienna" with its bittersweet blend of subtle late night jazz elements and quasi-funereal tones in the refrain. "Change" opens in a positively glum mood, too slow to be blues, it's almost closer in spirit to a super slow adagio transcribed for piano. Thankfully, the mood lifts somewhat on "Orchid" with its bouncy tempo and dancing sense of melody (although even here Elkinson introduces darker minor key elements throughout the piece, as if sprinkling pepper over a chocolate cupcake). "Indigo" reverses field and returns to the smoky confines of a piano bar at 1 am, with only a few customers drowning lost loves in scotch and sodas. You can almost see Phillip Marlowe over in the corner, taking a drag on his cigarette, pining for a better life.

None of my comments about the music on *Opal* being dark or sad should be taken as criticisms, though. If anything, this stubbornly atypical new age piano album is a breath of fresh air. The songs are complex without being patently obvious about it and Elkinson is in fine form from a technique standpoint as well. It's refreshing to hear a different take on solo piano and *Opal* is just that, but not in a ponderous or experimental fashion.

By the way, as of my writing this review, the entirety of *Opal* was available for free download at Ken's site, so you really have nothing to lose, do you? But, if you don't buy the CD, you'll miss Elkinson's humorous and off-the-wall liner notes (which, paradoxically, are in stark contrast to the CD itself - and offers further proof that he is both a nice guy as well as an artist who doesn't believe in the conventional way of doing things, and isn't that nice for a change?).