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KEN ELKINSON

Cue

August Son Productions (2006)

This is Ken Elkinson's fourth CD, and like previous releases, it reveals his considerable talent as well as the subtle way he composes solo piano music which is both immediately accessible yet not so pedestrian so as to be "lost in a crowd" (and the solo piano genre is surely crowded!). Part of the uniqueness of Cue is how, even when the music takes on a lively pace, the mood is still "quiet," such as on the opening "Porteños," which alternates between delicate soft sections and spirited yet restrained bursts of faster tempo playing. Cue's overall mood can be gleaned from the title cut which evokes a somber reflective state even though some of Elkinson's fingering is quite dexterous. This juxtaposition of a somber/reflective mood with music which is not in necessarily minimal won me over from the first playing. Since melancholic music appeals to me, Cue touched a spot in my heart which goes deeper than mere appreciation for the technical or artistic merits of an album.

"Lightly" earns its title with a softer, less dynamic and sadder way of wending its way through its five minutes. The refrain speaks of deep nostalgia, perhaps driving down the side streets of a small town in rural America, past houses that were once gleaming but are now worn and tawdry, yet still filled with memories, albeit faded ones. The rolling notes of "Oregon Coast" paint a sonic portrait of driving alongside the ocean as the sun sets against a cloudy backdrop. The listener is neither sad nor happy, instead guided to that neutral place where life just washes over us leaving us to ponder at the past, present and future. "Maybe," the second to last track, approaches a dark sparseness when compared to other songs here (compared to the quaint and child-like "Tetherball" or "Firefly" which is arguably the cheeriest track on the CD). The album concludes with a vocal ballad, sung by Tim Freund, entitled "Beautiful Sadness" and it is indeed a sad tune, with thoughtful lyrics about how "It's not a symmetrical life we lead." The words are cryptic enough to not be simplistic, but not so obscure as to be impossible to interpret. While Elkinson's playing is an adequate backdrop, I think the song would benefit from just a little more instrumentation for added gravitas (e.g. a solo cello perhaps?). By the way, it's a smart move placing this track last for the benefit of those to whom sung lyrics are anathema.

Cue combines the easy accessibility of "easy" new age solo piano music with the added depth and sophistication of something more emotionally complex and richer in nuance, especially on the darker side of human nature (without descending into maudlin moribund despair). In addition, besides playing some great music, Ken is also possessed of an engaging sense of humor. As is his habit, he livens up the liner notes, this time by including an elaborate list of his "favorites" (under the heading "Everything you always wanted to know about Ken but were afraid to ask..."). So, even among the somber tones of the music, the artist's smile lets us know that no matter how bad the weather, the world will continue turning

Review by Bill Binkelman