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CD Feature/ Ken Elkinson: "Cue"

Most people will claim that they are striving for happiness, but their spending patterns are contradicting their rhetoric. The machinery behind Pop and Rock has managed to create an addiction to instant satisfaction that is making it hard on anyone with a diverging voice or an attitude which does not scream in hip terminologies to be truly heard. Ken Elkinson knows this, because he is a member of one of the uncoolest and unhippest clubs in town in terms of media representation: The league of contemporary solo pianists.

The fact that Elkinson's work is almost exclusively reviewed in New Age publications and that he has had contact with "telephone hold music companies, yoga centers, music therapists, and airline in-flight audio" to promote and market his music is striking evidence to the fact that journalists have still not opened their ears to the possibility that this might actually be a kind of music many have waited for.

Admittedly, part of the dilemma is down to the artists themselves. The consensus seems to be that their repertoire must either appeal to romantically inclined fans of Billy Joel or Elton John, to naive admirers of Chopin's nocturnes or be easy enough to play for former music students who have now taken to a career in insurances. Consequently, the genre is dominated by mimicry and imitation, by surrogats and semi-solutions. It tastes of honey and milk and seldomly smacks of life itself.

It is right here that "Cue" makes a difference. Ken Elkinson is one of the few artists of this niche to pay the necessary respect to his instrument. He neither uses it to play background tracks to unfinished songs, nor to indulge in pastiches of yesteryear. His melodies do not feel like excuses, they come cascading down like waterfalls in long tension archs which often feel as though they're in for a crash landing – but are always swept up into the air again by another stroke of the keys.

Harmonically, Elkinson doesn't reach out very far. But the distinct rhythmic feel of his pieces, dominated by continuo-passages with a cyclical feeling in the bass section and complemented by the weightless motives hovering on top, makes them intriguing from beginning to end nevertheless. As a listener, one is seldomly genuinely surprised by his modulations or developments, but it remains interesting to listen to him protract tempi, to insert a slightly longer break at the end of a phrase, to carefully change the dynamic of a piece or to come full circle after a long variation. "Violet", the track with the most obviously classical feel, is a good example of this style, which feels both composed and improvised.

If people were more concerned with really being happy, they'd probably buy more CDs like "Cue". On the other hand, the succes of the free-to-download experiment of Ken Elkinson's previous album "Opal" proved that his work could definitely touch a wide audience if only it could eliminate the initial threshold of scepticism. Let's hope it falls soon: This man should never ever have to try selling his music to telephone hold music companies again.

By Tobias Fischer, published 2008-02-24