

Jason Kao Hwang - Human Rites Trio



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Jason Hwang and his longtime bandmates Ken Filiano (bass) and Andrew Drury (drums) could only have made this recording now, after having persevered –individually and collectively –through life’s trials and errors to get to this point of effortless musical mastery, where they can converse freely and eloquently in a language created together over years of collaboration. Certainly, the intimate experience of engaging with this music as a trio for at least a year, testing it in concert after concert, making revisions and discoveries all along the way, has engendered a truly remarkable depth of shared feeling and common understanding among them.

Words Asleep Spoken Awake aptly showcases the way Hwang’s compositions channel his trio’s incredible chemistry, as increasingly syncopated chromatic string lines provide a recurring frame of reference for mutually responsive interplay weaving funk, swing, and free sections together with consistent thematic coherence. Even when playing separately, all three keep resonating together; just listen to the seamless flow among their successive individual solos leading into the stately recapitulating coda. Filiano begins the sequence with an arco statement, densely textured with double-stopped multiphonics echoed and elaborated, in a deft segue, by Drury’s solo on floor tom (which he plays by blowing air through a plumbing fixture onto his sliding-bell-tuned drumhead). Hwang’s solo picks up just where Drury’s leaves off, expanding upon the rough-hewn lyricism, while reintroducing the restless chromatic agitation to be foregrounded immediately thereafter in the final ensemble passage.

It takes three to tango –and shuffle –in Conscious Concave Concrete, whose first part starts out with rhythmically insistent vamps propelling improvisations into the rubato viola solo that serves as a pivot into the powerful blues groove that follows. Throughout, Hwang’s Korean influenced pizzicato viola provides continuity across the two contrasting sections while highlighting cosmopolitan aesthetic affinities.

Such artful transgression of conventional generic boundaries further manifests itself in 2AM, as the off-beat counterpoint of its opening exposition gets distilled down to Filiano’s loping asymmetrical bass line, which evolves from violin-solo accompaniment into an extemporized lead voice in its own right before giving impetus to Drury’s concluding drum solo over string tremolos.

From a certain perspective, Battle for the Indelible Truth –in its progression from raw string-shredding expressionism, through hybrid Afro-Asian ecumenicism, to poignantly direct lyricism –might conceivably bear witness to Hwang’s own aesthetic journey, testifying to his deep roots in the Lower East Side avant-garde scene while offering abundant evidence of the transformative revelations he’s experienced since the loft era.

Last but not least, Defiance finds this trio reaping the rich rewards of sustained musical rapport, so amply demonstrated by the dynamic call and response here between composition and improvisation, with written lines serving as inspirational points of departure for individually conceived, and often contrapuntally interwoven, elaborations of the thematic material at hand.

Over the fifteen years since they recorded their debut together, Hwang’s artistic synergy with Filiano and Drury has gained such depth and profundity with each successive project –from his Edge quartet through his Spontaneous River string orchestra, his Burning Bridge octet, and his Sing House quintet –that it seems a single gesture can now send all three into a sublime state of sympathetic resonance. As we marvel at the collaborative interplay of their individual voices united here once again in common purpose, we can only look forward to many further shared journeys of musical discovery still ahead. –Scott Currie