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Yuri Honing Acoustic Quartet

“True”

(Challenge Records CR73336)

Dutch saxophonist Yuri Honing is one of Europe’s most intriguing jazz musicians. Born in 1965 Honing has been leading his own [bands](#) since 1990 and has released an interesting and varied body of work. His first group was a trio featuring bassist Tony Overwater and [drummer](#) Joost Lijbaart and initially concentrated on original material but Honing has never been afraid to look outside the jazz canon for sources of inspiration. “Star Tracks”, recorded by the trio in 1996 pre-empted the current trend for covers of contemporary pop songs by creating successful jazz from such seemingly unpromising material as Abba’s “Waterloo” and Police’s “Walking On The Moon”. A successful second album, “Sequel”, followed in 1999 and included tunes by Bjork and Blondie.

At the other end of the scale Honing has also offered his interpretation of Franz Schubert’s song cycle “Winterreise” recorded with classical pianist Nora Mulder and one of a number of cross genre collaborations including “Symphonic” (2006) on which he collaborated with arranger Vince Mendoza and the [Metropole Orchestra](#).

Honing has also worked with Lebanese singer Rima Khcheich and other Middle eastern musicians and co-operated in a freely improvising duo with Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg (later becoming a trio with the addition of cellist Ernst Reijseger). However the record that did most to gain him an international reputation was 2001’s Grammy winning “Seven” recorded with an all star North American group featuring pianist Paul Bley, bassist Gary Peacock and the late, great Paul Motian at the drums.

Currently Honing divides his time between his electric ensemble Wired Paradise featuring guitarist Frank Mobus and the newly formed acoustic quartet featuring his long term collaborator Lijbaart at the kit, the drummer is a constant in virtually all of Honing’s recordings. The Acoustic Quartet is completed by pianist Wolfert Brederode and double bassist Ruben Samama. Fellow Dutchman Brederode is an interesting choice, he

is the first “jazz” pianist Honing has worked with for several years and is also an established band leader in his own right having recorded a number of successful albums for the prestigious German label ECM.

Honing’s varied back catalogue suggests an enquiring [musical](#) mind and in 2009 he collaborated with dance music producer Floris Klinkert on “Phase Five”, a project that brought the saxophonist’s various worlds of jazz, pop and classical together on an album that saw Klinkert sampling aspects of Honing’s back catalogue to produce new [compositions](#) which were then sung by contemporary pop singers. Jazz and classical instrumentation was featured in the mix alongside the technology of beats, samples turntables and scratching. Honing’s is not a hermetic jazz universe, he is constantly looking outside the tradition for inspiration, as the best jazz musicians have always done. In this respect Honing follows such great names as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie.

Much has been written about Honing’s love of song and although “True” contains only two pop song covers, Goldfrapp’s “Paper Bag” and David Bowie’s “Bring Me The Disco King” there is still a song like quality of construction about the original material, four items by Honing and one by bassist Ruben Samama and at a little over forty minutes the album has the running time of the classic pop or rock album. A smattering of post production electronica augments the otherwise pure sound of the acoustic quartet but ideas borrowed from electric music are present throughout albeit very subtly expressed. Other commentators have commented on the “slowness” of Honing’s music and certainly much of “True” is pleasantly unhurried, there’s a sense that Honing and his colleagues are trying to distil the essence of the music. The saxophonist has a purity of tone that some have compared to Jan Garbarek yet ultimately Honing’s music sounds very different, less personalised, less influenced by folk forms and more attuned to contemporary musical developments – this is intended as an observation regarding the stylistic differences between the two musicians rather than a criticism of Garbarek, of whom I remain a long term fan.

Honing’s title track begins with Lijbaart’s almost funereal drum pattern which serves as a constant reference point for Honing’s slowly unfolding saxophone ruminations and Brederode’s sympathetic and supportive piano chording. Everything is admirably unhurried and eloquent with the deeply lyrical Brederode occasionally taking over the lead. Honing favours the upper registers of the tenor saxophone and he is primarily concerned with establishing mood and atmosphere rather than any form of technical grandstanding, “True” is an expression of the beauty to be found in sparsity and simplicity.

The first of two takes on “Paper Bag” by Will Gregory and Alison Goldfrapp offers a greater degree of animation with Lijbaart’s contemporary drum grooves and Brederode’s use of dampened [piano](#) strings providing an added rhythmic impetus. Initially Honing’s pure toned tenor floats serenely above the grooves but becomes increasingly incisive as the music gradually builds in intensity before eloquently subsiding again.

Brederode moves to layered, droning, Gothic harmonium for the splendidly atmospheric Honing original “End of Friedrichsheim”. Harmonium and saxophone are supplemented by the low register rumble of Samama’s arco bass and although it’s the sound of the harmonium that gives the piece its unique atmosphere it’s Honing’s splendidly understated long lined saxophone that is the real highlight. There are obvious parallels with Garbarek’s work with church organist Kjell Johnsen but Honing’s sound is very much his own.

The following “Borchardt” continues the mood of introspection with Honing on airy soprano intoning above Lijbaart’s electronically enhanced drum grooves. Samama’s bowed bass adds to the slightly eerie atmosphere of a piece which ends with an unexpectedly delicate, wraith like coda featuring feathery soprano, low key mallet rumbles and almost subliminal piano.

A second look at “Paper Bag” is equally dolorous, this time a brooding lament with long lined saxophone lines, glacial piano and supremely economical drums.

“Bring Me The Disco King” is a comparatively obscure David Bowie tune written in the early 1990’s and finally recorded on the 2003 album “Reality”. Honing re-invents it as “Bring me the discoking”, a surprisingly lovely piece that features the saxophonist on light, airy soprano with spacious, lyrical support from Brederode

plus Lijbaart's delicately brushed grooves. It's an unusual but inspired choice and Honing and his colleagues invest the piece with a genuine beauty. In fact Honing is no stranger to Bowie's work having interpreted "Space Oddity" on the Wired Paradise album "White Tiger".

Honing makes slowness a virtue almost throughout the album and this approach finds its apotheosis in the dark and ominous ruminations of "Yasutani". Brooding saxophone, sparse piano and low register bass rumbles evoke uneasiness, an air of quiet menace. Samama's "Nobody Knows" sounds positively perky by comparison but overall fits quite comfortably into the pattern of the rest of the album. The composer's buoyant bass pulse and Lijbaart's Magnus Ostrom style drum grooves complement Honing's keening, high register tenor with Brederode providing additional splashes of colour from the piano.

The album concludes with a reprise of the title track that adopts different rhythmic patterns but retains every aspect of the tune's meditative beauty.


The single minded approach adopted by Honing almost throughout the record makes for a compelling mood piece. Recorded in a single day in Berlin the music is immaculately played with Honing and his colleagues adopting a "less is more" policy. On first listen the album may seem a little underwhelming but closer inspection reveals hidden secrets and the listener begins to appreciate just how difficult this balance is to achieve. Unadorned beauty plus a certain intellectual rigour combine to make this a highly satisfying album with Honing's pop sensibilities adding yet another intriguing flavour to the mix.

The intimate nature of the performances suggests that this is music that should translate very well into the live environment. London based readers (and others) should consider visiting the Pizza Express Jazz Club in Dean Street on Thursday 20th October 2012 for the official UK album launch of this very good album.

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