

AKI TAKASE

MY ELLINGTON

Aki Takase: Piano

Compositions by Duke Ellington except "Lotus Pond" by Aki Takase.

Recorded April 16, 17, 2012, by Kulturradio vom Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg.

Sound supervisor: Wolfgang Hoff. Sound engineer: Nikolaus Löwe.

Digital cut and mastering: Anne-Kristin Sölter. Radio producer: Ulf Drechsel.

Liner notes: Bill Shoemaker. Photo: Norbert Guthier.

Cover art and design: Jonas Schoder.

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Aki Takase's phenomenal technique and her talent for improvisation is well known, as is her love for the jazz classics. She has already paid tribute to Fats Waller and recorded with saxophonist Silke Eberhard an „Ornette Coleman Anthology“. Now she takes a close look at the arguably most influential jazz pianist of the jazz tradition: Duke Ellington.

Aki Takase examines Ellington's playing from numerous angles throughout the album and within each track. Rather than quote or paraphrase Ellington compositions to contextualize this idea, Takase concentrates on the building blocks of his piano vocabulary – the articulations, voicings and devices that convey colors and fragrances. As a result, she sets a wealth of stylistic markers afloat, untethered to an Ellington composition, where they can be heard anew. Bill Shoemaker writes in the liner notes: „*What cannot be overstated is Takase's depth of feeling here and throughout My Ellington; it is something rare and profound.*“

Aki Takase. My Ellington

Duke Ellington's most compelling piano solo wasn't intended to be recorded, let alone released on disc. The tape just happened to be rolling. It was the end of the session for *And His Mother Called Him Bill*, Ellington's great tribute to Billy Strayhorn. The band was packing up, initially oblivious to Ellington at the piano as he begins to play Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom." Within seconds, however, the chatter and noise end. Having heard Ellington play hundreds, if not thousands of times, Ellington's men knew they were hearing something rare and profound; although it was tacked on at the end of the memorial, "Lotus Blossom" was the homily – and one for the ages.

Traditionally, homilies are commentaries on the sacred texts selected for a given service; there are no rules as to form; they are expository rather than hortatory; they base spiritual interpretation on the literal text – and they tend to be placed near the middle of the service. By these criteria, Aki Takase's "Lotus Pond" serves as the homily of *My Ellington*, one with a clear point of reference – Ellington's tribute to Strayhorn. However, instead of using a single flower (or a single petal of a rose) as her central image, Takase, with a nod to Thelonious Monk's "Friday the 13th," compares the Ellington legacy to the ecosystem in which the lotus blossoms and variegates.

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"Lotus Pond" highlights two essential truths about Ellington's music that Takase reiterates throughout *My Ellington*. The first is that Ellington's compositions are self-contained worlds, be it the heartscape of "Solitude" or the naïf's jungle of "Fleurette Africaine" (think Henri Rousseau's *The Repast of the Lion*, which graced the cover of *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington*). The other is that his orchestra was really Ellington's instrument, even though he composed at the piano and remains one of jazz's most distinctive stylists; inevitably, Ellington's solos have an orchestral dimension.

Takase examines this aspect of Ellington's playing from numerous angles throughout the album and within each track, her choices often leading to methods and materials not envisioned by Ellington. To establish a baseline, she initially plays the album-opening "The Mooche"



Aki Takase. Photo: Norbert Guthier

much like Ellington would, buttressing the midregister statement of the theme with loping bass lines, and highlighting it by splashing chords across higher octaves. In the usually boisterous chorus, however, Takase infers a back-and-forth between orchestra sections, using a light touch and slightly longer than normal rests to bracket key phrases; this makes for a smooth transition to an improvisation that exudes low-down blues instead of ducal elegance.

Takase also conveys another essential insight about Ellington's music: The subject of some of Ellington's most monumentalized and chronically revised compositions is the mood of the moment. Not only did Ellington regularly revamp the charts for "Solitude," he repeatedly overhauled his solo piano versions and unaccompanied introductions to ensemble performances. His stride-based left hand arguably overdrives the two solo versions he recorded in 1941, dampening their emotional impact. The introduction to the 1957 orchestra version is somber and relatively sparse. In his freewheeling '62 session with Max Roach and Charles Mingus, Ellington quickly dispenses with the stride-based left hand to indulge his mastery of prolonged cadence with plush flourishes and Impressionistic shimmers.

Within seconds, Takase upends several decades of solo piano commentary on "Solitude" – including Monk's version, the only solo track on his classic '55 Ellington album, where he counter-intuitively uses a stabbing attack to create an achingly tender interpretation. Takase juxtaposes an austere, tone row-like single note line with a romantic statement that practically oozes nectar. Instead of loneliness and anguish, she projects nostalgia; not an idealized pining for a bygone time or lost love, but an embrace of old means to emote, implicitly unavailable in puritanical strains of modernism. In doing so, Takase turns one of Ellington's most exquisite worlds inside out.

Takase does something of the same with her medleys. After a puckish introduction, Takase maintains an unusually bright pace on "In a Mellow Tone" with formidable stride chops. A reiteration of the introduction almost instantly veers outward, the centrifugal force soon atomizing the material. She then downshifts pronouncedly for an especially languid version of "Don't Do Nothing till You Hear from Me." It's the anatomy of a mood swing. There is a contrasting trajectory in Takase's other medley: her single-note lines caper nimbly through "Love You Madly" with an air of coquettishness; but then she uses big declarative chords in a beaming reading of "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart."

The symmetry of Takase concluding the album with "Ad Lib on Nippon," the final movement of Far East Suite, can be overstated if it is presumed that the piece was inspired by Japanese culture. It wasn't; intended as a toast to his fans for his first tour of Japan in 1964, "Ad Lib on Nippon" is a slinky blues variant that morphs into a show-stopping tour de force for Ellington and clarinetist Jimmy Hamilton. Takase ruminates on Ellington's piano trio introduction, employing a slower tempo to emphasize the suppleness of the writing. What cannot be overstated is Takase's depth of feeling here and throughout My Ellington; it is something rare and profound.

Bill Shoemaker, December 2012

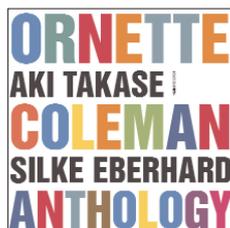
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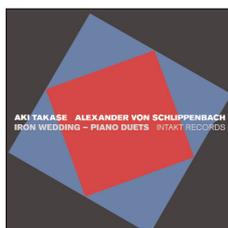
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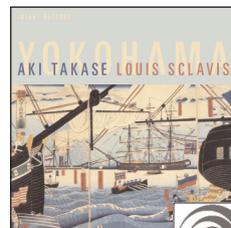
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