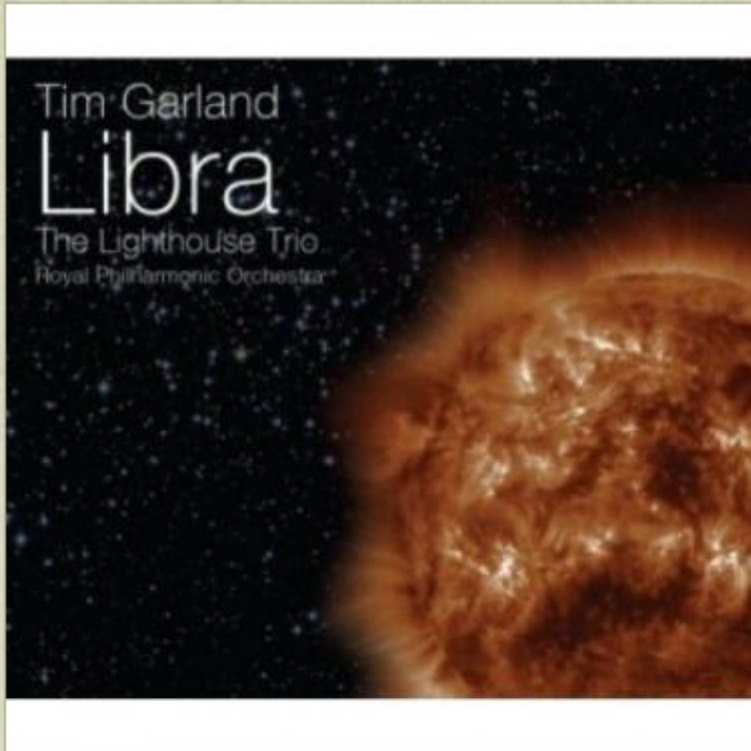




REVIEW



Libra

Tim Garland

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“ *A major statement from one of the UK's leading musicians and composers with inspired playing from all involved* ”

This ambitious double album by British saxophonist, composer and arranger Tim Garland was released on January 26th to unanimous critical acclaim. Having seen Garland and his Lighthouse Trio perform much of this material live at Much Wenlock's Edge Arts Centre last December I can confirm from personal experience that the praise is thoroughly justified. That show is reviewed elsewhere on this site.

“Libra” features the core Lighthouse Trio of Garland, brilliant young pianist Gwilym Simcock and the extraordinary percussionist Asaf Sirkis who deploys a staggering range of frame drums and other exotic percussion instruments alongside items of more conventional kit drums.

The trio originally came together on Garland's 2005 album “If The Sea Replied”, part of which was actually recorded in an old lighthouse to capture it's unique acoustic qualities. The trio have worked together on a fairly regular basis ever since and Garland and Simcock also comprise 2/3 of bassist Malcolm Creese's chamber jazz/classical hybrid Acoustic Triangle.

The involvement of Sirkis inevitably ensures that the Lighthouse Trio is a more forceful unit than Acoustic Triangle but there is also a greater emphasis on improvisation. In part “Libra” takes it's title from the notion of “balance” as Garland reconciles classical structures with the freedom of jazz improvisation. European harmonies with the Middle Eastern rhythms brought to the group by Israeli emigre Sirkis and the sheer scale of orchestral composition and arrangements with the intimacy of the jazz trio.

Garland succeeds in his aims brilliantly on this two CD set. The first studio recorded disc subtitled "Sun" features the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra alongside the trio. There are also two guest appearances from American guitarist Paul Bollenback.

The album commences with "The Eyes Of Ages", an elegant composition that introduces the voices of the trio with Garland's haunting tenor sound supported by Simcock's delicate piano touch and the delightful details of Sirkis' percussive accompaniment on hang, small cymbals, udu etc.

Appropriately "Hang Loose" features the hang more extensively. The Swiss designed instrument made famous by the Portico Quartet resembles a flying saucer, a giant wok or in Garland's words "The Cadbury's Smash Alien". It produces sounds that have been compared with the West Indian steel pan and the Indonesian gamelan and can be played with the hands, by soft mallets or even sticks. Here Sirkis plays with the hands in a manner similar to the Indian tabla. The percussionist has been influenced by the rhythms of Yemen and the Middle East as a whole as well as India and he brings many of these elements into play over the duration of the album. "Hang Loose" also features the powerful tenor of Garland and the feverish acoustic slide guitar of Bollenback.

"Arabesque For Three" features Garland on mercurial soprano in a three way conversation that emphasises the democratic nature of the group. Although ostensibly a "chamber piece" the trio find plenty of room for improvisation.

The centre piece of the "Sun" disc is the four part suite "Frontier" featuring the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra". Its title was inspired by the phrase "The Next Frontier" coined by Gunther Schuller and referring to the level of integration that can be reached between improvisation and large scale contemporary ensemble writing.

Garland dedicates his suite to Schuller and the ranks of the RPO are swelled by guest jazz artists in the wind section among them trumpeters John Barclay, Noel Langley and Derek Watkins, trombonist Barnaby Dickinson and saxophonists Phil Todd, Andy Panayi and Howard McGill. Malcolm Creese appears on double bass.

The opening movement "SunGod" features the orchestral players only and is a dense, swirling and dramatic evocation of "solar flares" complete with thunderous orchestral percussion. It is based around a Middle Eastern 3/4/3 structure introduced to Garland by Sirkis. In any event it is gripping, stirring stuff.

More subdued in tone "MoonGod" also features the orchestra but slowly introduces members of the trio as soloists. Firstly the lyrical Simcock is backed by Sirkis on udu, then Garland appears on delicate soprano saxophone.

"On SunGod" features the trio tackling their own version of "SunGod" utilising the ten beat rhythm and featuring some bravado percussion from Sirkis alongside Garland's full blooded tenor. There is some fiery dialogue between Simcock and Sirkis and orchestral flourishes add to an already heady brew.

The closing movement "Libra" draws on material from both "SunGod" and "MoonGod" and features Sirkis' dramatic percussion above a full orchestral backdrop as the suite reaches it's climax.

"Libra" represents a sense of balance and the triumph of good over evil.

The first disc closes with "Old Man Winter", another piece based around the Arabic Samii 3/4/3 rhythm. Lyrical and atmospheric the piece features Garland on both soprano sax and bass clarinet and another distinctive contribution from Bollenback's acoustic guitar.

Disc Two subtitled "Moon" features the trio in a live situation with most of the tracks being recorded as part of the City Of London Festival at the Stationer's Hall venue adjacent to St. Paul's Cathedral. The track "Darkhouse" also includes an appearance from the Sacconi Strings with whom Garland and Simcock worked with Acoustic Triangle, most notably on the album "3 Dimensions".

"Moon" opens with the trio's classy interpretation of the Bill Evans/Miles Davis classic "Blue In Green". As at the Much Wenlock show this segues into Garland's "Bajo Del Sol" a Latin flavoured piece clearly influenced by Garland's lengthy tenure with the great Chick Corea.

Although "Bajo Del Sol" bears a marked resemblance to Corea's "Spain" and "La Fiesta" the piece is a tour de force in it's own right and features some sparkling playing from all members of the trio. Garland switches between bass clarinet and soprano sax and Simcock is particularly dazzling, especially in the interplay between himself and the dynamic Sirkis.

After the exuberance of "Bajo Del Sol" the aforementioned "Darkhouse" quietens the mood. Originally recorded on "If The Sea Replied" the Sacconi's ethereal strings supply the ideal backdrop for the ghostly fluttering of Garland's bass clarinet.

Kenny Wheeler's artful tango "Sly Eyes" introduces a playful element to the proceedings with Garland on forceful tenor plus another delightful duet between the ebullient Simcock and the effervescent Sirkis. Delightful.

Like "Sly Eyes" the Garland original "Black Elk" has also been recorded by Acoustic Triangle. This gently reflective, folk tinged tune features the deep, woody sound of Garland's bass clarinet shadowed by Simcock's piano and Sirkis' delicate embellishments. The version featured here also weaves in the sound of "found" voices.

"Break In The Weather" initially appeared on Garland's 2004 album "Change Of Season" which also featured Bollenback in an all star line up that also included bassist John Patitucci and drummer Gary Novak. Played here by the trio this dramatic piece builds from quiet beginnings to more "full on" playing featuring Garland's soprano rush above Simcock's dense chording and Sirkis' virtuoso percussion. The sparks also fly in an inspired duet between Simcock and Sirkis. Brilliant stuff that quite rightly draws a rapturous response from the London crowd.

Charles Mingus' classic "Nostalgia In Times Square" has also become favourite item in the trio's live repertoire. "Moon" closes with a studio version of the old warhorse featuring Bollenback on guitar alongside Garland on soprano and the outstanding Simcock again in fine form. Like his other solos Bollenback's contribution is once more highly skilled and delightfully idiosyncratic. Sirkis indulges in a few drum breaks and rightly so after such a brilliant contribution throughout. Those of us that know him only as a powerful and technically brilliant kit drummer will have their eyes opened by his colourful and subtle playing here, rich in texture and detail but wholly sympathetic to the cause of inspired music making.

Garland has financed "Libra" himself and musically it is pretty much a triumph throughout with inspired playing from all involved. Jazz followers will probably prefer the live disc, the orchestration on "Frontier" is occasionally a little overblown but there is no doubting Garland's skill and ambition in this area.

Minor quibbles aside "Libra" is highly recommended and with the Lighthouse Trio about to set off on a string of live dates in support of the album a visit to a gig is highly recommended too. They are a supremely entertaining live act and an evening of wonderful music making is guaranteed.

See <http://www.timgarland.com> for details of tour dates, recordings and other projects.