

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

Shelly Berg

The Nearness of You

Arbors

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Shelly Berg - The Nearness of You - Arbors ARCD 19378, 60:41

******:** (Shelly Berg - piano & producer) Jazz pianist Shelly Berg is a musician's musician. He is well known in the music industry for his keyboard skills, his career as a jazz instructor, his arranging and composing on jingles and film and television projects, as an accompanist for artists such as Bill Watrous and Patti Austin, and studio work that extends from country to pop. But because he does not tour or record regularly, he is almost unknown among jazz fans, even though he is one of the top pianists around. Berg has recorded about half a dozen releases, ranging from originals to pop/rock standards and a tribute to his acknowledged influence, Oscar Peterson. *The Nearness of You* finds Berg doing a one-person performance, his first ever venture into solo piano, covering a spectrum of popular show tunes, one jazz classic, and one TV theme. Although this hour-long album, recorded in 2008 at Gusman Concert Hall at the University of Miami, is an intimate affair that presents often-relaxing performances, Berg also proves he can be a powerful player with formidable technique. Being a consummate professional, though, Berg never tries to awe his audience, but rather engrosses everyone in his welcoming and warm renditions. Berg starts with a "My Fair Lady" medley. Berg gives a lift to three familiar Lerner and Lowe tunes. He spins through "Show Me," and moves at a fast, amiable clip through multiple chord progressions. He slows the sizzle to an ebbing sway on "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face," providing a luxuriously melodic bed for listeners to dip into, while demonstrating his ability to be tender while avoiding any saccharine inclinations. After that short ballad, Berg wells up again on a jaunty take of the renowned hit "On the Street Where You Live," utilizing an ardently swinging, fluid mannerism while sidestepping any cloying sweetness that has marred other artists' interpretations. Berg also shows his sensitive side in matters of the heart during the unhurried, supple, Gershwin-ish "Like a Lover," which has a distinct emphasis for Berg because it was featured during his wedding. Here, Berg shares his romance with the world, an expressive display of his love for his wife and ardor in general. During the six

minutes, Berg courses through a soft-spoken reverie, while unfurling fleet flashes of verve as he deftly skips up the keyboard, adding splashes of color that reflect the various emotions related to a relationship. Berg's jubilation is prominent during uptempo cuts such as Ray Noble's "The Touch of Your Lips" and "If I Were a Bell," which is part of a "Guys and Dolls" medley. Berg very effectively turns the usually reticent Noble number into an exceptionally upbeat engagement, much more enthusiastic and brisk than what listeners might envision. If you pay close attention, you can even hear Berg keeping time with his foot, as he spiritedly romps through the melody. Another Berg gift is his capacity to re-conceptualize music and propel a piece into uncharted or unfamiliar paths. A good example is Berg's transformation of Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma." Berg accentuates the melody with classical music details and a descending harmonic development, creating a heated contrapuntal arrangement that is a firm exhibition of both Berg's remarkable keyboard dexterity but also his spiritual viewpoint. The version is akin to what Chick Corea or Keith Jarrett has accomplished on similar solo piano explorations, although Berg uses a different musical language to attain a likeminded temperament. Another fine re-adjustment of expectations comes during "Dreamsville," an uncelebrated Henry Mancini composition from the *Peter Gunn* soundtrack. Berg ably discloses Mancini's jazz roots, and gets rid of any easy-listening prospects that someone might predict for a Mancini song. In Berg's quick-witted representation, he balances poise, a sense of exploration, and a few, fiery surprises when he flows agilely through some impressive chord changes. Berg closes with the driving Rodgers and Hart chestnut, "Where or When." Berg begins with fluctuating measures, the melody rising, fading, and rising again. Emotional bonds are loosened as Berg ingeniously works himself through well-trodden lines, successively and efficiently building up to a fevered punch that concludes with a single, lingering phrase. This outing is a perfectly captured live event. The one-take document communicates Berg's spontaneity and inventiveness in a sympathetic setting where there is no distance or gap between performer and audience. The program is natural and unblemished, including the aforementioned foot-tapping and other underlying ambient sounds. Engineer Paul Griffith thoroughly reveals all of the hues and tints inherent in the orchestral-sounding German Steinway Berg employs on the nine tracks.