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Shelly Berg

The Nearness of You

Arbors Records

By Michael G. Nastos © 2009 Rovi Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

It's hard to believe this is only Shelly Berg's sixth recording as a leader. A clearly talented musician, he's admitted to never having sought a career as a recording artist, preferring to teach and perform on-stage. But as you listen to his astute and literate jazz piano, you quickly realize this is one of the more talented keyboardists around, rivaling acclaimed contemporary greats like Chick Corea, Kenny Barron, and his first hero, Oscar Peterson. This is a solo piano project exclusively with no overdubbing, varying track by track from upbeat to a ballad approach and back. Berg offers his interpretations of American popular standards or medleys of show tunes, while brilliantly incorporating well worn lines alongside new and freshened melodies that catch and slightly tug or twist your ears. His rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "Con Alma" is particularly arresting, forming cascading extrapolations on the theme, taking it into Baroque territory, and exhibiting the virtuosity similar to Corea. He, like Corea, adeptly bounces along a bunny trail for a My Fair Lady medley of the music of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, or Frank Loesser's Guys & Dolls, both midtempo, playful and fun. His fleet fingers accent the atypically upbeat take of "The Touch of Your Lips," much more anxious and excited than the title implies. Somewhat reticent emotionally but stylistically vintage, Berg's dualities during "Where or When" come out further, but he's more involved in matters of the heart during the slower, tender, Gershwin-esque "Like a Lover" Chopin like "The Nearness of You," and sentimental but not sappy, patient, careful read of "My One & Only Love." On "Dreamsville," Berg transports the listener to a far away place on the wings of springtime via a pillow of romanticism. Symmetry, balance, and common sense sway Berg's thinking, but there's always an element of adventure and wonder in his playing that separates him from so many others. Add to that his immense talent does not command the spotlight of a pyrotechnician nor a workmanlike presence, but that he is constantly re-inventing these standards. It would be a good guess that if this album was to be completely redone a thousand times, many individualistic, different results would occur. Only the insular, informed, elite music community is aware of the brilliance Shelly Berg possesses, and now it's time, albeit overdue, for the rest of the world to catch up.