

## Gwilym Simcock, The Forge, Camden

Written by Peter Quinn



Gwilym Simcock: the ecstasy of influence

*Ron Beenen*

As star pianist Gwilym Simcock amusingly recalled during his solo set last night, German efficiency almost scuppered the making of his latest – universally acclaimed – release, *Good Days At Schloss Elmau*. Recorded at the deluxe alpine spa in just a single day last September, the pianist's Herculean keyboard feats were made against a subliminal backing track of meadows being mown and kitchen deliveries being made. The results, tractors and bratwurst notwithstanding, suggest that the crisp mountain air clearly agreed with him.

Launching the album in the slightly less tony environs of Camden Town, what's fascinating about Simcock's playing is that he doesn't shy away from his influences. Like the greatest musical magpie of them all, Igor Stravinsky, Simcock can dip in at will to the entire breadth of the piano repertoire, be it jazz (Keith Jarrett, John Taylor) or classical music (Chopin, Rachmaninov). That's not to suggest that he's merely a brilliant *pasticheur*; more a case of paying homage to his musical loves by borrowing, and creatively transforming, some of their stylistic traits. The ecstasy, rather than the agony, of influence.

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Simcock writes as idiomatically for the piano as any of his classical heroes and in his musical universe, harmony rules. This is not someone who'll happily construct a composition out of a humble one-chord vamp. In the opener, "These Are The Good Days", the pianist glided imperiously through a series of ever more remote keys, carving vast cathedrals of sound which at times reached levels of such textural density you'd swear you were listening to the Labèque sisters rather than a soloist.

If Debussy had lived to witness the jazz age and felt minded to write a third set of jazz-inspired *Préludes*, you could imagine one of them sounding a lot like "Mezzotint". Featuring another sequence of startling modulations, here the melodic line magically coalesced out of a huge pool of notes created by some heavy use of the damper pedal. In "Gripper", named after the kind of person who latches on to you, while delivering a monologue about which you have absolutely no interest, the prolixity of the pianist's right hand runs was comically pitted against the left hand's disinterested ostinato. The piquant use of bitonality, stated most starkly in a brief coda, served to accentuate the one-way conversation. With its lyrical beauty, its distinctive use of grace notes, or *appoggiaturas*, at the ends of phrases, and its soaring gospel climax, "Northern Smiles" provided the evening's most overt nod to Jarrett.

Despite Simcock's stated wish to write a simple theme, "Plain Song" still journeyed through keys which most boy bands have only heard rumours of, while "Jaco and Joe" (a homage to Weather Report from his 2009 album *Blues Vignette*), conjured up something of the varicoloured polyphony of Messrs Pastorius and Zawinul. Heard in a live setting, "Can We Still Be Friends?" – another Simcock original, not an ode to Todd Rundgren – made you appreciate the nuances of the inner voices, something which not even the most faithful recording could fully reproduce. "Wake Up Call", pitched somewhere between the fiendishly complex counterpoint of Conlon Nancarrow and the bitonal delights of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, proved a coruscating standout. Unlike some other classically trained pianists who have moved into jazz, Simcock has a very strong relationship with the pulse – in other words, he grooves – as the final showpiece, a virtuosic tour of "On Broadway" (also from *Blues Vignette*) vividly demonstrated.

The latest in a line of exceptional pianists to record for the Munich-based label, ACT – Vijay Iyer, Vladyslav Sendekci, Joachim Kühn, Michael Wollny and Danilo Rea – the increasing richness and complexity of Simcock's compositional voice is a cause for huge celebration.

- *Find Good Days at Schloss Elmau (ACT) on Amazon*