

CD review: Gwilym Simcock

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Good Days At Schloss Elmau **(ACT 9501-2)**

On 2 September last year Gwilym Simcock sat down at the grand piano in Schloss Elmau. This is a posh hotel and spa in the Bavarian Alps, but it started life at the beginning of the last century as an artists' hideaway, and the man behind the ACT recording label, Sigggi Loch, is keeping that spirit going by using it as a recording venue. It is particularly sympathetic to pianists and the young Welshman is the latest to record there.

Playing solo piano and in these impressive surroundings, Simcock gets to explore all his influences and musical education, feeding not only his jazz improvisations but also his classical background into these eight solo pieces. They were written with one exception – the gorgeous *Plain Song* – specially for this recording. They are by turns lyrical and energetic, rhapsodic and light-hearted.

From the energetic syncopated drive of *These Are The Good Days*, which opens the album, through the note showers and impressionistic feel of *Mezzotint* to the blues-drenched improvisation of *Gripper*, which builds into a Keith Jarrett-tinged groove section before returning to its blues roots, what is striking is not only the seamless synthesising of Simcock's classical and jazz influences, but the way he brings these resources together to create a very personal sound world.

Northern Smiles is a more overt Jarrett tribute, taking the American solo piano master's *Southern Smiles* as its title influence. For me the rhythmic speeding and slowing of its melody is also reminiscent of Django Bates. And the scope both in style and richness of melody of the 12 minute-plus *Can We Still Be Friends?* really is breathtaking.

Simcock's distinctive harmonic and melodic explorations are always underpinned by a really strong rhythmic assurance (not always the case with musicians who have started out in classical music), but what is also most striking is the distinctive sound he gets from a piano. He makes the instrument sing, which is thoroughly appropriate as a singing quality is what his music always has.

It's joyful stuff in every sense, having the excitement and barely contained enthusiasm of spontaneous dance and shout, but a deep and satisfying spiritual joy also. In the sleeve notes, Simcock gives an indication of why this might be: "As I get older I worry less about the deficiencies of my playing, and the musical fallibilities I have. What becomes of paramount importance to me is the spirit in which the music is made."

That he has achieved this understanding at so young an age suggests there is a lot more profound music to come in what is already a remarkably rich and fruitful career, despite its brevity (remember, this is only Simcock's third recording under his own name!).