



“ *Everything sounds dazzlingly fresh with the melodic qualities of Simcock's writing always readily apparent.* ”

Gwilym Simcock

“Good Days at Schloss Elmau”

(ACT [Music](#) ACT 9501-2)

Pianist Gwilym Simcock has become one of the best known figures on the UK jazz scene. A frequent poll and award winner his ability to embrace both jazz and classical elements in his music have won him a remarkably wide following- Simcock's appeal extends beyond the regular jazz constituency. Part of this popularity stems from a strong work ethic and the resolve to take jazz to audiences who might not otherwise hear it, as exemplified by his work with the group Acoustic Triangle and also with his own trios and quartets. Simcock has also been fortunate in winning the support of the BBC, once winning the Rising Star category at the BBC Jazz Awards and later becoming a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist, this leading to regular exposure on Radio 3, often outside the regular jazz slots.

Simcock has been a regular presence on the pages of the Jazzmann, mainly for his live appearances, but he has also released two albums on the Basho label, “Perception” (2007) and the double set “Blues Vignette” (2009). “Blues Vignette” consisted of one album of solo piano and another featuring Simcock's current trio of Yuri Golubev (double bass) and James Maddren (drums).

The solo half of “Blues Vignette” acts as the precursor for Simcock's first album for ACT “Good Days at Schloss Elmau”. Another solo piano record the album was recorded in the Bavarian Alps at the “Luxury Spa & Cultural Hideaway” of Schloss Elmau, a venue much loved by the recording artists on the ACT roster. Here Simcock benefits from the production expertise of ACT founder Siggie Loch and the label's international distribution network should help to bring Simcock's talents to the attention of a broader, Europe- wide, musical public.

Solo piano albums are notoriously difficult affairs and frankly some make rather dull listening. Self indulgence and a lack of interaction with other musicians are the biggest obstacles to the solo performer. Having said that ACT have come up with two solo piano classics in a matter of months. The first is Vijay Iyer's appropriately titled “Solo”, which is reviewed elsewhere on this site, the other is this offering from Simcock.



Although superficially similar both [records](#) are in fact strikingly different, and hereby lies much of their appeal. Needless to say both are technically brilliant and superbly recorded but the playing of each musician is very much a reflection of their cultural background. New Yorker Iyer's music is dense, complex and intellectually rigorous, simultaneously acknowledging not only the work of jazz masters such as Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk but also the influence of popular and hip hop culture.

Simcock's music by contrast is more openly Romantic and unashamedly melodic, traits that reflect his classical training and European background. These qualities are apparent throughout "Good Days.." with the environment of Schloss Elmau itself also contributing to the atmosphere of the album. Not that there is anything bland about Simcock's album, behind the flowing melodies are plenty of substantial rhythmic ideas with the young pianist striking a good balance between composition and improvisation.

Of the eight pieces on the album seven were written expressly for this recording, the exception being "Plain Song", but having said that Simcock doesn't appear to have recorded the piece anywhere else. "Good Days.." differs from the solo half of "Blues Vignette" in that all the material is original and is, if anything a progression from the earlier record. Although Simcock arrived with a written framework the album was recorded in a single day, thus adhering to the jazz virtues of immediacy and improvisation. As a result everything sounds dazzlingly fresh with the melodic qualities of Simcock's writing always readily apparent.

The album begins appropriately with "These Are The Good Days", effectively the title track. Any reservations regarding the absence of drums and bass are made redundant by Simcock's dampening of the strings and making use of the body of the piano for percussive effects. Not that these should be viewed as mere novelties or effects, it all fits in beautifully with Simcock's tightly focussed melodic vision.

The following "Mezzotint" is lush, rolling and exquisite, informed in the main by Simcock's classical background. The slowly unfolding "Gripper" by contrast reveals his absorption of jazz and blues, the combination of Romanticism and blues inflected melody on one of Simcock's most memorable tunes is reminiscent of the great Keith Jarrett at his best.

"Plain Song" also boasts a gorgeous melody and is as simple and unadorned as its title suggests. Simcock's liner notes suggest that these days he is less interested in technical ability (though he has this in spades) than in the spirit in which music is produced. This beautiful piece is the perfect encapsulation of this aesthetic.

"Northern Smiles" is a more overt Jarrett tribute, the title itself a direct reference to Jarrett's own "Southern Smiles". Simcock's playing is a good summation of Jarrett at his most relaxed and exuberant, mercifully without appropriating any of Keith's notorious vocalisations.

At twelve minutes plus "Can We Still Be Friends?" is the centre piece of the album, another outpouring of beautiful melodic ideas that again have their grounding in Simcock's classical past.

The mood is predominantly delicate and meditative. Simcock exhibits a zen like air of serenity on this quiet masterpiece.

"Wake Up Call" is well named as Simcock demonstrates that he, too, can play with an Iyer like intensity. There's a denseness and urgency about his playing here that contrasts well with the rest of the album. The dark and brooding percussiveness demonstrates his versatility and offers a good balance to the sweetness found elsewhere.



The closing "Elmau Tage" however closes the album on a gently elegiac note more in keeping with the overall tone of the album.

"Good Days at Schloss Elmau" sees Simcock's stock continue to rise. It's a frequently beautiful record that seems destined to win Simcock many new admirers. His gift for melody is apparent throughout but there is also a rhythmic and harmonic sophistication that ensures that his music is both accessible AND interesting.

Simcock has done as much as anybody in recent times to achieve a synthesis between jazz and classical music. He's a genuinely nice guy too and one who deserves the success that has come his way in recent years. "Good days at Schloss Elmau" suggests that there is plenty more to come.