

Tranquility. Performers: Neil Swainson, bass; Don Thompson, piano. Toronto: Cornerstone Records, CRST CD 141, 2013. 1 compact disc (58:30). Contents: *Quasimodo* (4:29) – *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (5:07) – *I Remember You* (6:27) – *Tranquil* (6:20) – *A Face Like Yours* (6:30) – *Time Remembered* (8:52) – *Mr. Lucky* (6:30) – *Everybody’s Song But My Own* (6:19) – *Never Let Me Go* (7:49).

Tranquility was recorded in Toronto in October 2012 at Inception Studios by the duo of bassist Neil Swainson and pianist Don Thompson. Both are longstanding fixtures of the Canadian jazz scene, having played together in a myriad of groups and settings over the past thirty-five years. The repertoire on this recording is a combination of handpicked standards and an original. The simple arrangements, as Swainson explains in the notes, are intended to leave room for “maximum spontaneity” and also to best reflect their live duo performances. Yet simplicity is also demanding. With only one other musician to work with through the melodies and changes, it can be hard to keep the songs fresh. This is clearly not an issue for Thompson and Swainson, whose arrangements form the perfect backdrop for the rich interplay between them. While simple, these arrangements are never boring, as both musicians weave expertly in and around the songs and each other in a way that is only possible with someone whom you have known for a long time. *Tranquility* is indeed “a conversation between old friends,” as Swainson describes it.

The album begins with the Charlie Parker classic, “Quasimodo.” Both Thompson and Swainson play the head together. The tempo is lively, the feel swings hard. Thompson’s solo for the most part focuses on crafting melodic lines that use bebop-infused twists and turns, as well as minimal chordal accompaniment in the left hand until his final chorus. Swainson’s solo also has an easy swing feel, as well as a masterful use of space in his bop-infused lines.

A solo rubato piano marks the beginning of the standard, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” Swainson undergirds Thompson’s solo with a two feel, providing a contrast to the flurry of double-time passages that comprise the bulk of the piano solo.

The pace picks up with the duo’s lively rendition of “I Remember You.” Swainson’s walking bass complements Thompson’s melodic lines perfectly as he improvises through the melody in the head. Thompson’s playing is mostly linear, with only the occasional chordal accompaniment. Swainson’s solo keeps up the lively pace, weaving between melodic and walking lines. Swainson and Thompson then solo together before heading out.

Swainson’s own composition, “Tranquil,” follows. Beginning with a pensive rubato bass intro and piano accompaniment, the piano then takes the melody, with the bass playing in a very free two feel. There is a wistful quality to the bass solo, which begins gradually, letting the melodic motifs breathe between phrases.

“A Face Like Yours” opens with a richly textured solo piano intro. The bass enters in a two feel for the head, which gives the piece a sense of motion. Thompson’s solo focuses mainly on melodic development, with very simple comping to accompany his phrases. As the solo builds Swainson

walks over the changes, further heightening the intensity of the piece. Swainson's driving lines in his solo again highlight his melodic prowess. Thompson punctuates these lines with a simple chordal accompaniment in a two feel. The piano takes a final solo chorus before playing the head out, the melody heavily embellished with improvised passages and block chords.

Next on the album is "Time Remembered," written by the celebrated jazz pianist, Bill Evans. Thompson and Swainson open the tune freely, trading lines and ideas as Thompson breaks out his most Evans-like chord voicings. Their rendition sparks energy as they weave through the song, often wandering off on improvisatory phrases and interludes. In particular, the two seem to enjoy trading motifs, which take on a call and response that seems to anchor their divergences.

The duo then breaks into a Henri Mancini tune, "Mr. Lucky." This bluesy, medium swing arrangement has none of the kitsch of the original TV theme, but still manages to playfully salute it. Both musicians take a turn playing the melody, and their solos groove hard.

Next, the duo plays a Kenny Wheeler piece, "Everybody's Song But My Own." Wheeler's characteristic harmonic structures shine brightly in this arrangement, and this duo captures the floating motion of the 6/8 feel effortlessly. The tune begins with a lush, rubato intro on the piano. The bass enters, and the song shifts into a 6/8 feel, with the bass playing in 2. Thompson's playing floats over the bass, and both musicians are playing rather freely, trading lines, diverging and returning to the song seemingly with one mind. It is at this point that their synchronicity is evident.

"Never Let Me Go" features Swainson's thoughtful and melodic playing. The tune begins with a bass intro, and he plays the head, with piano accompaniment. The mood of this song is melancholic, and Swainson's solo is thoughtful and rich. When Thompson begins his solo, he matches the subdued tone. Swainson's playing matches Thompson's in intensity as the piano solo builds, gradually incorporating more complex bass lines, and also trading back and forth with the piano. Swainson's solo in this tune is marked by long, arcing lines, which are grounded by a lush piano accompaniment.

The energy generated by this duo is anything but tranquil. Thompson and Swainson seem almost as if they are of one mind. Their collective sense of time is flawless, and their sensitivity to each other's playing means that they are both comfortable taking the other in different directions as they go through each piece. The end result is a recording that is at once polished and spontaneous. I highly recommend this album.

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