

Editors' Picks



BY FRANK ALKYER

Armen Donelian, *Sayat-Nova: Songs Of My Ancestors* (Sunnyside)

Armen Donelian is a massively gifted pianist. There's a graceful confidence and touch to his approach that's rooted equally in jazz, classical and folk music. On *Sayat-Nova: Songs Of My Ancestors*, Donelian effortlessly intertwines the three while digging into the music of his Armenian ancestry. The songs of Armenian musician Sayat-Nova (1712–'95) have been handed down from generation to generation.

Donelian grew up listening to this music, and on his new two-CD set, he updates the poet-composer's work with a jazz sensibility and classical sheen to create a very modern-sounding joy. On the first disc, Donelian performs solo, demonstrating a command of the piano that few on the scene today can match. He lavishes in the lyricism of "Where Do You Come From, Wandering Nightingale? / Oosdi Goukas Gharib Blbool." He adroitly straddles the folk and classical realms on "Surely, You Don't Say That You Also Cry? / Ches Asoum Te Latz-es Eli." He squeezes every ounce of heartache from "With The Nightingale You Also Cry / Blbooli-Hit Latz-es Eli." He aches with love and sophistication on the eight-minute track "Were I Offered Your Weight In Pearls / Tekouz Koo Kashn Markrit Tan." For the second disc, Donelian adds bassist David Clark and drummer George Schuller to the festivities. On "King Of Cathay / Shahkhatayee," the trio glides across the sands, with Clark and Schuller maintaining an infectious, loping beat that's combined with Donelian's massive chops. Another lovely tune, "Your Headdress Is Silver And Silk / Tasdamazt Sim Oo Sharbab," begins with Donelian stating the melody solo, and then Clark adds subtle arco work. When Schuller joins in, the tune takes off for a beautiful ride. "As Long As I Draw Breath / Kani Vor Jan Eem," the closing number, tugs at the heartstrings and then explodes into an improvisational dream. The trio is locked, loaded and on fire. What's so interesting about this 14-song program is that the melodies seem familiar yet hard to place. On one level, Donelian is reinforcing the importance of Sayat-Nova as a composer. But in the process of bringing these songs front and center, the pianist is also finding new inspiration in the ancient. It's a powerful blend. On April 27, Donelian, Clark and Schuller will perform songs from *Sayat-Nova* at Castle Street Cafe in Great Barrington, Mass.