

Armen Donelian *Sayat-Nova: Songs Of My Ancestors*

SUNNYSIDE 4018

★★★½

While the 18th-century Armenian troubadour Sayat-Nova may not be a household name in the Western world, he has long been recognized as one of the greatest poets and troubadours to emerge from the Caucasus region. On the two discs that make up *Sayat-Nova: Songs Of My Ancestors*, the Armenian-American



pianist Armen Donelian has prepared a deeply felt—and often strikingly beautiful—tribute to this distant master.

Most of Sayat-Nova's songs survive only as simple melodies, offering considerable scope to the modern arranger. Donelian—who, in addition to having a long career in jazz, was educated in harmony and counterpoint—has broken his arrangements into two distinct groups: The first disc features solo piano versions of nine of Sayat-Nova's compositions, while the second offers four more Sayat-Nova songs (plus one from Armenian folk musician Khachatur Avetisyan) performed as a trio with bass and drums.

The solo piano arrangements are, by far, the more extraordinary. Although Donelian is respectful of the original melodies, he also appears largely unbound by the constraints of any particular musical approach, using the spare frame of Sayat-Nova's compositions more as a compass than a map. His expansive improvisations occupy a beautifully elusive place somewhere between the taciturn introspection of Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes*, the modal lamentations of John Zorn's Masada songbook and the genial invention of Art Tatum's solo recordings. There are countless exquisite moments to be found within these nine extended meditations.

Next to such a carefully wrought offering, the trio disc cannot help but sound somewhat conventional. Although bassist David Clark and drummer George Schuller provide an agile and tightly focused rhythm section—and Donelian's improvisatory flights are constantly informed by a graceful melodic sensibility—the piano trio format has a tendency to downplay the unconventional exoticism that makes the first disc so compelling. The trio performances are never less than satisfying, and there are numerous passages where the combo really cooks, but there is little on the second disc to match the revelatory quality of Donelian's solo explorations.

In the course of his life, Sayat-Nova composed hundreds of songs, and their singular melodic language—at once disarmingly foreign and strangely familiar—seems to have offered Donelian a considerable well of inspiration. On the strength of the first disc alone, one can only hope that the songs on *Sayat-Nova: Songs Of My Ancestors* represent the beginning of a continuing partnership between the 18th-century master and his 21st-century disciple.

—Jesse Simon

Sayat-Nova: Songs of My Ancestors: Disc 1: Where Do You Come From, Wandering Nightingale (Oosdi Goukas Gharib Bibooll); I Have Traveled The Whole World Over (Tamam Ashkhar B'dood Eka); Without You, What Will I Do? (Arantz Kez Eench Goneem); Surely, You Don't Say That You Also Cry? (Ches Asoum Te Latz-es Eli); I'll Never Know Your True Worth (Hees Koo Gheemetrn Cheem Geeteel); I Call Lalanin (Hees Ganchoom Eem Lalaneen); Praised Among All Instruments (Amen Sazi Mechn Govats (Kamanche)); With The Nightingale You Also Cry (Bibooll Hit Latz-es Eli); Were I Offered Your Weight In Pearls (Tekouz Koo Kashn Markrit Tan). (55:00) Disc 2: King Of Cathay (Shahkhatyee); Your Headdress Is Silver And Silk (Tasdamazt Sim Oo Sharbab); My Sweet Harp (Eem Anoush Davigh); You Are Golden And Exotic Brocade (Tipa Oo Yenkitoonia); As Long As I Draw Breath (Kani Vor Jan Eem). (43:36)

Personnel: Armen Donelian, piano; David Clark, bass (Disc 2); George Schuller, drums (Disc 2).

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