

Alex Sipiagin
Moments Captured

With **Moments Captured**, trumpeter and composer **Alex Sipiagin** revisits the three-horn sextet sound he first explored in 2004 on **Equilibrium** (Criss 1257) and again in 2011 on **Destinations Unknown** (Criss 1336). You will hear that the densely polyphonic aspects of Sipiagin's writing continue to grow in their intricacy, lyricism and imaginative sweep, as his previous outing **Balance 38/58** (Criss 1378) also made plain. (About that 2015 release, one could say that guitarist Adam Rogers functioned almost as the third horn.)

On both earlier three-horn dates it was David Binney and **Chris Potter**, on alto and tenor saxophone respectively, joining the leader in the frontline. But here we have, alongside the returning Potter, the fiery altoist **Will Vinson**, who made such a strong contribution to **Introducing Joe Sanders** (Criss 1344) and debuted as a leader on **Criss Cross** in 2010 with **Stockholm Syndrome** (Criss 1330). "Will and I have had shared experiences, traveled together, played a lot in different situations," Sipiagin says. "We found we had similar points of view. All these guys play so incredibly." Sipiagin, for his part, has been busy on the label of late, as co-leader of the collective Opus 5 and a sideman with Misha Tsiganov, Manuel Valera, Conrad Herwig and Luis Perdomo.

On bass and drums are **Matt Brewer** and **Eric Harland**, staying on from the **Balance 38/58** lineup. Brewer divides his time between acoustic and electric bass and gives the music an impeccably tight and modern feel. A sideman on this label with Mike Moreno and David Binney, he went on to release his own **Mythology** (Criss 1373) and **Unspoken** (Criss 1390). Harland, a prolific Criss Cross sideman not only with Sipiagin but also Edward Simon, John Swana, Jimmy Greene, Joel Weiskopf, Walter Smith III, Zach Brock and Philip Dizack, raises the bar in every musical setting, and **Moments Captured** is no exception.

But the wild card here, the element of sonic surprise that brings Sipiagin's music into another zone, is pianist and keyboardist **John Escreet**. To be sure, Escreet appeared on **Balance 38/58** as well, but solely on acoustic piano. On **Moments Captured** he expands not only to Fender Rhodes but also the Prophet 6 synthesizer.

"I wanted to use the synth," Sipiagin explains, "because I heard how the Prophet 6 is one of the main instruments in John's life. He spent a lot of time researching it — this instrument has unlimited possibility. So for the last couple of years he's been practicing and searching. We played a few gigs at the 55 Bar where he brought it for the first time and I really loved the sound. When I started composing for this record I really kept that sound in mind. John took it so seriously — before the recording we got together at least five times at his house and tried different sounds on each tune. He was careful to write it all down, really preparing. I would say 90 percent of it he played live. That's why you hear a perfect mix of acoustic piano, Rhodes and synth, because he played everything at the same time."

Sipiagin plays flugelhorn on roughly half the album, beginning with ***Evija Bridge*** (pronounced

“eh-VEE-yah”). The song evokes a memory of an early morning run in Holland, a forest, a lake, a beautiful bridge: “That’s why I call the album **Moments Captured**,” Sipiagin says. “Trying to find the best way to capture the moment: such great circumstances, everything so peaceful... it’s like the best picture you could possibly imagine. I just want to put this into music.” Escreet’s burbling tremolos and surreal contrapuntal parts on synth alter the aural space right away.

After burning solos from flugelhorn, alto sax and Rhodes, the piece pivots back to the multipart theme, ushering in a solo from Potter that is more than just a solo: we’re hearing the tenor improvise live in the moment, but also Escreet doubling the entire thing on synth in an overdub. To my mind, this is one of the most technically startling achievements in much of recorded jazz today. But aside from the chops and ears required for Escreet to do it (“from memory, on the first take,” Sipiagin declares), it has the effect of turning Potter’s solo into a new compositional section, almost like a long big-band soli.

Vocalist **Alina Engibaryan** joins for the affecting **Moments from the Past**, a calmer song for which she wrote original lyrics. “Alina is absolutely incredible, a young vocalist from Russia,” Sipiagin says. “I met her in Holland when I was teaching in Groningen. She’s from Rostov, which is a really musical town — there’s a jazz scene going on, a very strong school. When she moved to New York I knew we had to work on something together. I also produced her [sophomore] album *Driving Down the Road*, which came out in January [2017].” Among the solos, Escreet’s acoustic turn stands out and contrasts beautifully with Brewer’s electric bass, shifting the tonal aesthetic once more.

Unexpected Reversal is a tune Sipiagin wrote several years ago, “about something happening that I didn’t exactly expect, but actually the opposite: when you’re certain it’s going to happen a certain way and then right in front of your face it’s something else. I modified this before the recording and added parts, so I look at it as a brand new song.” Brewer switches to acoustic bass as the ornate theme plays out. The solos transpire over flowing time and shifting meters: first a fiery trading exchange between Potter and Vison, then Sipiagin (who plays both trumpet and flugelhorn on the track), then a head-spinning turn from Escreet on Prophet 6, teeming with imagination and controlled chaos. First it’s pure aural abstraction and quasi-noise, leading into a bent yet relentlessly swinging feature.

Blues for Mike is dedicated to the late Michael Brecker. Sipiagin worked with Brecker in his Quintet and remains in awe of the tenor icon’s gifts: “His music is always with me. This song was inspired a single phrase from one of his albums. Some of it I left intact, straight from the solo. The phrase sounds like a tune already, so I arranged his line, spread it a little bit longer, added notes and arranged it for three horns.” While Sipiagin points to the 12-bar form as the only blues-like thing about the piece, you can still hear certain turnarounds and hits in the harmonic rhythm that bring a blues flavor to the performance and the solos.

Breeze, according to Sipiagin, is “a pure dedication to my heroes Kenny Wheeler and John Taylor” (both sadly deceased within the last three years). Engibaryan returns with wordless vocals to echo the plaintive melody. “I was inspired listening to Kenny and John all my life,” says

Sipiagin, “and the changes on this tune reflect those moods. I didn’t want any solos, I just wanted to keep this spirit for five minutes. *Dream* is similar: it’s two episodes, and on the second episode it just grooves and stays there. I thought we might add some solo on the top, or collective improvisation, or some lyrics. But everyone thought it was such a moment of peace and calm and good energy that we should just leave it like it is. In the studio, when we finished the short melody in the beginning and the rhythm section kept grooving, I was almost about to stop them. But they went deep, deep into the groove. Eric, John and Matt all closed their eyes and kept grooving for like 10 minutes. And I thought ‘Ok, let them.’”

Bergen Road, a complex hard-swinging piece with a decidedly acoustic jazz feel (no synthesizer here), refers to “a place near where I live on the way to the best vineyard in Long Island, which is Macari Vineyards,” Sipiagin offers. “The owner, Joe Macari, has the most amazing collection of Long Island wines, which ordinarily aren’t so popular but these are amazing. He’s been so supportive of what I do, and we’ve played a lot of concerts at his winery, so I dedicated this song to him.”

While Sipiagin opted not to list the different pieces on *Moments Captured* as a suite, he does see at least some of these “moments” as connected in their expressive intent. *Evija Bridge*, *Moments from the Past*, *Breeze* and *Dream* in particular are related, the leader clarifies. It’s a kind of theme for Sipiagin, whose previous albums also take inspiration from moments that happen during his life of busy travel. The summoning of these hard-to-state feelings, the use of all the varied sonic tools and virtuosity at his disposal, and just the right dose of daring and determination to stay true to himself: in these regards and more, Sipiagin continues his quest as one of the great jazz artists of his time.

David R. Adler

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