

Michael Jefry Stevens
The Poet Is in the House

If you drive north about three hours from my home in Athens, Georgia, you'll reach North Carolina's stunning western mountain region. There, in and around the artistic haven of Asheville, you'll encounter a community of fine musicians — one of them being pianist and composer Michael Jefry Stevens, whose commanding work for the 15-piece Mountain Chamber Jazz Ensemble is so vividly captured on this album, *The Poet Is in the House*. Another of Asheville's cherished figures was drummer, music journalist and educator Robin Tolleson, who took on the task of writing liner notes for this album but tragically passed away before he could complete them. It's a double honor, therefore, for me to finish what Robin started, and to comment on the deeply melodic, richly orchestrated music that Stevens has crafted here.

My first encounter with Stevens was in the late '90s, at a Connecticut jazz workshop where I experienced his teaching acumen firsthand. He was temporarily overseeing an ensemble in which I played; I brought in a hastily transcribed tune and he devised an efficient rehearsal plan for it on the spot. His methodical approach inspired the handful of players in the room to reach to the best of their abilities. I imagine something like this, on a larger scale, is what transpired with the Mountain Chamber Jazz Ensemble, a colorful assemblage of reeds and strings, trombone, vibraphone, and vocals from the talented Kate Cilluffo on half the program.

Robin delineated many of the highlights in his unfinished notes but did not get to the stately minor-key waltz "What a Dance," with its resonant flute textures, eloquent Christian Howes violin solo and expressive lyrics by Kathleen Sannwald. "Trailer Park Heaven," inspired by a monthlong stay in 2005 at the Centrum Artist Colony in Port Townsend, Washington, has a certain Ellingtonian flavor, with Frank Southecorvo's baritone sax in the foreground and Justice Mann's trombone repeating a cross-rhythm counterline, as strings and flutes establish a mood of haunting dissonance. Drummer Bill Berg's steady beat gives way to the freer energy of collective improvisation before the gently rolling tempo returns and pizzicato strings assert themselves in the final minute. "Sad," the closing track, a lyrical waltz with an affecting Cilluffo vocal, edges into funky swing under fine violin and trombone solos.

Never one to shrink from political engagement, Stevens addresses the 2019 status quo with "Trump (Dire Warning #1)" — and at this point, can any warning be dire enough? The Third Stream elements are pronounced here, departing from a jazz aesthetic as Cilluffo speak-sings the text of "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats in the manner of a Schoenberg lieder, her voice framed by martial snare drum patterns and harmonic passages of beguiling and elusive beauty.

At every turn, Stevens makes imaginative use of the instruments' unique tonal qualities, creating intersecting parts between sections in a music full of rhythmic and dynamic flux. "Borderline" is an especially rich example: a chamber-group introduction leads to Bill Berg's entrance on brushes as the song moves into a jazz ballad feel. The swing feel heats up for trombone and bari sax solos, with vibes and piano comping respectively (an alluring textural

contrast). Bassist Bill Fouty takes the final solo before Cilluffo's vocal returns, this time in the chamber-group setting of the opening. The text is from Langston Hughes' poem "Border Line" — Stevens couldn't have known it while conceiving the piece, but it brings us back to the matter of his friend Robin Tolleson's untimely death and serves as a fittingly profound elegy:

*I used to wonder
About living and dying –
I think the difference lies
Between tears and crying.*

*I used to wonder
About here and there –
I think the distance
Is nowhere.*

— David R. Adler