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Anders Hagberg: *North*

Prophone

In terms of sound and style, *North*, the latest release by woodwinds player Anders Hagberg, has more in common with an ECM release than one from Blue Note. Pooling the talents of musicians from Sweden, Norway, and Finland, the album exudes a strong atmospheric quality, with nine settings characterized by spaciousness and sensitive interplay. Yet in contrast to the cerebral cool of some ECM albums, Hagberg's is warm and intimate, the difference attributable to the prominence given flute and the folk-flavoured melodies that ground certain pieces. *North* does also feature him on soprano sax, but it's his C, alto, and bass flute playing that bolsters this lovely album's appeal.

He and pianist Joonas Toivanen, double bassist Johannes Lundberg, and percussionist Helge Andreas Norbakken convened for two days in late February to record the album, just before the pandemic hit. Some have worked with Hagberg already (Lundberg for more than ten years), whereas others are recent associates. If the sound quality of the recording impresses, it likely has something to do with the contributions Lundberg, who's worked as a sound technician on ECM productions, made to the project as co-producer. While *North* combines through-composed and improv-directed performances, the lines blur when the music-making is enriched by intuitive responsiveness to collective expression as it's happening.

The compositions aren't randomly titled, with most alluding to people and places significant to Hagberg. Whereas "Islands of the North" and "Avenue Junot" are titled in reference to the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic and a Paris street in Montmartre, respectively, "Inga" is titled in memory of singer Inga Juuso, who was a member of his band Earthsongs. No awareness of such associations is needed, however, to derive satisfaction from the recording as the pieces resonate on purely musical terms. Hagberg's writing blends the improvisatory openness of jazz with melodic lyricism emblematic of the Nordic region.

"Islands of the North" illustrates the beauty of the sound world the four are capable of creating. Unison flute-and-piano voicings of dance-like melodies provide mystery as Norbakken fills the air with percussive colour and Lundberg animates the performance with fluid lines. Arguably the loveliest track is "Inga," whose impact is heightened by the soulfulness of the playing. Executed at a sultry clip, the piece seduces all the more intently when Hagberg uses bass flute for this moving homage. Soulful too is "Children," which closes the album strikingly. While much of *North* is ruminative, a few tracks are rhythmically robust, "Four Three" the most overtly swinging. Elsewhere, ambient textures intensify the atmospheric, ECM-like tone of the title track, and "Melodic Modes" reflects the inspiration Hagberg's drawn from collaborations with Middle Eastern musicians.

As striking as his flute playing is, his soprano saxophone is hardly undistinguished, as his evocation of "Avenue Junot" shows. Here and elsewhere, Hagberg shows himself to be a soloist who considers every note carefully and shapes his poised statements with intense consideration of rhythm and space. Much the same could be said of Toivanen, who demonstrates similar qualities in his contributions as soloist and accompanist. When not performing, Hagberg is a professor of musical performance and improvisation at the University of Gothenburg, but *North* is anything but an academic exercise when its music exudes feeling, warmth, and humanity and presents small-group interplay at an exceptionally high level.

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