Aaron Parks - Arborescence (2013)



1 Asleep In The Forest 4:16 2 Toward Awakening 6:16 3 Past Presence 4:28 4 Elsewhere 7:04 5 In Pursuit 5:32 6 Squirrels 2:21 7 Branchings 5:08 8 River Ways 3:06 9 A Curious Bloom 3:24 10 Reverie 4:17 11 Homestead 3:59 Piano – Aaron Parks

Slowly but surely, over the past several years, ECM Records has forged relationships with some of New York City's most impressive musicians—no mean feat given that, despite the Big Apple no longer being the jazz mecca it once was, it certainly remains a lightning rod for some of the world's most creative musicians, ranging from trumpeter Ralph Alessi and saxophonists Tim Berne and Chris Potter, to pianists David Virelles, Jason Moran and Craig Taborn—all of whom have been represented, either as guests or leaders, on some of the most uncompromising and impressive music to be released in recent times—not just on the heralded German label, but anywhere, period.

Add to that list pianist Aaron Parks—who, like Taborn's superb first recording as a leader for the label (2011's Avenging Angels), makes his own ECM debut by contributing another fine installment to a label that has, across four decades beginning with Chick Corea's Piano Improvisations Vol. 1 (1971) and Keith Jarrett's Facing You (1972), defined the litmus test against which all subsequent solo piano recordings are measured.

Parks is a rarity: a young musician who, at a time when such things are difficult if not impossible, spent his first few professional years mentored by an older musician, in this case Terence Blanchard. The trumpeter met Parks when the pianist was 15, recruiting him three years later and giving him an opportunity to see how it was done both on the road and in the studio, so that when Parks stepped out on his own with the acclaimed Invisible Cinema (Blue Note, 2008), he was well and truly ready.

In the ensuing years, Parks has become increasingly in demand, including membership with the egalitarian James Farm, the promise of its 2011 eponymous Nonesuch debut confidently delivered with more recent live performances, and with Kurt Rosenwinkel, whose Star of Jupiter (Wommusic, 2012) represented yet another career milestone for the upwardly mobile guitarist.

None of which prepare for Arborescence, a suite of eleven largely spontaneous creations that reflect a great many touchstones while, at the same time, speaking with a voice that has fully matured, now plainly assertive of its own personality. The opening "Asleep in the Forest" and darkly pastoral "Elsewhere" feel somehow a kinship to French composer Erik Satie, were he to have hailed from the forests of the Northwestern United States (where Parks grew up) instead of the southern estuary of the Seine River in Northwestern France. Minimalistic hints imbue the repetitive motif-driven "In Pursuit," where Parks' virtuosity—never an end, just a means—is more dominant, while the skewed and, at times, abstruse lyricism of "Branchings" and "Past Presence" hint at Paul Bley's innovations in the realm of spontaneously composition, despite Parks' independent voice a constant delineator throughout this 50-minute set.

With Parks turning 30 a week prior to Arborescence's October 15 release, the pianist's milestones continue to accelerate. His past work may have been consistently impressive, but Arborescence represents the true watershed of Parks' arrival as an artist whose future shines brighter with every passing year. ---John Kelman, allaboutjazz.com

There is no shortage of fine solo piano offerings on ECM, going all the way back to Paul Bley's classic 1973 Open, To Love. Twenty-nine-year-old pianist Aaron Parks is notable in jazz circles for the skill he displayed in bands led by Terence Blanchard and Kurt Rosenwinkel, as well as on his own wonderful Invisible Cinema for Blue Note in 2008. Arborescence, his first solo recording for ECM, marks his second appearance on the label. His first was backing South Korean vocalist Yeahwon Shin on her lovely collection of ballads and lullabies, Lua Ya, recorded in 2012 and released in September 2013. Arborescence is a collection of 11 improvised pieces recorded at Mechanics Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts. Though two works, "Elsewhere" and "Homestead," were taken from previously composed works, here mere elements and themes were used as jumping-off points into exploration. This set is very much in the moment, though its atmosphere is more internal and restrained. A listen to its mysterious opener, "Asleep in the Forest," evidences this. The piano's sounds and harmonies are investigated not as process, but as a deeply connected emotional dialogic relationship between

instrument and music, to reveal a "voice." The use of repetition in many of these pieces isthe polar opposite, with the much more dynamic "In Pursuit" as an example, revealing the sound of the pianist digging inside the emotional and sonic geography where harmony, space, tone, and silence commingle. "Toward Awakening" commences haltingly, one carefully placed note and chord at a time, but gradually develops movement as its timbral palette expands, never losing its intuitive elegance. "River Ways" comes from several directions at once, as the left hand articulates a repetitive sequence, the right hand conjures it further in another register, both of them meeting on a seam where dissonance, multiple tonalities, and several voices are articulated invidiously in directions that diverge after their initial meeting. Arborescence is as mercurial after ten listenings as it is after one. The only "strategy" that these pieces seem to share is Parks' determination to remain open as improviser and listener. This requires discipline. He never runs off with his discoveries, but remains present to them as they whisper, move, and slowly dance, seemingly never imposing his will against the suggestion of the music itself. The innate, quiet grace displayed on Arborescence is far from static, but an intricate, ever-evolving labyrinth of sonic communication and elocution. ---Thom Jurek, allmusic.com

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