Meridian Trio – Triangulum (2017)



1 Rhododendron 2 Triangulum 3 Ringdown 4 Reminiscing 5 Witch Hazel 6 Solstice 63 7 Strange 8 Inflection Point Nick Mazzarella – alto saxophone Matt Ulery – bass Jeremy Cunningham – drums

2017 is proving to be something of a breakout year for alto saxophonist Nick Mazzarella. He recently released Signaling, a superb freely-improvised duo recording with cellist Tomeka Reid, and now he's followed it up with this excellent outing from the Meridian Trio, where he is joined by his colleagues Matt Ulery on bass and Jeremy Cunningham on drums. Whereas on Signaling we are given a glimpse of Mazzarella's substantial prowess as a sympathetic partner in an unstructured context, here the emphasis is on Mazzarella's strong compositions and tight-as-a-drum collaboration within a Chicago-based trio that has been working together since 2014.

Recorded live at the tail end of a month-long series of appearances at the Chicago club The Whistler, Mazzarella's eight originals serve as the foundation for some daring explorations of the "meridian" between the inside and outside regions of the jazz tradition. Continuing the approach taken by like-minded trailblazing altoists like Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Henry Threadgill, Oliver Lake, and Gary Bartz, Mazzarella seeks to embody the history of the music while pushing it forward into new realms. One can definitely perceive this mission in Mazzarella's compositions, which have melodic cores that are catchy and memorable, yet open-ended enough to allow for spirited adventure. The compelling tunes at the heart of tracks like "Rhododendron," "Ringdown" and "Witch Hazel" are powerfully articulated by Mazzarella, whose lyrical sensibility is always present even during the group's more outward- leaning moments. Part of this is due to the strong undercurrent of the blues in Mazzarella's playing: listen to the ecstatic shouts he delivers on his horn during "Ringdown" or "Solstice 63" as proof that even Mazzarella's most tumultuous expressions won't come at the expense of an essential rootedness in basic blues feeling.

As for Ulery and Cunningham, they provide a rock-solid rhythmic structure for the music: whether tightening or slackening the pulse, they're always moving in seamless rapport with each other and with Mazzarella. While cuts like "Rhododendron" and "Ringdown" showcase the group's hard-driving swing, even freer tracks like "Triangulum" or "Strange," where the sense of time is much more malleable, possess a fundamental integrity and coherence reflecting the trio's obvious ability to react and respond as one.

For a live recording, not only the dynamics of the music but also the ambience of the room is captured nicely— perhaps a little too nicely, given the rather audible chatter that is especially noticeable during the less boisterous moments, when a less talkative audience would have allowed for easier appreciation of the subtlety of the group's interplay. But such concerns are forgotten once we get to the phenomenal closing cut, "Inflection Point," where the feisty leaps and exclamations of Mazzarella's Dolphy-inspired solo leave no doubt that this music can stand mightily on its own, regardless of the circumstances in which it's performed. ---Troy Dostert, allaboutjazzcom

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