

Julia Hülsmann Trio □ – Imprint (2011)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Rond Point* 4:07 2 *Grand Canyon* 6:23 3 *A Light Left On* 5:40 4 *Juni* 4:08 5 *Storm In A Teacup* 4:11 6 *(Go And Open) The Door* 7:12 7 *Kauf Dir Einen Bunten Luftballon* 3:30 8 *Ritual* 5:22 9 *Lulu's Paradise* 4:54 10 *Ulmenwall* 6:06 11 *Zahlen Bitte* 6:14 12 *Who's Next* 4:15
Double Bass [Double-Bass] – Marc Muellbauer Drums – Heinrich Köbberling
Piano – Julia Hülsmann

Longevity is tough to maintain, in a time when artists largely need to work with a variety of projects to make a living, but there are increasing (and encouraging) signs of the value placed on chemistry and the kind of collective voice that evolves naturally, over time. German pianist Julia Hülsmann has maintained the same trio lineup for 15 years, though her early releases on the ACT label were augmented with vocalists and, in the case of *Good Morning Midnight* (2005), a larger ensemble that included horns, bandoneon and electronics. So, when Hülsmann was recruited by ECM for her label debut, *The End of a Summer* (2008), it represented a distillation back to her core trio, for an all-acoustic set, favoring a freer-thinking and more delicate approach to music that, with the exception of a lovely cover of Seal's "Kiss From a Rose," was written by either Hülsmann, bassist Marc Muellbauer or drummer Heinrich Köbberling. It was also clear that Manfred Eicher's involvement—a rare hands-on producer who's an integral partner in nearly every record he releases—had much to do with Hülsmann's trio making a significant collective leap.

Imprint represents a logical evolution for the trio, though there's one particularly significant change; both the writing and the playing is stronger, more outgoing than the largely introspective *End Of A Summer*. That's not to say the trio has lost its ability to communicate at levels so deep that even the approaching silence of a collective decay is empathically connected during gentler songs like Hülsmann's "A Light Left On," where the pianist and Muellbauer effortlessly share its thematic development. The pianist's "Juni" is another quiet composition of a darker-hued disposition, with Köbberling's brushes and Muellbauer's sparsely chosen notes suggesting time, that ebbs and flows with Hülsmann's slowly unveiling melody.

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But even Imprint's more inward-looking material feels somehow stronger, more confident, as if the fundamental shift of End Of A Summer has led to a new place where the trio can more profoundly interact.

In another example of Eicher's overarching narrative through careful track sequencing, "Storm in a Teacup" concludes this trifecta of pieces that act as a calming transition between the more up-tempo "Grand Canyon"—built around a repetitive pulse from Hülsmann, and supported by Köbberling's paradoxically delicate but fiery polyrhythmic support—and the pianist's "(Go And Open) The Door," the album's longest track and an indication of greater compositional complexity, as shifting meters lead to a middle section that features Muellbauer's muscular tone and unfailing melodic disposition. There's even a hint of swing on Köbberling's "Zahlen bitte."

Like End Of A Summer, overt virtuosity has little place on Imprint, but the equilateral triangle that forms this trio, with each side gently pushing and pulling—never for dominance but, perhaps, for emphasis—is the unmistakable consequence of three players who, after being together for many years, have leapt to another plateau since joining ECM. With greater aplomb, and a more balanced blend of extroverted energy and the equal power of understatement, Imprint is a watershed recording for the egalitarian Hülsmann and her trio, and one of 2011's best piano trio recordings to date. ---John Kelman, allaboutjazz.com

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