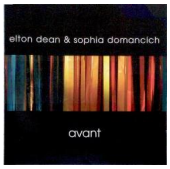
Elton Dean & Sophia Domancich – Avant (2005)



1 Avant-Après (À Jozefa) 18:13 2 No Fuss 2:11 3 No Bother 27:59 4 Les Portes-En-Ré 8:43 Alto Saxophone – Elton Dean Piano – Sophia Domancich

Saxophonist Elton Dean first came to fame in the late '60s as a member of pianist Keith Tippett's sextet, and perhaps more prominently as part of what is now considered to be the classic Soft Machine lineup that recorded Third, Fourth and Fifth. Since that time he's been involved in a variety of projects—both as a group member and leader—that have maintained his ties to the British Canterbury scene, while at the same time continuing to forge his own identity as a fearless free improviser.

Not as well-known, pianist Sophia Domancich has nevertheless been something of a force on the French improvising scene, having worked with Orchestre National de Jazz, ex-Henry Cow bassist/vocalist John Greaves (who relocated to France in the early '80s), and more recently releasing her own recording, Pentacle, on the sadly now-defunct Sketch label.

Dean and Domancich have come together on a series of projects spanning nearly twenty years, involving other members of the Canterbury scene, including Hatfield and the North drummer Pip Pyle's Equip' Out, and more recently the collective Soft Bounds, which also includes Domancich's partner, drummer Simon Goubert, and another Soft Machine alumnus, bassist Hugh Hopper. But on Avant, the latest release from Britain's Hux Records, Dean and Domancich join together as a duet for the first time. This live concert, while based on loose compositional sketches, is largely improvised, and it finds the pair operating without a safety net—completely exposed and with the kind of free reign that larger ensembles rarely afford.

Each contributes a pair of compositions to the nearly hour-long set. But while the writing provides a starting point, where the duo ultimately goes represents the kind of adventure that can only be found when two improvisers are deeply in tune with each other. The overall ambience is dark and brooding—there's nothing that could be remotely considered joyous about these extended pieces, although there is a clear joy in the sense of discovery and common musical experience that pervades the set.

Both Dean and Domancich are highly responsive players, capable of reacting to each other's ideas in ways that are at times frighteningly telepathic. Both have the kind of technical ability that would allow more dazzling demonstrations, but it's a greater sense of space, and a desire to create pieces that breathe with a deeper meaning, that gives the performance its life. Free and unfettered improvisation? Yes. But disorganized, without an underlying sense of purpose? Unequivocally no.

Avant represents, perhaps, a culmination of years spent involved in other projects that, while inarguably providing an opportunity for self-expression, never allowed for as great a sense of pure freedom. Hopefully this recording is but the first of many collaborations from a duo that brings new meaning to the term spontaneous composition. ---John Kelman, allaboutjazz.com

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