

Winstone / Gesing / Venier

An English singer, a German reedman, an Italian pianist.

A remarkable group whose intimate performances encompass a great arc of music. Here are three adventurous musicians united by a profound feeling for song. The stark instrumentation – voice, piano, bass clarinet/ soprano sax - seems never to limit their repertoire, but to encourage the players to explore widely, and to make musical use of the available space.

Jazz ballads, old and new, find their place alongside – for instance – adaptations of Friulian folk songs, and ‘chamber’ pieces influenced by classical or contemporary composition. Textures, colours and rhythms may be drawn from scattered, surprising sources: a sudden bright flash of calypso, perhaps, or the hypnotic lulling of an Armenian cradle song. Winstone, Gesing and Venier have played songs from Cole Porter to Komitas, borrowed melodies from Satie and Coltrane, culled lyrics from James Joyce poems and Christina Rossetti nursery rhymes. What they take they make their own, much of the material they compose themselves, and most of the words are Norma Winstone’s. As both singer and lyricist she has few contemporary peers: her words seem to float up from the music’s expressive core.

Nonetheless, this is not a story of singer and accompanists. If the group *is* Norma’s, as some promoters insist, she was the last to join it. In reality it is a band in which creative responsibilities are very equally shared. Glauco Venier and Klaus Gesing have collaborated in musical projects since the mid-90s, including a long running duo. They invited Norma to join them for Italian concerts a decade ago and the singer soon recognized a potential for developing a trio music with its own specific character, meanwhile documented on three outstanding recordings: “Chamber Music” (Universal, 2004), the Grammy-nominated “Distances” (ECM, 2008), and “Stories Yet To Tell” (ECM, for release Autumn 2010).

The recordings give an index of the group’s range, and reveal Venier and Gesing as gifted composers and distinctive instrumentalists. Venier’s choice of notes and his harmonizations are strikingly original, and Gesing has established his own methodology for bass clarinet in particular, vaulting between rhythm and melody functions, and matching textures and phrases with Winstone’s subtle voice.

From the beginning of her life in jazz, Norma Winstone has wanted to be part of the ensemble, rather than a frontwoman. She uses her voice ‘instrumentally’, to interweave improvised lines with her partners and participate in the blossoming harmony. When singing texts, she draws her fellow musicians ever deeper into the storylines sketched by the lyrics, until the plot is illuminated from three perspectives. It is a point of honour with this trio never to tell the tale, or play the music, the same way twice. One reason, amongst many, why it is important to experience the group live as well as on disc.

Steve Lake