

Artist: Gissel Velarde

Album: Angeles

Review by Matthew Warnock

Solo piano can be one of the hardest, yet most beautiful, forms of self-expression that any pianist can embark on. Whether it is performing a solo work from the classical repertoire, interpreting a jazz standard or creating a completely improvised piece of music on the spot, the orchestral nature of the instrument allows pianists of all backgrounds and styles to express their musicality through the art of solo piano. Bolivian born Gissel Velarde recently recorded a collection of six short, solo-piano pieces for her album *Angeles*, and the result is an engaging and intriguing look into the musical personality of this talented artist.

Each short piece, the shortest being 90 seconds and the longest running a little over five minutes in length, is a musical vignette, telling a short story based on one or two musical ideas. By choosing to keep each song, and the album, short, Velarde is avoiding any aural burnout with her audience, something that can sometimes happen to even the best musicians when they put together a long program of solo works for any instrument. It also helps keep the focus of each piece clear and audible to the listener, leading them through a musical journey of motivic, harmonic and rhythmic continuity. Not to say that this is a concept album of any kind, each song stands out on its own as a complete, musical statement, but within each piece the intent is clearly focused and delivered. There is no noodling or wasted notes or ideas. Velarde carefully crafts each line and phrase, delivering them with deep emotional commitment and a sense of how that line relates to what has been played and where the idea will take her next. This sense of connection is one of the reasons that this short record is so successful and why it is definitely worth listening to.

There are moments where Velarde connects chords and melody, such as the opening piece “Como en un Sueño (Like a Dream),” which showcases beautiful arpeggios forming the foundation for a simple, yet highly effective melodic statement that grows as the piece develops. There is no room in Velarde’s work for unnecessary notes or flash, and this piece is a testament to her advanced musicianship and search for the perfect note for every particular moment.

“Entre Mundos (Between Worlds)” is based on a repetitive four-note pattern that is craftily syncopated and developed throughout the piece. Velarde’s choice to insert two effective pauses, one at the start of the phrase, then one more between each two-note motive, may seem like a small choice in the larger framework of a piece. But, it proves to be a highly effective decision as it adds a third layer, rhythm, to the double-layered motive, already possessing harmony and melody.

Injecting rhythmic variety into a motive can also be heard on the album’s longest track “El Jardín Etéreo (The Ethereal Garden).” Here, rhythm is used to punctuate the chordal work throughout the piece. From the quickly attacked chords in the beginning of the song, to the longer held and rhythmically separated chords in the middle section, Velarde’s rhythmic approach is one of the reasons that this song, and the album as a whole, speaks so directly to the listener. This is not just a showcase for her technical ability or creative nature, but for her love of melody and rhythmic motives, helping her stand out against other solo pianists in the genre.

Overall *Angeles* is a strong release by the Bolivian born Velarde, one that is highly creative, expertly performed and leaves the audience wanting for more.

Review by Matthew Warnock

Rating: 4 stars (out of 5)

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