

Brazil Mehmani's Latest Release Dances Between Themes

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
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Pianist/composer/multi-instrumentalist André Mehmani has the rare distinction of being one of the most consistently inventive and absorbing, yet unacknowledged musicians in the forefront of Brazilian instrumental art.

Convincingly at ease in nearly all possible contexts, from Mozart to Monk, Mehmani possesses an impressive classical technique that is never just paraded; there is conviction in all he plays. His formidable improvisatory imagination and uninhibited lyricism have made his presence on any recording a strong assertion of its high quality.

Mehmani's latest super audio CD, *Lachrimae*, presents him as both writer and pianist in a thematically unified program of moody, atmospheric waltzes and ballads that mirror his own introspective nature.

Milton Nascimento's "Francisco" is a particularly striking example of how Mehmani works with a composition. Arranged for voice, cello, piano, contrabass, and drums, this hauntingly memorable performance with a fine supporting cast evokes love and loss and sublime stillness.

The exquisite Mônica Salmaso, letting her long notes shimmer, displays with her sensuous natural voice what Nascimento achieved in falsetto register.

The piano version of "Eternamente" (Eternally), a little waltz that appears three times on the CD in different ensemble settings, opens with a quote from Brahms's *Intermezzo Op. 118* floating benignly above the pulse of the piece.

This short track, one of the best, reveals Mehmani as an impressive solo pianist, posed midway between the eclecticism of Egberto Gismonti and the delicate impressionism of Bill Evans before segueing into "Canto Primeiro" (First Song), where its principle motif is also quoted.

Originally composed for and first recorded on *Canto* (1999) with Mehmani playing all instruments - piano, acoustic bass, synthesizers, viola, violin, flute, clarinet, scaletta, and percussion - here it is arranged for trio.

Mehmani's tone, subtle pedal effects, and the phrases he uses, as well as the amount of space that he leaves open around them, carry an arranger's artistic reasoning. And Sérgio Reze's extraordinary brush work, changing the entire texture with a single punctuation, takes the mood from an airy splendor to a hushed pondering.

On "Uma Valsa em Forma de Árvore" (Waltz in the Form of a Tree), the sinuous grace of Luca Raelle's clarinet, the ease of Mehmani's technique, and, above all, the intense warmth and melodic invention of the cello played by Dimos Goudaroulis remind the listener how a fresh alignment of great instrumentalists is always something of an occasion.

The composition, like most Mehmani originals, has the charm of both conception and interpretation that transcends the need to analyze structure or offer technical explanations.

When "Eternamente" makes its third appearance, it provides a particularly vivid, assured, and mature example of how two musicians can make perfect partners.

With a duo, nothing slips by unnoticed. Either you strike the magic chord, where you can anticipate your partner's every intention, answering questions before they have even been asked, or you sink into contrived chit chat.

Mônica Salmaso's alluring voice, rich in nuance and subtlety, combines with the pearl-like lyricism of Mehmani's melodic lines and his remarkable rubato in extracting everything from this piece. Their empathy, especially during the short

improvisatory section, is extraordinary.

One of the most fascinating aspects of a Mehmari trio is that it is never just a pianist with rhythm accompaniment. There is constant switching of roles as first one player and then another steps into the foreground and then back.

The title track, Mehmari's "Lachrimae" (Tears), contains the extremes of his stylistic ambit, from an impossibly graceful touch to harsh drams of almost unbearable intensity; the pianist gets hand-in-glove- support from the emphatic Célio Barros on bass and Sérgio Reze on drums.

Borrowing its harmonic language and overall mood from English Renaissance composer John Dowland, and containing improvisations inspired by pre-baroque polyphony, the tune deserves more than a few listenings.

There is a cunning fraternity of ideas on "Passarinhadeira" (Bird Nests), a lyrically reflective ballad by Paulo César Pinheiro and Guinga.

With the contrabass played by Célio Barros and drummer Rogério Boccato's rhythmic color and propulsion unerringly centering the musical spotlight on the soloist, there is a keen sense of inquiry in this pared-down arrangement that establishes a marvelous tension. Chords are meticulously dissected and rearranged, probed for inner resonance; the whole form used to lyrical ends.

Affording a warmer sound, greater amplitude between instruments, and increased detail in dynamics, this super audio CD gets the balance between passion and beauty just right. Everything about it is superlative: the compositions, the free-flowing interplay, the level of inspiration, the brilliantly focused improvising.

Whether the poignancy of Edu Lobo's "Pra Dizer Adeus" (To Say Goodbye), the fragility and exposed vulnerability of Pixinguinha's "Carinhoso" (Affectionate), or Mehmari's own abstracted view of Nelson Cavaquinho's "Amor Perfeito" (Perfect Love), this recording is quintessential Mehmari.

No one forces the pace or distorts musical contours. The entire disc is infectious in its tone and substance. Everything breaths naturally. Like a good vintage wine that has many dimensions revealed upon opening, a bouquet of soft, intimate textures is aired on Lachrimae.

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Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an international monthly publication based in Los Angeles, for close to a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.

He is the recipient of three government grants that allowed him to research traditional music in China, India, and Brazil. His articles on Brazilian music have been translated and published in Dutch, German, Portuguese, Serbian, and Spanish. You can reach him through his e-mail: cuica@interworld.net.