

Album Released: 19th August 2016 - Label: Whirlwind Recordings

**Euan Stevenson and Konrad Wiszniewski
New Focus On Song**

Robin Kidson reviews this album for us:

The pairing of jazz musicians with string groups or orchestras has had a chequered history. Bird just about carried it off with his *Charlie Parker with Strings* project, but other musicians have often struggled to achieve a successful integration. In 1961, Stan Getz had a go. The result was the album, *Focus*, a critical and artistic triumph which has been a benchmark for jazz-strings combos ever since.



Focus has been the inspiration for two Scottish musicians, Euan Stevenson and Konrad Wiszniewski, who have come together in a collaboration which they call *New Focus*. They produced a well-received album of that name on the Whirlwind Recordings label in 2012. And now comes a follow up album, *New Focus On Song*. Stevenson plays piano on the album and has composed all but three of the 13 tracks. The remaining tracks are by Wiszniewski who also plays tenor and soprano sax as well as clarinet and whistle. Andrew Robb on bass and Alyn Cosker on drums make up the jazz quartet at the heart of the album. The strings are provided by the Glasgow String Quartet (William Chandler and Lorna Rough on violins, Ian Budd on viola and Betsy Taylor on cello). Nicola Wiszniewska (flute) and Alina Bzhezinska (harp) also feature on a number of tracks.

The original *Focus* album was a very American work. Stevenson and Wiszniewski may have used it as an initial model for *New Focus* but are no Getz clones and have moved the concept on by taking on board a number of other, more European influences including folk music, and classical composers such as Vaughan Williams, Debussy and Ravel. The result feels very British – or, on some of the more folksy tracks, Scottish.

The track most clearly influenced by *Focus* is the Wiszniewski composition, *Little Allegory* (track 5). This has the spikiness and complexity of some of the original *Focus* tracks with the strings closely integrated into the whole, and some interesting shifts in mood and tempo. Saxophone playing has moved on since the days of Stan Getz and Wiszniewski's superb playing on the track shows he has absorbed Coltrane et al as well as adding something of his own style.

The Stevenson composition *Corea Change* (track 7) also has *Focus* elements with again, some frenetic work by the strings but the string quartet soon drops away and we are left with great jazz quartet playing with Stevenson, Wiszniewski, Robb and Cosker really stretching out and showing what they can do. Much the same happens on Stevenson's *Fourths Ostinato* (track 10): initial spiky string playing followed by the jazz quartet on its own playing straight ahead jazz with the added bonus of a nice drum solo from Alyn Cosker. There is also some straight jazz to be heard on the

Wiszniewski composition, *Destination Unknown* (track 3) where the strings are dispensed with altogether and the jazz quartet again take over.

Both Stevenson and Wiszniewski can write a good tune and there are a number of tracks which masterfully integrate folk, jazz and, yes, pop elements into some memorable and eminently accessible music. On *Sophia's Song*, for example, (track 4), Wiszniewski has written a haunting folk tune which hooks into the brain like a pop song. Wiszniewski plays both Low D Whistle and sax and the whole is driven along by an insistent rhythm superbly fashioned by Robb and Cosker.

[Click here](#) to listen to *Sophia's Song*.

Air in D Minor (track 1) and *Green Park* (track 2) shows that Stevenson can also write this sort of high quality folk/pop with memorable hooks. *Green Park*, in particular, would make a good television theme tune – *Country*



File or Gardeners World, perhaps? *Flora* (track 12), again by Stevenson, is another piece which falls into this folk/pop category with another great tune and an attractive gentle jazz swing.

[Click here](#) to listen to *Green Park*.

Stevenson is a versatile composer seemingly at home in a number of genres. On both *Braeside* (track 6) and *Ascension* (track 8), he moves into classical music mode. Both pieces begin with the creation of Debussy-type impressionistic moods beautifully played by the strings. Gradually, Stevenson injects a jazz feel into the music slightly reminiscent of Gershwin. The pieces could almost be the background music to Hollywood films of the thirties or forties – Debussy meets Gershwin meets MGM.

Finally, two of the tracks, *Piano Interlude* (track 9) and *Epilogue* (track 13)) are short improvised pieces for solo piano, classically influenced but with a nice jazz tinge.

In *New Focus on Song*, then, Stevenson and Wiszniewski have created a wholly convincing synthesis of musical styles which integrate not only strings but other instruments into an absorbing whole. There is plenty of innovation and imagination on display here but the music is also completely accessible. Like much European jazz being produced these days, it manages to transcend old and increasingly outmoded musical categories whilst still staying true to some basic jazz roots.

Stevenson and Wiszniewski are currently on tour – go to the *New Focus* website for dates (and also further details of the project) at: <http://new-focus.org/>

[Click here](#) for details and to sample.

Robin Kidson