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Colin Vallon Trio
Rruga

ECM 2185
★★★★½

The dirge-like qualities of the opening songs of the Colin Vallon Trio's *Rruga* (their debut) and the way they are structured suggest the endings of songs rather than songs in their typical entirety. This may have something to do with the material's modal forms, the limited uses of melodic invention or hooks, and the musicians' apparent emphasis toward feeling and mood more than movement, per se.

It helps to know that this trio is Swiss, and that Switzerland is close to the Scandinavian countries that are responsible for so much in the way of grey, dark and oftentimes beautiful music. But being from this part of the continent doesn't always mean the same; think fellow labelmates in the Marcin Wasilewski Trio, whose music edges more towards Bill Evans, John Taylor, Keith Jarrett and Paul Bley even, in its resonances with song form. No, Vallon's trio seems to be playing the music that comes before we get to places more often visited, like "Everything I Love" and "Plaza Real." Like another labelmate, pianist Nik Bartsch, Vallon appears to be more interested in forms and the elements that make for a truly composed piece of music. The notion of improvisation and so-



los taking a back seat, *Rruga* is more about vignettes and dynamics, shadings and the sounds of the instruments themselves.

Every track, in its own way, spells this out. Despite the use of just three instruments and limited emotional range, each piece somehow manages to be different than

the one that preceded it. There are the more softly driven, backbeat-oriented tunes, where rhythm plays more of a part, as with bassist Patrice Moret's "Telepathy" and Vallon's title piece. But the most enchanting stuff comes as those tunes give way to the more ethereal ones, like Vallon's haunting "Home" and the mysterious "Eyjafjallajökull." This is an album where, excepting drummer Samuel Rohrer's "Polygonia" and Vallon's "Meral" and the more terrestrial, rock flavorings of "Rruga, var.," the music tends to go from a kind of morning fog just above the ground to something more elevated, seemingly weightless as it heads skyward. The players—with Vallon's more methodical, chordal approach, Moret's subtle, insistent bottom and Rohrer's alternately snappy and subdued percussion—blend particularly well together.

—John Ephland

Rruga: Telepathy; Rruga; Home; Polygonia; Eyjafjallajökull; Meral; Iskar; Noreia; Rruga, var.; Fjord; Epilog. (53:50)
Personnel: Colin Vallon, piano; Patrice Moret, bass; Samuel Rohrer, drums.
Ordering info: ecmrecords.com

**Scott Hamilton/
Rossano Sportiello**
Midnight At NOLA's Penthouse

ARBORS JAZZ 19415
★★★★★

It is the most intimate, naked duo setting in jazz, and when the tenor saxophonist and pianist are well matched, magic can happen.

That kind of magic is so consistent on this set of duets that it seems that veteran saxophonist Scott Hamilton and Italian pianist Rossano Sportiello are residing in some sort of rare state of grace. Their energy levels and touch on their instruments are absolutely in sync, and they handle both ballads and uptempo songs with equal facility.

Throughout his career, Hamilton often has seemed like a man standing in opposition to progress, but here he proves himself a timeless master of the subtle gesture and the perfectly placed note. His breathy vibrato and slightly hoarse tone sound like they're made to order for love songs like Sammy Kahn's "Wonder Why" and the extraordinarily gentle "A Garden In The Rain." Like Sonny Rollins, Hamilton sustains a bare refrain by creating in the listen-



er a sense that the next step is both logical and totally unknown. The suspense is lush, and so the release of emotion breaks like a giant wave. Sportiello's light hands and balanced playing provide ideal accompaniment, never rushing things, notes falling in all the right places. On faster pieces like Rodgers and Hart's "This Can't Be Love" and Louis

Armstrong's swaggering "Big Butter And Egg Man," Sportiello displays the technique that made his reputation as an inheritor of the stride tradition.

As good as the playing is, the material on *Midnight At NOLA's Penthouse* plays a key part in the album's strength. These are songs with great bones, and melodies that grow rather than recede in a duet setting. Stripped to their essence, they shine, while Hamilton and Sportiello's pure musicality deepens one's appreciation of the songs' structural brilliance.

—James Hale

Midnight At NOLA's Penthouse: Wonder Why; A Garden In The Rain; This Can't Be Love; A Time For Love; Come Back To Sorrento; All My Tomorrows; Big Butter And Egg Man; It's All In Your Mind; All God's Chillun' Got Rhythm; In The Middle Of A Kiss. (67:23)
Personnel: Scott Hamilton, tenor saxophone; Rossano Sportiello, piano.
Ordering info: arborsrecords.com