

WINDSOR PROJECT

Ricardo Pires (saxophone), Iryna Brazhnik (piano)
ricardopiresmusic.com

Following on from my review of *Stage* by Bruno Santos in the Winter 2023 edition, I have another fantastic album by a Portuguese saxophonist to write about this month, highlighting the quality of saxophone playing in the country at the moment. While Santos' disc was a lyrical affair, Pires' debut album, *Windsor Project*, is quite different. This album is not for the faint-hearted, as much of the music is very contemporary. However the playing is some of the finest I have ever heard, demonstrating Pires' formidable technique on both soprano and alto saxophones.

The disc has an interesting concept; all the works are written either by Portuguese composers who studied in Britain or British composers who studied in Portugal. Pires himself took a Masters degree at the Guildhall School of Music in London, and this is where the concept originated from (along with funding from the Anglo-Portuguese society.)

The album opens with *Capriccio* by Christopher Bochmann, an aptly named piece showing off Pires' dazzling soprano playing in this unaccompanied work. Next up is *Wandering* by Gonçalo Gato for alto saxophone and electronics. After an unaccompanied opening various effects begin to enter, creating a somewhat disconcerting texture and sound; listeners would be forgiven for wondering at moments if their speakers were playing up. It's a very intriguing piece however, and one that rewards repeated listening – there is so much to unpack!

Keep Up! by Jorge Ramos makes use up of extended techniques, which Pires executes effortlessly. These blend with another rather unsettling track, reminiscent of the sound of trying to tune an analogue radio. At times the track verges on finding a groove, however it never allows the listener to get comfortable.

Ao longe meu pai dizia... by Ângela da Ponte literally translates as *In the distance my father said*. There is an air of melancholy and reaching out in this piece, continuing within the aesthetic of the previous works and the mysterious soundscapes created by the electronics. Pires' slap tongue is once again at the fore, demonstrating his mastery of the technique. As the composer writes: "In the 21st century we are more connected than ever and technology has been a major contributor. But human relationships may be more apart than before. Interference, distance, or indifference are still barriers for a perfect communication and a better understanding of the other. This piece tries to explore the idea of communication/ non communication, its difficulties and how it can be distorted through time."



In *The Poetry Underground* by Pedro Lima, Pires returns to soprano saxophone. From the outset we can hear fragments of noises from the London Underground cleverly manipulated and distorted in the opening movement *Rising Engines*. This is perhaps the most harmonic of the electronics tracks on the disc, bringing with it some warmth compared with the previous tracks, whose sounds have a deliberate digital harshness at times. The second movement features clever manipulation of the lopsided opening phrase, whilst the third movement has a warm reverb on the solo saxophone. The final movement is perhaps my favourite, with a ghostly accompaniment and heavily manipulated saxophone sounds.

Seek Your Way Out by Francisco Fontes is a return to an unaccompanied work, this time on alto saxophone. It conjures up images of trying to find the way out of a maze and again displays exemplary technique from Pires across the full range of the saxophone.

Verde Secreto by Luís Tinoco brings a welcome change of texture with the opening piano solo played by Iryna Brazhnik. This piece shows off the more expressive side of Pires' playing with brooding lyrical lines interrupted by occasional outbursts.

Seven Miniatures by Daniel Davis takes us on a journey through different moods, each only fleeting in nature before giving way to the next miniature as we continue our journey. Pires' performance is wholly convincing, with a warm, rich, and clean sound in these unaccompanied pieces for alto saxophone. There is also impressive control of the altissimo register which blends seamlessly, and sensitive playing in the more subdued moments.

The final piece on the disc is *Bird in Space* by Ivan Moody, originally written for Amy Dickson. In this piece we hear Pires really singing on the soprano saxophone, making a beautiful clear sound. This is perhaps the most accessible of the works on the disc, and an apt way to end the album.

Overall this album shows off Pires' incredible technical ability, as well as his gift for putting across convincing performances of intellectually and musically demanding works. Whilst much of the music is very contemporary in nature and may not appeal to all CASSGB readers, if you want to hear saxophone technique at its very finest then it is well worth a listen.

Alastair Penman