



## THE LAST TREE

Alastair Penman (saxophones)

Meadowbank Music

*The Last Tree* combines original composition, visual imagery (using AI), quotations from written or spoken work by famous figures and masterful saxophone playing and music production.

And it's a subject close

to the heart of saxophonist Alastair Penman, a vegan and environmentalist who channels his passion for the urgency of the climate change emergency into music for saxophone ensemble – to stunning effect. Penman is a musician who is walking his own path. He has been in possession of a traditional record deal, but prefers to release his own music on his label Meadowbank Music. He has perhaps reached a zenith of doing it all by himself on this disc as he played every saxophone line on the disc and then mastered it too. But when you can play this well, why not?

Essentially the music is structured in eight short movements around eight quotations by famous figures about climate change, from the wise: "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed" (Mahatma Gandhi) to the, shall we say, sceptical: "We could use a big fat dose of global warming!" (Donald Trump). Penman has produced an appropriate AI image to represent each one, and the album demonstrates his innate ability to create musical character and mood to reflect them.

The title track opens with a soft chord from the beautifully blended saxophone orchestra, beneath a repeated motif with

perfect vibrato from the solo instrument. A few minutes in, the higher saxes begin a sort of animated conversation which gathers pace and urgency. This is storytelling through music; as well as appreciating his skill, the audience is being called to reflect on the topic at hand. The closing chord is haunting. The accompanying picture in dark tones of a leafless tree, dead fish and barren ground has in the middle a man sitting on a pile of cash, looking into the 'camera' as he holds some to his mouth. This track is inspired by the Cree proverb "Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught and the last river been poisoned will we realize we cannot eat money." The opening, and much of the album, feels classical in tone, but on two tracks in particular ('Big Fat Dose' and 'Every Man's Greed') Penman strays into jazz territory.

It's possible that the message lacks subtlety, but I would imagine that's the point. I must confess a partiality for multimedia works – I enjoy the juxtaposition of different ways of communicating the same message. And it's encouraging to see an artist making use of AI rather than either shunning it or pretending it doesn't exist. It's so much more nuanced and complex to face up to something and find a way forward than just remain a binary state of loving or hating it. And this is what Penman is embracing – standing in his power as an artist to speak about his passion, through his talent. Inspirational.

Catherine Smith

*Turn to page 10 to read an interview with Alastair Penman.*