

CD Reviews

Eighty-Eights

October 2006

ARMEN DONELIAN/MARC MOMMAAS

All or Nothing at All (Sunnyside)

First, an admission: I am disinclined toward duo dates. To me, a piano and saxophone alone together often sound panicky, rushing to fill all that open space. They engage in a technical exercise, like fencing, with intellectual rewards more athletic than aesthetic.

All or Nothing at All is different. To be sure, pianist Armen Donelian and tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas set out a fierce, dense, austere contrapuntal recital. But they function within the duet format with such skill and creativity and taste that it is impossible for an open-minded audience not to have fun.

This particular open-minded audience filled the Jazz Performance Space at the New School University in New York City in 2003. The live sound is oddly monophonic yet captures the intimacy of the evening's shared adventure, which is all about duality. For example, the 11 minutes of the title track contain a slow, luminous intro by Donelian; a horn-plus-accompaniment melody chorus with Donelian's strong anchoring bass line and Mommaas' free forays; frenetic, inspired, loose call-and-response dialogue; an eruptive solo by Donelian creating complex polytonal commentary on the theme; another, more liberated shared melody chorus; and a haunting, piping, high-register coda from Mommaas.

So I ask myself, what's not to like?

-Thomas Conrad