



Thema Prima
Aki Takase Japanic (BMC Records)
by Kurt Gottschalk

Not everything Aki Takase touches turns to gold. Sometimes—as with her interpretations of the Duke Ellington, Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy songbooks—she touches things that are already gold and manages to crystallize them. Other times, as in her long partnerships with her husband and fellow pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach and his son, who performs under the name DJ Illvibe, gold touches her. And in some cases, the gold just appears.

That is the sort of alchemy she has conjured on *Thema Prima*, a fantastically entertaining set of jazzy tunes and dreams recorded in Budapest with Illvibe and the trio of players (saxophonist Daniel Erdmann and bassist Johannes Fink, both German, and Norwegian drummer Dag Magnus Narvesen) that make up her Japanic group. Over the course of 10 tracks, the quintet displays a cunning wit without losing sight of the groove.

They do so without losing sight of the group, either. There's a strong sense of common purpose

giving the record cohesiveness. Two of the tracks were composed by Erdmann and one by Narvesen (who also plays in a duo with Schlippenbach and in a trio with Conny and Matthias Bauer), the rest by Takase and a couple don't employ the full personnel. But the musicians share a common drive that gives the album an intoxicating momentum.

Tying it together is Illvibe's clever turntablism. He gives the proceedings a warped nostalgia, dropping distant jazz-age daydreams and blurred raps onto the upbeat, hardbop proceedings. He often takes on the role of unintelligible vocalist, moving at wrong speeds through the midtempo kicks and quirks.

At its liveliest moments, *Thema Prima* bounces along with all the energy of a frantic Richard Rodgers-Oscar Hammerstein-scored scene, Illvibe on the edges like a circling biplane. But it wouldn't work if that's all there was to it. The band dissolves into sensitive, intuitive passages with hardly a moment's notice and resolves them just as readily. As strong as the rest of the band is, though, it is Illvibe who pulls it all together. His sparing, scratching and time-bending voices put a distorted face on the tunes, making it stand out as a most unusual session.

The surprise here is in the inspiration, but it's the inspiration that explains it all. Takase's interests in the composer Conlon Nancarrow (who created most of his works for player piano) was the foundation for the compositions and for the formation of the group. There's not much about the album that sounds like Nancarrow's enigmatic work, but the tempos, density and playfulness all show his hand. And that could be the best kind of tribute—to say someone inspired you to do something new.

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