

Turtle Island Quartet -- Hendrix

Translating the music of Jimi Hendrix, visceral electric guitar music, into the vernacular of the classical string quartet seems like an improbable idea. Yet on this remarkable recording, the Turtle Island Quartet -- a group that has consistently expanded the idea of the string quartet over the years with its recordings of John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, etc. -- has once again hit what at first might seem a difficult target. In lesser hands, such treatments could easily fall flat. But the tracks on this CD illustrate the quartet's great imagination, sincerity and arranging prowess in reigniting the Hendrix fire.

"Have You Ever Been to Electric Ladyland" begins the album in a dreamy rubato style that was one of Jimi's signature modes. The dreaminess ends as the quartet punches into the staccato opening rhythm of "Purple Haze" to introduce "House Burning Down." Over this emphatic pulse, the lead violin rips into the pentatonic blues scales and rock guitar phrasing a la Jimi -- in fact, as if Jimi himself were playing the violin. The Hendrix Experience morphed into a string quartet!

At this point, the Turtle Islanders -- in a contemporary word -- "own" the music. The Hendrix phrasing, feel, whammy bar, bends, glissando E7#9 chords are all present, but not pale imitations. This is a sinewy, vital confirmation of the songs.

One of the high points of this recording, and one that illustrates remarkably the depth to which the players have subsumed the Hendrix music, is the solo cello version of "Little Wing," where Mark Summer has taken the phrasing -- including all of the guitaristic hammer-ons, pull-offs, string bends and double-stops -- to create an authentic and shimmering version of a song originally written and played on a Fender Stratocaster.

There is much else to enjoy here -- this is a stellar recording and achievement. A salute to the quartet for giving us a vigorous and scintillating reworking of the music of Jimi Hendrix. Long may he live...

Andy Summers