

INSTRUMENTAL

A Personal Space: MIRA by Arild Andersen, Paolo Vinaccia and Tommy Smith

January 23, 2014



*Sometimes, you listen to great music and you think, "I wish I had starlit sky to look at while I'm listening to this." Or maybe you are looking at a starstruck sky thinking, "I wish I had some great music to soundtrack this vista of the heavens." Perhaps, you should have a listen to **Mira**, just released on **ECM** by **Arild Andersen, Paolo Vinaccia and Tommy Smith**. It might be more effective than wishing on a star.*

Mira A is a red giant in the constellation of **Ceti** and can be seen from Earth, often with the naked eye. It is a variable star whose luminescence fluctuates over time, and its name is derived from the Latin for "wonderful" or "astonishing". There is much on this *Mira* that is wonderful, with more than a few astonishing moments.



The artists formerly known as The Arild Andersen Trio have assumed their own names for a CD consisting largely of original compositions by Andersen himself. Whether the group morphs back into the AAT is not moot here. What is pertinent is the sound of three voices in eleven songs with one clear goal; to make new music that is so concise that you can hear yourself think while listening to it. There is an equality here that delivers the traditional jazz trio from the cult of separate, sometimes antagonistic identities into an interlocking whole.

Bygone sets the scene with very soulful saxophone from Tommy Smith in a conversation that leaves spaces for bassist Andersen and drummer Vinaccia to offer helpful suggestions. As can be heard throughout this record, the ever-stylish Andersen takes over the discussion with the authority of a leader in his field in the places where Smith rests and Vinaccia animates.

It's followed by *Blussy* (Bloo-see!) which applies very supple muscle to a stretched out blues canvas. It actively encourages Smith to speak up, and he gets his points across quite forcefully in places. That encouragement comes from the twin foils of Vinaccia's drumming and Andersen's bass. It's all tightly packed like a tennis ball; for they tend to intertwine as a group, circumscribing one another rather than play side-by-side or turn about.



Andersen says, “I always wanted to do an album of ballads...*Mira* is perhaps better suited to Sunday morning than Friday night” and this warm, generous recording duly respects your personal space and “me” time. He is true to his aspiration by including one of the most beautiful ballads ever written, and also one of the most misconstrued. Tommy Smith, whose voice on saxophone rings throughout *Mira*, sings of regret, misgivings and disappointment through his lovely phrasing on tenor. He strikes the right balance between dwelling on misfortune and moving on, and it’s a welcome contrast to the histrionics of vocal stylists who made *Alfie* into a melodrama.

Paolo Vinaccia, we are told, plays “drums”, but his approach redefines the small kit as a set of percussion elements arranged at his convenience. He doesn’t so much ‘drum’ as play what he likes and hit whatever he pleases. It’s often the case that things that sound intuitive are really the result of knowing exactly what you’re doing at any given moment. His style has been described as “unpredictable”, but that’s often the case with someone who has clearer ideas about what’s going to work than you do.



There are some very strong songs here including the title track and *Rossetti*, which you could comfortably hum along to from a first hearing. In fact, Smith joins in sounding as if the sax has also decided to pick up the tune as it goes. It quickly flourishes into an animated exposition of intensely colourful thinking that connects nicely with *Reperate*, where muted electronics provide atmospheric shading to the indisputable power of three.

Raijin, a tune by Paolo Vinaccia and Tommy Smith further elaborates the themes of flowing song and intricate structure. It is an idea in motion that begins with Smith playing a beautiful segment on *shakuhachi*. Its voice seems to stop the clocks before succumbing to a waking dream of tossed sax, scrambled percussion and effusive bass before once more finding peace. It's an unusual piece but it's played with implicit mutual understanding of its design values. In another small delight the shakuhachi is further reprised on *Kangiten*, a short solo work composed by Smith.

If the album has threads then they are to be found on tunes like *La Saleya* and *Eight and More*. On the former, Vinaccia's percussion wanders in and is joined by Smith's saxophone making measured statements that are gradually pulled out by the undertow of rhythmic currents and eddying bass lines. The vessel is held up by the assured buoyancy of playing guided by a deep mind map of the navigable channels. Before you know it you're in the water and the music is washing over you.



The main topic of conversation on the album is melody and it's passed around like basket of a warm croissants. *Mira* itself is a beautiful tune that is almost a waltz, and yet another very strong song. It's introduced by Andersen's bass providing its own electronically enhanced, looped counterpoint, before Smith and Vinaccia step in with fine filaments of percussion and patiently paced saxophone. The motto among them seems to be "*sing in your own voice*" as Andersen takes over the melody before generously giving it back to Smith.

Mira finishes with *Stevtone* a folk-inflected tune co-written by Andersen with **Kirsten Bråten Berg**. It seems more than a little informed by "*She Moved Through The Fair*" and it flags up the ways that older hands can cradle treasured melodic forms yet still shape them into new possibilities. Certainly, repeat listening to *Mira* offers the enjoyment of great playing by imaginative musicians, although it is Andersen's skill as a composer of ballads that provides it's strongest cornerstone.

Download: [09-mira.mp3](#)

MIRA – Arild Andersen, Paolo Vinaccia and Tommy Smith ↑ If we were indexing *Mira* in the library at the end of time then we'd place it under jazz. But *Mira* contains something other than jazz that perhaps belongs in its own future world. In many ways this signposting is a feature of the ECM output, a label with which Andersen is particularly closely associated. Will some of the thinking on *Mira* point the way to the stars, or offer a path into the future? I don't know. I'll tell you when we get there.

Michael S. Clark

Mira: Arild Andersen, Paolo Vinaccia and Tommy Smith
Released 20.1.14 on ECM (Cat no: 372 8782)