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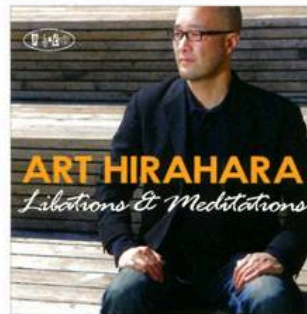
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Art Hirahara *Libations & Meditations*

POST-TONE 8131

★★★★½

Art Hirahara plays with a kind of effortless grace as to make every song dance on your eardrums. By the time you notice that "With Two Ice Cubes" is a fast, spirited run through his version of "What Is This Thing Called Love?," the elegant, measured "Father's Song" has already hit your ears.

By this point you've already heard the 45-year-old pianist's ease with uptempo swing, but with equal poise does he transition into a slightly funky, more interactive trio sound. Hirahara's range of chords and single lines become and more exposed as the CD unfolds. His busy two-handed approach on "Father's Song" is accented by Linda Oh's single-note bass lines and supported by the gentle punches from drummer John Davis. Ditto the blues of "Be Bim Bop," another slightly funky, swinging medium-tempo romp. Some straightforward uptempo swing forms the architecture for "D.A.Y.," another taste of busywork this time handled in a rather straightforward manner (Davis' soloing as natural as the old in-and-out).

This is very good, very listenable, in-the-pocket trio jazz. *Libations & Meditations* showcases a pianist whose style is unassumingly forceful. He's all over this music (nine of the 11 songs are Hirahara compositions), but somehow manages to let it all breathe. No one is out of place, no clanging bells or rear-end accidents to behold. No doubt some of that naturalness comes from the production, which gives us everyone in their rightful sonic place, everyone heard up-front even as the leader clearly leads.

One of two non-Hirahara tunes here is also the spot (roughly midway through) where the trio cools it. Japanese conductor/composer Kosaku Yamada's "Karatachi No Hana" sounds like it's got some spiritual roots to it, the melody suggesting folk music. What it demonstrates is Hirahara's ability to play solo piano in a measured, played-through kind of way, the balladic melody rightly a gentle, sweet one, almost weightless. Bill Evans' rare "Only Child" is the other cover. It's a natural followup, what with its breezy, easygoing swing and dainty melody.

By this point, it's clear that Hirahara's got this trio sound down pat, his approach on *Libations & Meditations* seemingly sure and time-tested. A strength, it is also a kind of weakness, because more often than not successful jazz music leans on the notion of surprise, the unexpected.

That said, the floating, dreamlike, oddly titled trio rubato tune "Dead Man Posed" has a caressive quality that can make you forget about innovation and instead simply let it carry you away. And the quirky, start-and-stop (revis-

ited) blues, now entitled "Bop Bim Be," contains the strengths of all three members as they swerve hither and yon en route to finishing up with a medium-tempo, impressionistic, slightly raucous, swinging waltz, making for a hearty, spirited finish.

—John Ephland

Libations & Meditations: With Two Ice Cubes; Father's Song; Be Bim Bop; D.A.Y.; Karatachi No Hana; Only Child; Dead Man Posed; Big Country; The Looking Glass; Bop Bim Be; Nereids And Naiads. (S177)

Personnel: Art Hirahara, piano; Linda Oh, bass; John Davis, drums.

Ordering info: post-tone.com