

Mamiko Watanabe

MOTHER EARTH – www.mamikowatanabe.com.

com. *A Little Piece for Dance – Mother Earth; I Remember You; Lake; The Murmur of the Moonlight; The Moon Was Reflected On the Sea; Verdure; In a Mellow Tone; Just Making It.*

PERSONNEL: Mamiko Watanabe, piano; Kevin Louis, cornet, flugelhorn (5,6,8); Ameen Saleem, bass; Francisco Mela, drums.

By Mark Keresman

From Japan, pianist Mamiko Watanabe currently makes New York City her home base. A bit of background: Watanabe has been playing since age four and studied at the Berklee College of Music, during which time she won awards for her emerging improvisational skills. She honed her craft with such swells as Joe Lovano, Tiger Okoshi, and Kevin Mahogany. *Mother Earth* is the third disc under her leadership, and it is a good one.

Her approach recalls bebop granddaddy Bud Powell (with her ability to intelligently spin-out rapidfire single-note lines with ease) and such percussive pianists as McCoy Tyner (rolling, brisk) and Dave Brubeck (“heavy” yet nimble). The opening track, the title tune, But she can be delicate too – “Lake” evokes minimalist key-crackers as Ran Blake and the sweeping mainstream melodicism of Cedar Walton and the late Gene Harris. But whatever mode she plays in, Watanabe’s playing has a forward thrust, occasionally fervent, always driving (except on the ballads, of course), swinging in the classic hard- and post-bop ways. Her take on the standard “I Remember You” has the easygoing élan of Errol Garner, as does her beautifully pensive original “The Moon Was Reflected On the Sea,” the latter featuring the silky, yearning, almost Bobby Hackett-like horn-work of Kevin Louis. The Duke’s “In a Mellow Tone” starts as a wistful ballad, then works its way into higher gear, the rhythm team of Ameen Saleem and Francisco Mela providing lively, crackling, percolating support. The album closes with the punchy, swaggering “Just Making It,” which evokes the proud, brassy spirit of mid-1960s Freddie Hubbard and Lee Morgan without ever sounding like them (or the ‘80s re-boppers, for that matter). “The Murmur of the Moonlight” is a Gershwin-like panorama – despite its dreamy title, it’s a brisk, up-and-at-‘em-type of tune, something you might hear in a movie soundtrack when Dudley Moore (himself a fair jazz pianist) or Michael Caine is feeling top-of-the-world. While it’s nothing momentous, *Mother Earth* is a sterling example of a mainstream piano trio disc – immediate, gregarious, stirring, and inspired, with flair to spare, with no superfluous anything. Even better, the trio’s collective technique serves the music (as a whole), not individual egos. Like the best piano trios, Watanabe’s threesome has the focus and interplay of a working band. It’s a cliché, but if the shoe fits, kick yourself with it, I say – Ms. Watanabe has what it takes to be a jazz star.