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The Carn Davidson 9: *Murphy*

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Ernesto Cervini's Turboprop: *Rev*

ANZIC Records

Rev and *Murphy* offer terrific companion sets of high-calibre contemporary jazz by Toronto-based ensembles. And companion volumes they very much are, seeing as how both feature drummer Ernesto Cervini, saxophonist Tara Davidson, and trombonist William Carn, the latter marriage partners as well as co-leaders of The Carn Davidson 9. Yet as much overlap as there is between the releases, there are also significant differences, among them the absence of a pianist in the latter outfit and the inclusion of covers on *Rev*. Still, differences aside, you're very much advised to double your pleasure and grab both.

To be precise, Turboprop's sophomore album isn't a purely Canadian affair, as New Yorkers Joel Frahm (tenor sax) and Dan Loomis (bass) appear alongside Davidson (alto, soprano), Carn, Adrean Farrugia (piano), and, of course, the leader on drums. In addition to versions of the chestnut "Pennies from Heaven," the Radiohead B-side "The Daily Mail," and Blind Melon's "No Rain," compositions come from Cervini, Farrugia, Loomis, and Carn, the varied set-list amplifying *Rev*'s collective feel.

Modern Drummer has likened Cervini's playing to Art Blakey and Billy Higgins, but a better reference point to these ears is Ralph Peterson, who, like Cervini, prods and energizes others with an infectious attack; both are also ever-inventive powerhouses who never lose the rhythmic plot, so to speak. Such dynamism is inspiring, of course, and true to form his band-mates respond in kind with fluid, high-energy soloing and ensemble playing of their own.

Farrugia's "The Libertine" inaugurates the release in grand manner with a mellifluous exercise in hard bop, the horns' playing a smooth complement to the rhythm section's muscular groove. Pushed by Cervini's insistent ride patterns and cymbal splashes, Farrugia delivers a bold, free-wheeling solo, after which a wailing Frahm takes his own robust turn. For "Granada Bus," Cervini drew for inspiration from a trip to Spain where a melody overheard at a bus stop became the basis for the tune's bass line; it's Davidson's sinuous soprano playing, however, that most gives the piece its individuating character. Cervini's other composition, the title track, is a bravura show-stopper that sees all the front-line players individually roaring with the fervour of an ecstatic New Orleans outfit. Carn caps the release with "Arc of Instability," an adventurous, full-throttle excursion whose nine minutes provide a fine foretaste of *Murphy*.

On the covers front, Loomis graces the ballad-styled treatment of "The Daily Mail" with a lyrical solo, after which Frahm and Carn step forth with bluesy contributions that give the material an epic quality. Dedicated to Cervini's one-year-old daughter, Penelope, "Pennies from Heaven" sees the group digging into a relaxed bop treatment spearheaded by Frahm's smoky lead and beautiful unison playing. And though I was never a fan of Blind Melon or its '90s hit "No Rain," to Turboprop's credit the tune's reborn in its hands. As it turns out, the song lends itself wonderfully to a jazz ensemble treatment, especially when its familiar melodies are rendered so sweetly and with as much conviction as they are here. That Cervini and company can transform such material into something so grandly satisfying says much about the Turboprop project in general.

Carn and Davidson bring impressive CVs to their group project, each boasting numerous performance and recording credits with figures such as Kenny Wheeler, Barry Harris, Carla Bley, Steve Swallow, and Mike Murley, and each bringing multiple Juno Award nominations to their nonet: Carn's debut album, *Other Stories*, was nominated as Traditional Jazz Album of the Year, and

Davidson's recordings also have received nominations for Album of the Year. Formed in 2010, The Carn Davidson 9 sees the co-leaders (Davidson augmenting her alto and soprano with flute and clarinet) joined on *Murphy* (named, incidentally, after their Russian Blue) by Cervini, saxophonists Kelly Jefferson (tenor, soprano, clarinet) and Perry White (baritone, bass clarinet), trumpet and flugelhorn players Jason Logue and Kevin Turcotte, bass trombonist Alex Duncan, and bassist Andrew Downing. Befitting a co-led project, the album's eight originals are split between Carn and Davidson, though arrangements are shared between them and Cervini, Geoff Young, Andrew Downing, Jason Logue, and Andy Ballantyne.

The nonet's chamber jazz sound is striking, not only due to its seven horns front-line but also the absence of piano, a move that lends the material added tension in having such a conventional anchor omitted. As a result, the arrangers accord the horns a greater role in providing a harmonic foundation besides carrying the melodic weight. Certainly one of the album's greatest draws is the horns' luscious sound, which is so full it gives the nonet the feel and impact of a big band, and the addition of flute and clarinet timbres makes a considerable difference. The interplay between Downing and Cervini captivates too, especially when it can be heard with such clarity in the piano's absence.

The co-leader's compositions are a splendid bunch, with Carn and Davidson authoring superb set-pieces for the outfit. The pieces are typically intricately woven, rich in polyphony, and thoughtfully conceived with soloing opportunities in mind for all concerned. Contrast is also plentiful, with the brash exuberance of Carn's "Try Again," for instance, nicely offset by the delicate lyricism of Davidson's "Family Portrait." Guest Emilie-Claire Barlow enhances Carn's "Glassman" by adding a soft wordless vocal to Young's chamber ensemble-like arrangement, though it's the arresting woodwind textures that perhaps argue most on the setting's behalf. Intended to evoke the idea of a cat on the prowl, Davidson's "Murphy's Law" does, in fact, exude a rather stealthy feel, especially when solo spotlights are given to White's guttural baritone and Logue's blustery trumpet.

This is a band that can dial it up when the mood strikes but bring it down to a whisper, too; in fact, it's probably in the latter scenario where the velvety timbres of the horns and woodwinds can best be appreciated (see the lovely, chorale-styled intro to Carn's "Second Act" and Davidson's "Colebourn," a lullaby written for her newborn nephew, as illustrations). The recording's marked by sterling ensemble playing, and listening pleasures are afforded in equal measure by singing solos *and* resplendent backdrops. Aficionados of expansive big band playing will find much to admire here, even if it's a relatively smaller unit responsible for it.

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