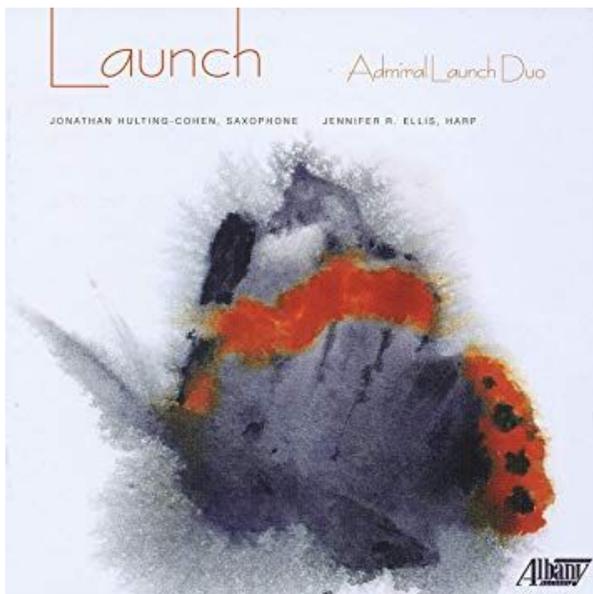


CD Review: *Launch* — The Admiral Duo

by Hannah Schoepe



As the month of Valentines Day and love, February is abundant with hearts and couples of all kinds. The Admiral Launch Duo's new album *Launch* could be seen as an “opposites attract” type of situation. Not many musicians had thought of bringing the saxophone and harp together until Jonathan Hulting-Cohen (saxophone) and Oberlin and CIM grad Jennifer R. Ellis (harp) came along. Released by Albany Records in December 2018, the album showcases 18 tracks of uniquely crafted music.

The sense of ensemble is wonderfully exacting throughout as the duo creates contrasting moods with exceptional poignancy. The album has excellent sound quality — the only shortfall is the different dynamic capabilities between the instruments combined with the harp's inability to sustain notes at length, making the saxophone the dominating force.

The repertoire was mostly commissioned by the duo, including Natalie Moller's *Starshine & Moonfall*, Patrick O'Malley's *Thaumaturgy*, Christine Delphine Hedden's *Amhrán na Cásca* and *Kitchen Dance*, Stephen Rush's *Whirlwind*, Angélica Negrón's *Still Here*, and Jasper Sussman's *...nice box! “Oh So Square.”* The remaining tracks are arranged from previously existing works for harp and either flute, voice, or oboe. Clearly the newcomer in this genre is the saxophone, but Hulting-Cohen embraces the role whole-heartedly, making the instrument shine in a bright new light.

The playlist is wrought with a vast range of emotions, beginning with Ida Gotkovsky's five-movement suite *Eolienne*. The first movement, “Lyrique,” is mysterious and scintillating. The second, “Intermezzo,” brings warmth and playfulness, reminiscent of

children playing in the park on a sunny day. In the final movement, “Declamatoire,” Ellis brings out her harmonies with striking clarity and precision.

Starshine & Moonfall is magnificent, introducing an abundance of intriguing harmonies. The saxophone carries the melody throughout, occasionally taking on the chord arpeggiation from the harp. In the liner notes, Moller describes the inspiration she drew from nature, calling the piece an “evensong that charts the waning of a day through a horizon embraced by sunset, the unfurling of twilight, and the radiance of a star-speckled midnight.”

The duo breaches new territory with *Whirlwind*, an inventive composition the composer characterized as a “Funk-Indian Toccata plus a slow cadenza.” Hulting-Cohen whirls through his many notes with captivating enthusiasm, propelled along by the jazzy rhythms he shares with Ellis.

After Negrón’s heartbreaking *Still Here*, which explores conflicting and contradictory emotions in abusive relationships, comes Sussman’s ...*nice box!* “*Oh So Square*,” the wackiest track on the album. Wackier than a “Funk-Indian Toccata plus a slow cadenza,” one might ask?

The answer is yes. Hulting-Cohen explores a tremendously wide range of sounds — even creating a very real-sounding scream. Sussman marks the opening of his score with this message: “think Moody Dinosaur...you’re a baby dinosaur, you’re upset—are you sad? Angry? You can’t decide!” More concretely, he describes the work as exploring “the excitingly personal space between fixed and free, a space where experimentation, storytelling, and a unique state of presence are all embraced and celebrated” — and the duo play it with gusto.

Launch is available on [Amazon](#) and [AllMusic](#), and select tracks from the duo’s website on [SoundCloud](#).

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