

21. Pekka Kuusisto: *First Light: Muhly & Glass* (Pentatone)
22. Reed Tetzloff: *Schumann* (Master Performers)
23. Raffi Besalyan: *The Sound of Black & White* (Sono Luminus)
24. Channa Malkin: *This is Not a Lullaby* (TRPTK)
25. Dan Dean: *Fanfare For The Common Man* (Origin Classical)
26. Garrett Keast and the Berlin Academy of American Music: *Transatlantic* (Onyx Classics)
27. PSO: *Brahms: Symphony No. 4* / MacMillan: *Larghetto for Orchestra* (Reference Recordings)
28. The Del Sol Quartet: *A Dust In Time* (Bright Shiny Things)
29. Canadian Brass: *Canadiana* (Linus Entertainment)
30. Una Sveinbjarnardóttir & Tinna Þorsteinsdóttir: *Last Song* (Sono Luminus)



photo: Agnete Schlichtkrull

TOP 30 JAZZ



01. Miho Hazama: *Imaginary Visions* (Edition Records)

Carrying on the enduring Ellington tradition, Miho Hazama composes material for the band she's leading, whether it be her acclaimed jazz chamber orchestra m_unit or The Danish Radio Big Band (DRBB). A Japanese artist based in New York, she inhabits the role of chief conductor for the latter so comfortably, it feels as if she was born to it. All of the material performed by the DRBB on *Imaginary Visions*, her first album with the outfit, was composed by Hazama, and it proves a terrific showcase for the nineteen-member ensemble. As she was preceded in the chief conductor position by Thad Jones, Bob Brookmeyer, Jim McNeely, and Palle Mikkelborg, there was a little bit of trepidation on her part about stepping into the role. But the musicians welcomed her warmly and, as their enthusiastic performances of the compositions reveals, both sides clearly benefit from the arrangement. While she brings her classical training as a composer to everything she does, *Imaginary Visions* is full-bodied big band jazz that flatters Hazama as bandleader, composer, and arranger and the DRBB as a dynamic ensemble.

02. Adi Meyerson: *I Want To Sing My Heart Out In Praise of Life* (Adi Meyerson)

After making an auspicious debut with her 2018 release *Where We Stand*, Adi Meyerson takes a significant leap forward on her follow-up. Original, ambitious, imaginative, adventurous—*I Want To Sing My Heart Out in Praise of Life* is all that and more. Rather than play it safe with a mix of originals and covers, the NYC-based jazz bassist has crafted a mature personal statement that's both conceptually bold and musically engrossing. Configured as a six-part suite, each track differs from the next, with some incorporating spoken word or vocals and others purely instrumental, yet each also feels connected to the others because of the shared theme. Musically, there are moments where the material recalls the vibrant soundworlds of Miles's *In A Silent Way* and Herbie Hancock's *Mwandishi*, but there's nothing retrograde about the project. In creating such an original and imaginative set, she demonstrates boldness of vision and shows herself to be an artist of authenticity and integrity.

03. Kazembe George: *I Insist* (Greenleaf Music)

As a title, *I Insist* recalls Max Roach's 1960 protest album *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, but Kazembe George's debut as a leader is neither as militant nor as politically charged as the

drummer's. It is, however, an extremely poised and assertive statement by the Brooklyn-based tenor saxophonist, not to mention an exceptionally well-crafted collection of contemporary jazz compositions and performances. No matter the style tackled, the performances are delivered with assurance by him, Sami Stevens (vocals), Isaac Wilson (Wurlitzer, piano), Tyrone Allen II (bass), and Adam Arruda (drums). All are fully locked into the leader's vision, and the music swings confidently, whether it be ballad or burner. Among the many appealing things about *I Insist* is the fact that while it's grounded in acoustic jazz tradition (the presence of Wurlitzer aside), it feels wholly contemporary.

04. Jalen Baker: *This is Me, This is Us* (Outside In Music)

Hailing from Houston, Jalen Baker impresses as a vibraphonist, composer, and bandleader of preternatural poise on his debut collection. What he has accomplished on *This Is Me, This Is Us* is more in line with what one expects from an artist well into a career rather than on a first album. A graduate of Columbia College Chicago and Florida State University, the Washington, DC-born vibraphonist has left his mark as an instrumental presence in and around Chicago, Georgia, Northern Florida, and, of course, Houston and now takes the next logical step with the recording. Aided by the production acumen of drummer Ulysses Owens Jr., Baker's joined by trumpeter Giveton Gelin, pianist Paul Cornish, bassist Gabriel Godoy, and drummer Gavin Moolchan on the date, with extra sweetening provided by violinists Jessica McJunkins and Orlando Wells, violist Andrew Griffin, and cellist Susan Mandel. Flexing his muscles as a composer, the recording features nine Baker originals, with a short rendering of a Stevie Wonder classic for a coda.



05. Amanda Tosoff: *Earth Voices* (Empress Music)

Some albums impress as special the moment they're heard, Amanda Tosoff's *Earth Voices* a case in point. Though the Toronto-based pianist's sixth album as a leader involved nine studio sessions, numerous vocal and string overdubs, post-recording shaping, and seventeen artists from multiple music scenes, it arrives so fully formed it gives the impression of having come together in one fantastic creative outburst. Tosoff elaborated on the vocal dimension of her Juno Award-nominated 2016 album *Words*, which featured Felicity Williams only, by including Emilie-Claire Barlow, Laila Biali, Michelle Willis, Lydia Persaud, Robin Dann, Alex Samaras, and, again, Williams. Lyrics come from poetry by Poe, Whitman, Marjorie Pickthall, and more, and compositions are split between Tosoff originals and covers of material by Joni Mitchell and Mike Ross, among others. The performances are exuberant, eloquent, and sympathetic to Tosoff's vision.

06. Firm Roots Duo: *Firm Roots* (Firm Roots Music)

At the risk of extrapolating too much, the duo performances by pianists Chris White and Lara Driscoll on *Firm Roots* suggest the married couple's Chicago home must be an exceptionally harmonious one. On this debut set, the two complement one another magnificently, each completing and extending the other's phrases while at the same allowing room for individual expression. A major part of the listening pleasure afforded by the release stems from luxuriating in the cozy exchange of ideas between them. After meeting as students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and forging individual careers, they've now chosen to play together as Firm Roots Duo, the name inspired by the Cedar Walton composition with which the album begins and which even served as the couple's recessional at their wedding ceremony. The set-list is strong, with White and Driscoll balancing four originals with well-chosen covers, and the sound produced by the two Bösendorfers is itself a treat for the ears.

07. PRISM Quartet: *Heritage/Evolution Volume 2* (XAS Records)

Rare for a saxophone quartet, PRISM Quartet can pass as convincingly for a jazz ensemble as classical one, with the material performed typically determining which designation seems more suitable. While the second chapter in its *Heritage/Evolution* commissioning series straddles both classifications, there's little question the balance tips in jazz's direction when the volume features Ravi Coltrane, Joe Lovano, and Chris Potter alongside the quartet. In addition to performing with the group, each wrote a composition for the release, with the fourth penned by the group's co-founder and tenor saxophonist Matthew Levy. He and the other PRISM Quartet members, Timothy McAllister (soprano), Zachary Shemon (alto), and Taimur Sullivan (baritone), would probably be the first to

admit they're not jazz improvisers to the degree that their guests are, which makes including players of such calibre a smart and strategic move.

08. Randal Despommier: *Dio C'è* (Outside In Music)

Like many a jazz album, *Dio C'è* was recorded quickly, in this case two days in late 2019 at Brooklyn's Big Orange Sheep Studios. The material featured on the project, however, is the product of intense discernment, deliberation, and craft on its creator's part. Joining the alto saxophonist and keyboardist Jason Yeager on the release are bassist Aaron Holthus and drummer Rodrigo Recabarren, plus guitarist Ben Monder, bassist Jimmy Haslip, flugelhornist Oskar Stenmark, and vocalists Aubrey Johnson, Allegra Levy, Tomas Cruz, and Patrick Lasie. Augmenting high-velocity jazz pieces and expressive ballads are a funky, R&B-inflected number, a heavy Stone Temple Pilots cover, and the coup de grace, a multi-part epic that blends jazz, classical choral singing, and gospel into a dynamic set-piece.



09. Kjetil Mulelid: *Piano* (Rune Grammofon)

Having enjoyed his playing with the Norwegian group Wako and his own trio for a number of years, my admiration for Kjetil Mulelid's playing has steadily grown. Hearing him perform solo, however, is like hearing him for the first time, and consequently *Piano* invites a renewed appreciation of his abilities. Throughout this exquisite recording, he demonstrates a remarkable command that makes one excited for what the future holds. He composed the bulk of the material during lockdown and then recorded the album over two days in June and September 2020 at Athletic Sound using the studio's 1919 Bösendorfer grand piano. While it might be tempting to consider Mulelid's solo piano release in light of ones by Brad Mehldau and Keith Jarrett (drawing a connecting line to the latter, Mulelid sometimes vocalizes as he plays), *Piano* stands up splendidly on its own terms.

10. María Grand: *Reciprocity* (Biophilia Records)

The profound experience of bringing new life into being permeates *Reciprocity*. The tenor saxophonist's follow-up to 2018's *Magdalena* was written and recorded in two days in early February 2020 when she was five-and-a-half months pregnant with her son, Ayní, and thus captures the close bonds she not only had to the life within but also to her bandmates, acoustic bassist Kanoa Mendenhall and drummer Savannah Harris. The saxophone trio format is intimate and exposing; further to that, added pressure is placed on the participants when the playing of each is so integral. There's nothing tentative, however, about the saxophonist's powerful, full-bodied attack, and much the same could be said of her trio mates. Elasticity informs the playing, with the bassist and drummer adapting instantly to the leader's sudden shifts in direction.

11. Simon Moullier Trio: *Countdown* (Fresh Sound New Talent)

Not a second's wasted on *Countdown* in ten concise covers by vibraphonist Simon Moullier, bassist Luca Alemanno, and drummer Jongkuk Kim. On a set free of dull moments and self-indulgence, the acoustic trio digs into each piece quickly, states its case lucidly, and then moves on. In the choice of material, Moullier pays homage to his forebears, with compositions by Mingus ("Goodbye Pork Pie Hat"), Evans ("Turn Out The Stars"), Monk ("Work," "Ask Me Now"), and Coltrane ("Countdown") appearing alongside standards by Porter ("I Concentrate On You") and Kern ("The Song Is You"). The leader demonstrates exceptional command in his playing, and Alemanno and Kim acquit themselves solidly throughout; the two are never merely passive support to Moullier, but they don't overpower him either.

12. Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra: *Twisting Ways* (Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra)

One of the more noteworthy aspects of *Twisting Ways* is the exceptional dynamic range shown by the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra in the recording's performances. During the music's most intimate parts, the WJO plays with the sensitivity of a piano trio and achieves a most delicate balance between its sections; at the same time, the ensemble is capable of generating a huge, robust sound when the material requires it. In augmenting saxophones, trumpets, and trombones with piano, vibraphone, bass, and drums, the instrumental make-up itself isn't unusual by jazz orchestra standards; nevertheless, the luscious sound achieved does much to distinguish the WJO. Another key reason for the album's impact has to do with the material, and in that regard the three works

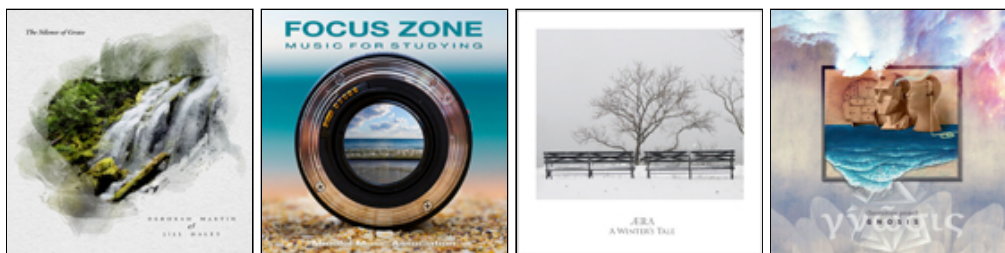
by Torontonians David Braid (also the pianist on the recording) and Montreal-based Philippe Côté do much to bring out the best in the ensemble, especially when the singers performing with it are Sarah Slean and Karly Epp, the former on the four-part title work and the latter the two single-movement pieces.

13. Eivind Aarset 4tet: *Phantasmagoria, or A Different Kind of Journey* (Jazzlandrec)
14. Anna Webber: *Idiom* (Pi Recordings)
15. Jim Snidero: *Strings* (Savant)
16. Adam Moezinia: *Folk Element Trio* (Outside in Music)
17. Tomoko Omura: *Branches Vol. 2* (Outside in Music)
18. CODE Quartet: *Genealogy* (Justin Time Records)
19. The Space Above: *The Space Above* (The Space Above)
20. Kinetic: *Dances of Lake Volta* (Kinetic)
21. Jihye Lee Orchestra: *Daring Mind* (Motéma Music)
22. Erin Propp & Larry Roy: *We Want All The Same Things* (Chronograph Records)
23. Lionel Loueke: *Close Your Eyes* (Sounderscore)
24. The Carn Davidson 9: *The History of Us* (Three Pines Records)
25. Sam Pilnick's Nonet Project: *The Adler Suite* (Next Level)
26. Matt Ulery: *Delicate Charms Live at the Green Mill* (Woolgathering Records)
27. Yelena Eckemoff: *Adventures of the Wildflower* (L&H Production)
28. 9 Horses: *Omegah* (Adhyâropa Records)
29. Greg Amirault: *News Blues* (Greg Amirault)
30. Yoko Miwa Trio: *Songs of Joy* (Ubuntu Music)



photo: Spotted Peccary

TOP 20 AMBIENT / NEW AGE



01. Deborah Martin & Jill Haley: *The Silence of Grace* (Spotted Peccary Music)

Deborah Martin is not only one of Spotted Peccary Music's key solo artists, she's also a long sought-after collaborator. That the character of a collaborative release can shift dramatically depending on the artist with whom Martin partners is shown by the differences between the mystical meditations presented on *Hemispherica Portalis*, her 2020 set with Dean De Benedictis (under the Desensitized name), and the graceful, New Age-styled settings she's created with Jill Haley for *The Silence of Grace*. Martin brings decades of sound sculpting experience to the new collaboration, and as a result her symphonic-electronic textures blend seamlessly with Haley's oboe and English horn. In eight settings, sultry ambient atmospheres and woodwind sonorities combine to produce eloquent reveries that evoke the outdoors in all its natural glory.

02. VA: *Focus Zone - Music for Studying* (Mindful Music Records)

The title of this expansive collection from musician members of the Chicago-based Mindful Music Association could be taken in two ways. Does it mean its two hours-plus of material is designed to function as background for students doing homework or that the music is intended to encourage attention at a deeper level of mindfulness? Press text included with the release states that the pieces "were chosen to help with focus and concentration for the listener," which seems to support the latter interpretation. No matter: the music presented on the release is splendid and further to