



Fantôme
Sasha Berliner (Outside in Music)
Moving Parts
Kaisa's Machine (Greenleaf Music)
Roots and Things
Jakob Dreyer (Fresh Sound)
by Jim Motavalli

Vibraphonist Sasha Berliner has relocated from NYC to LA, but she's still busy on the East Coast, where all three of these albums on review were recorded.

Fantôme is Berliner's own project and music (her third album as leader), the result of what she describes as what happens when a jazz vibraphonist with a rock background finds "an R&B and funk audio engineer and some of the best international improvisors." Of the latter, included are Taylor Eigsti (piano), Harish Raghavan (bass), Jongkuk Kim (drums) and David Adewumi (trumpet). So is it fusion, then? Nope, more like hard-charging post-bop. Billy Strayhorn's "UMMG" takes off right from the get-go with the leader luminously out front and really demonstrating her impressive vibraphone chops. "Khan Younis", commemorating a city in the Gaza Strip, does indeed have Middle Eastern flavoring filtered through a certain McCoy Tyner-esque majesty. What sounds like a shimmering acoustic piano solo, though, is actually Berliner on a CS-80 analog synth. "Private Investigation", another

burner, benefits from some strong Adewumi high-note trumpet work with guest pianist Lex Korten. "Zenith" features the up-and-coming saxophonist Rico Jones, who makes a fine riffing horn section with the trumpeter; their exchanges get particularly exciting near this selection's conclusion. Berliner is mature and burnished here, and Eigsti complements as a nice foil. "The Worst Person in the World" is about...who knows, but the wretch is probably deserving. The tune is surprisingly mellow, given its title, and features beautiful solos by Adewumi (flugelhorn) and Raghavan.

Berliner also keeps busy with such side projects as Kaisa Mäensivu's *Moving Parts*, the third from the bassist's band, Kaisa's Machine. Featured on the album's seven tracks, the vibraphonist explores themes of belonging and home, reflecting Mäensivu's experiences living between Helsinki, Finland and NYC. The leader describes the album's musical style as "Nordic noir meets New York sparkle" and Berliner takes that thread and with vibrancy shapes its vision, underscoring the relevance and importance of her instrument's timbre (as well as her technical facility) in creating a cogent soundscape. "Midnight Sun" is a highlight, featuring trade-offs between the bassist and vibraphonist, building dramatically as the number reaches its resolution. Berliner's effective contributions to the album closer, "Best Kept Secrets", proves to be a revelation: she plays no small part in serving as the connecting thread, if not glue, to Mäensivu's album, which is in essence a seven-track song cycle featuring impressive solos and interplay within the quintet, which includes Eden Ladin (piano), Max Light (guitar) and Joe Peri

(drums).

On German bassist Jakob Dreyer's *Roots and Things*, Berliner is part of a slightly smaller ensemble, a quartet with Tivon Pennicott (tenor) and Kenneth Salters (drums). The 16 tracks, including short interludes, were all composed by the leader (excepting the Rodgers and Hart standard, "With a Song in My Heart"). Pennicott, who has worked previously with Salters, as well as Esperanza Spalding, Kenny Burrell and Gregory Porter, is also an arranger and orchestrator of note. With a big tone and a lot of self-assurance, he certainly comes on strong, playing with Dreyer and crew. Berliner has a ripping extended solo, chasing Pennicott in the midst of "Constellation". The title composition is taken at a loping tempo, which the vibraphonist confidently handles, making her instrument both sparkle and linger. "Big Apple" is a nod to the bassist's adopted city, and it sounds pretty darn welcoming, while Berliner assays a solo that manages to be both funky and relaxed. While the Rodgers and Hart standard gets a workmanlike treatment—it's the originals here that truly attract attention.

If you haven't investigated Sasha Berliner's music, you could start with these three releases, beginning, of course, with her latest album as leader. But all three on review here are strong, uplifting efforts and feature players you should most certainly know about, Berliner included.

For more info visit outsideinmusic.com, greenleafmusic.com and freshsoundrecords.com. Sasha Berliner is at Superior Ingredients Jan. 10 and Le Poisson Rouge Jan. 12 (both part of Winter Jazzfest). See Calendar.

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