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PETER ZAK

My Conception (SteepleChase)

Peter Zak has now made three albums as a leader, all for SteepleChase of Denmark. The first two were piano-trio dates, the most recent of which, *For Tomorrow*, was one of 2006's sleepers. *My Conception*, a solo album, is better.

Zak has rarely performed publicly as a solo artist. Before he left for Copenhagen to make this recording in September 2006, he sought advice from Fred Hersch, a master of solo piano. Hersch told him to "clear his mind" of other pianists' approaches and to imagine that he "was in his living room back home." Zak listened. The 12 pieces on this album feel less like calculated performances than one private, unbroken contemplation on which the listener is allowed to eavesdrop.

Zak plays a varied program: originals like "Mahmoud's Memory," with harmonies that suggest Arabia over a written bass figure; hard-bop classics like the title track by Sonny Clark; standards like "Witchcraft." But even when he does a snapping calypso for trumpet by Blue Mitchell, "Fungii Mama," never before heard as a piano solo, the rapt atmosphere is sustained. The best piece is "With a Song in My Heart," with new changes, an unusual dead-slow tempo, and fragments repeated and communed over, as if in wonder.

-Thomas Conrad