

An Intense, Mesmerizing New Album From the Mehmet Polat Trio

by delarue

The Mehmet Polat Trio are one of the world's most distinctive and cutting-edge groups in Middle Eastern and Turkish music. Their songs are epic and picturesque, incorporating elements of West African, Andalucian, Romany and Balkan sounds as well. Bandleader and oud virtuoso Polat can play with blazing speed if he wants, but he typically prefers a dynamically charged approach. His compositions have a cinematic sensibility that gets very dark on occasion. In this group he's joined by kora player Dymphi Peeters and ney flutist Sinan Arat. Their show last summer at Lincoln Center was one of the most compelling concerts of the year; their latest album *Ask Your Heart* is streaming at [Spotify](#).

This is deep, rich, impeccably crafted music that demands repeated listening. The opening epic, *Untouched Stories*, builds out of an enigmatic intro with echoes of Indian baul minstrelsy to a catchy, verdantly anthemic sway, It wouldn't be out of place on an early 80s Pat Metheny album, but with organic production values. Arat's balmy flute solo eventually gives way to Polat's low, suspenseful oud solo over a syncopated strum, a high-spirited highway theme of sorts that calms as the rhythm drops out and segues into the second track, *Dance It Out*. Hazy ney over a hypnotically leaping, circular hook rises to a gently triumphant chorus, then a waterfalling kora solo and an unexpectedly insistent, enigmatic coda that Polat steers back toward the Levant. All this brings to mind the most energetic original work of fellow Turkish composer/oudist Omar Faruk Tekbilek.

The trio open *Sandcastles* as a pouncing, bristling, modal suspense theme with flamenco and Romany echoes, then the bandleader takes it into more pensive terrain with an insistent, minimalist solo, rising and falling. Neset quickly becomes even more insistent and imbued with longing, the kora at times supplying ripples akin to a kanun or santoor in Egyptian or Iraqi music while Polat essentially plays a bassline, ney wafting mournfully overhead.

Likewise, a muted, wounded sensibility pervades the beginning and end of *Whispering to Waves*, a brooding interweave of oud and kora falling away for a shimmering, crescemdoing kora solo and then desolate solo ney.

With its implied melody and pensively dancing syncopation, the album's title track lives up to its name. Polat plays melismatic, sitar-like low-register lines, then guardedly picks up steam. Arat's gentle rhythmic puffs add a hypnotic element.

Evening Prayer, with allusively heartbroken lyrics by Leyla Hamin and melody by Turkish oudist Kazanci Bedih, is more gently sprightly than you might expect. although the catchy tune grows more pensive as the band builds variations on it. A brooding solo by Arat bridges into the more anthemic and also much darker *Everything ils n You* as it rises from the lows (Polat plays a custom-built oud with extra low register). His aching, angst-ridden solo midway through could be the high point of the album.

Serenity opens with stately, starry kora, but the band picks up the pace, taking it down into murkier depths via a syncopated take on a familiar Middle Eastern progression. The band double their dancing lines and then dig in hard in *Simorgh*, an altered waltz, hypnotic kora anchoring Polat's pulsing solo. The album ends with *Mardin*, a lilting flute tune by Turkish oudist Ahmet Uzunoğlu. Meticulous interplay, striking tunes and a fascinatingly unorthodox lineup of instruments make this one of the best albums of the year.

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