

**Helen Sung*****Sungbird after Albeniz*** (Sunnyside Records)

Get your credit cards out for buying this one, it's a real winner. Very rarely has the combination of jazz and classical genres worked out. Miles' *Sketches of Spain* and MJQ's *Blues On Bach* just about covers it, and it's understandable if you're skittish about trying it again. Pianist Helen Sung has done it right, intertwining solo piano works in the Romantic vein with mixtures of band pieces that imbibe influences from Coltrane to Jamal. Six of the compositions are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century composers Isaac Albeniz, yet Sung brings them up to date in a stirringly remarkable fashion. Compositions like "Prelude", "Tango" and "Capricho Catalan" are exquisite, intimate and fluorescent pieces that conjure up images of Basque countryside. Meanwhile, Sung's own "Preamble," is reminiscent of Coltrane's "Crescent", and "Shall We Tango?" harkens back to Pershing Room Ahmad Jamal.

Marcus Strickland gives off some remarkably restrained sax work on the session, being able to show feeling and emotion without breaking the desired atmosphere, no small feat. The rhythm section of Samuel Torres (percussion), Nasheet Waits (d) and Reuben Rogers (b) is sympathetic without being overly deferential. They know they are onto something important on this recording. I personally guarantee you will be as fascinated by this disc on the 20th listening as on the first. Find it now!

--George W. Harris, August 2007

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**Album Review: *Sungbird after Albeniz*** (Sunnyside Records)

Pianist Helen Sung's third CD as a leader heads in a different direction. During a European tour, she decided to look for some Spanish classical work to adapt for her group, choosing Isaac Albéniz's *España*, Op.165. But for this recording, she intermingled her own compositions with solo piano interpretations of individual movements of Albéniz's work, creating a seamless recording in which one composers' contributions complement the other's. Her classical background is apparent, though she takes some liberties with Albéniz's melodies. On the quintet tracks, her supporting band, including Marcus Strickland (tenor & soprano saxophones), bassist Reuben Rogers, drummer Nasheet Waits and percussionist Samuel Torres, follow her muse and bring out the full potential of her catchy tunes. Clocking just under 43 minutes, Sung actually leaves the listener wanting more.

~Ken Dryden, *All Music Guide*

**JazzTimes****HELEN SUNG TRIO*****Helenistique*** (Fresh Sound New Talent)

Pianist Helen Sung's new album is a treat. How could it not be, given that it covers a veritable history of soulful music, from James P. Johnson to Thelonious Monk to Prince? Sung, perhaps eager to prove herself in a crowded field of young jazz pianists, takes on a wide range of material on the immodestly named *Helenistique* and comes off as a versatile, imaginative and assertive musician.

She bookends her album with takes of "H\*Town," a concise tribute to Houston, her hometown. It's an off-kilter piece of music that she plays with a muscular style, bashing the chords when they deserve it. She wears her affinity for Monk on her sleeve, both in her writing and in her renditions of "Sweet and Lovely" and "Bye Ya," the latter of which she reconstructs with shifting time signatures while avoiding

the trap of mimicking Monk's style. (Monk may very well be her patron saint: Sung was a member of the inaugural class of the New England Conservatory's Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance and was a semifinalist in the 1999 Thelonious Monk Jazz Piano competition). What she does with the standards is equally interesting. She pays a minute of respect to Rodgers & Hart's "Lover" before speeding the tempo and spiking the tune with dizzying runs. The disc concludes with a bang. Bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Lewis Nash sit out for Johnson's "Caroline Shout," as Sung puts on a stride clinic, and the trio turns funky with a stab at Prince's who-knew-it-could-be jazz "Alphabet Street." *Helenistique* is among the year's most exciting listens.

**STEVE GREENLEE**