

the absolute sound

March, 2006

**Jason Vieaux: *Images of Metheny*. Vieaux, guitar. Alan Bise, producer; Bruce Egge, engineer. Azica 71233. Music: ★★★★★
Sonics: ★★★★★**



Before I get to the superlatives, a little disclosure is necessary. I first heard Jason Vieaux play the guitar when he was, I think, 19, shortly after he walked away with first-place honors at the 1992 Guitar Foundation of America International Competition. I was auditioning him for a program sponsored by the USIA called “Artistic Ambassador,” through which outstanding American musicians who did not yet have established careers were sent overseas to teach, perform, and serve as ambassadors of goodwill. It was the year of the guitar, and Jason was the guitarist of the year, as far as we were concerned. He was so impressive that even before he went on his tour of Southeast Asia, I sent an e-mail to Klaus Heymann at Naxos, suggesting he sign him. Jason recorded his first recital disc for Naxos in the spring of 1995. He has since gone on to become

head of the guitar department at The Cleveland Institute of Music, and has made a series of discs for Azica, of which *Images of Metheny* is the latest.

Lest it seem like I am taking credit for anything, I am not. Vieaux’s talent is so huge, and has been apparent for so long, that all these things were bound to happen. He is still the most accomplished guitarist I have heard with my own ears, and that’s a list that starts with Segovia. Part of what makes him such a wonderful musician (and not just a great guitarist) is instinctive: his phenomenal sense of rhythm and color, his natural expressiveness, his way of giving something from within himself through the music he plays. And that brings us to Pat Metheny, who is a musician of similar instinct and generosity, and whose music has long appealed to Vieaux.

In the notes that accompany this disc of arrangements by Vieaux of some of his favorite Metheny pieces, the guitarist pays tribute to the “lush” sound of Metheny’s jazz-flavored idiom, the

advanced harmony, the shapely, expressive melody. Happily, his renditions capture Metheny’s beautiful, fragile-as-a-butterfly lyricism and ingratiating warmth. He caresses the wistful harmonies of “Letter From Home” and “Message to a Friend,” turns “The Bat” into a delicate tremolo etude, and imaginatively groups five songs (“Last Train Home,” “Antonia,” “Tell Her You Saw Me,” “Question and Answer,” and “James”) as a Baroque suite.

The recording is close-miked but suitably atmospheric, not dry; it conveys Vieaux’s full-bodied sound to perfection, along with his exceptional dynamic and coloristic range. With the dense chords and all the position changes they require, there is some string noise, but nary a dead note. The entire production (right down to the patchwork-quilt jacket art, which echoes that of Metheny’s *Letter From Home*) is at once respectful and illuminating. **TED LIBBEY**
FURTHER LISTENING: Ponce: *Guitar Sonatas*; Sevilla (*Music of Isaac Albéniz*)