

FRED HERSCH: LEAVES OF GRASS

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The problem in setting Walt Whitman's poems to music is that they sound musical all by themselves: They have decisive cadences and rich sonorities, repetitions and sequences that create grand structures from small parts, and a feeling of spontaneity that was the product of numerous revisions over many years. The challenge is to create music just as supple, inventive, wide-ranging, and deeply felt as the poetry, to both celebrate and amplify Whitman's achievement. It is deeply satisfying to report that, with his new album *Leaves of Grass*, pianist Fred Hersch has composed just such music.

Hersch establishes a unity among his settings that gives the group a cumulative power greater than any individual song. The quest for unity begins with his selection of poems from *Leaves of Grass*; as he reports in his artist's statement, "I found myself drawn to whole poems, titles of poems and sections of larger poems that conveyed universal and inclusive sentiments: appreciation of the present moment, wonder at the miracle of nature in all its forms, freedom to be oneself and express that openly, and above all, open-hearted love of all beings." Thus, the poems seem to grow from and reflect upon one another as the music gracefully shifts between awestruck pastorales, proud celebrations and magical nocturnes, with a few flickers of genre thrown in along the way.

The pianist also settles on a default musical mode in which the melodic lines he gives to Whitman's words follow the inflections and rhythms of speech, preserving much of Whitman's musical feel while leaving room for emphatic departures. The music that supports those melodic lines sticks much more closely to an even rhythm, though Hersch leaves plenty of room for flexibility and improvisation; he leads by example from his piano with sensitive, delicate, and unfailingly lively playing that complements, rather than imitates, the sung lines.

But like Whitman, Hersch's *Leaves of Grass* doesn't slavishly follow any formula. Hersch plays with the rhetorical discourse between singer and ensemble, following up climactic pronouncements with extended musical breaks like trumpeter Ralph Alessi's heavens-storming solo in one section of "Song of Myself" or bassist Drew Gress' dusky rumination in "On the Beach at Night Alone." He sets two lines invoking God as a spoken liturgy; he puts a list of occupations into an electronically generated round. Tone-painting adds amplitude to Whitman's exhaustive lists, especially in "Song of Myself," where a catalog of noises like "alarm-bells," "cries of stevedores" and the "bass of disjointed friendship" is brilliantly embodied by Alessi, trombonist Mike Christianson, and saxophonists Bruce Williamson and Tony Malaby. And Hersch even throws in the most unassuming fanfare ever, playing under the words "I celebrate myself" as "Song of Myself" begins, which comes back to close both the poem and the album.

The whole Hersch Ensemble (which also includes cellist Erik Friedlander and drummer John Hollenbeck) plays brilliantly, but *Leaves of Grass* wouldn't work as an album without the singing of Kate McGarry and Kurt Elling. Both vocalists bring a pure tone and the kind of technique that makes everything seem effortless to Hersch's twisting melodic lines, bringing out their lyrical beauty while ensuring that none of Whitman's words are obscured. In fact, Whitman is just as responsible for the success of this *Leaves of Grass* as Hersch and his ensemble are, which says a whole lot for the latter.

Source: <https://jazztimes.com/reviews/albums/fred-hersch-leaves-of-grass/>