

# wholenote



## **Pennsylvania Grey – MEM3 – Independent**

Contemporary mainstream jazz polished to a high sheen, “Pennsylvania Grey” could be the punch line to an anecdote that begins with the question: what happens when a Toronto drummer, a bassist from Sydney, Australia and a pianist from Seattle hook up in Brooklyn?

Three graduates of the Manhattan School of Music, four-year-old MEM3 consists of pianist and jazz educator Michael Cabe, sturdy bassist Mark Lau, who has backed folks like saxophonist Dave Liebman, plus homeboy percussionist Ernesto Cervini, who performed with the Toronto All-Star Big Band and recorded with saxophonist, Tara Davidson. The CD features three tunes composed by each of the principals plus one standard. Not only do the performances show off each player’s skills, but the simpatico interaction also shores up individual limitations. Sometimes this involves Cabe, whose prodigious technical skill allows him to slip into commonplace runs and chord sequences. Luckily, the tough, double-stopping bass thumps plus the drummer’s inventiveness prod the pianist into exploring unexpected improvisational avenues.

Taken adagio, the more-than-12-minute title track is a prime example of this, with the atmospheric outing becoming progressively more invigorating as Cabe limns the taut theme with one hand, while producing cross-tempo variations with the other. Reaching a crescendo of dense, impressionistic broken chords, Lau’s hard-toned, flamenco-styled strumming, which seems to echo back inside his bass, introduces theme recapitulation, with the finale cemented by the drummer’s distinctive cymbal cracks.

More expansive on his own *Cerebrau*, Cervini trades fours with the pianist, matching Cabe’s kinetic chording with snare backbeats, press rolls and tom-tom patterning as Lau steadies the others’ output with and undercurrent of walking bass lines.

Overcoming its growing pains, MEM3’s apprenticeship is swiftly coming to an end of the evidence of this CD.

*Ken Waxman*