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Whitman, Walt, Kinder Adams / Children of Adam; Iggy Pop, Alva Noto, and Tarwater, Leaves of Grass [review]

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REVIEWS



Whitman, Walt, *Kinder Adams / Children of Adam*, trans. Kai Grehn. Hamburg: Hörbuch Hamburg Verlag. Audiobook, 110 min on 2 CDs.

Iggy Pop, Alva Noto, and Tarwater, *Leaves of Grass*. Berlin: Morr Music. Vinyl EP.

“[Whitman’s] poetry is always about motion and rushing ahead, and crazy love and blood pushing through the body,” Iggy Pop lets his audience know in the supplementary material to *Kinder Adams / Children of Adam*. “He would have been the perfect gangsta rapper.” Still, Pop does not grant us this overdue “Gangsta Whitman”—the “original Kanye,” as James Franco recently called him on *Vice.com*—but instead presents a largely whispered, slow-paced summoning of much of the “Children of Adam” cluster as it appears in the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass* (with the addition of short pieces and fragments from other poems). Still, Pop’s reading by itself (CD 1) seems to have been included mostly for the sake of comprehensiveness: The real heart of this project is the experimental “radio play” *Kinder Adams* (CD2) that mixes parts of Pop’s reading with recitations of Whitman in German by a number of well-known actors such as Birgit Minichmayr and Marianne Sägebrect.

At the very least, the German Whitman here does have faint “Gangsta” echoes. Kai Grehn, whose “Children of Adam” translation first accompanied a 2005 collection of nude photography by Paul Cava (*Children of Adam from Leaves of Grass*; Galerie Vevais), amplifies the eroticism of Whitman’s cluster into something orgiastic: “One Hour to Madness and Joy” becomes “One Hour of Furor and Lust” (“Eine Stunde Raserei und Lust”), while Whitman’s “cheerful waves” turn into a bacchanal of “feucht-fröhliche Wellen,” implying to any native German speaker waves of alcohol (among other fluids). Although Whitman might have enjoyed such a pun in other contexts, it is perhaps not appropriate for “We two, how long we were fool’d,” a poem presented here as a bilingual duet of sorts between Pop and

Minichmayr (and hence heterovocally obscuring the homoerotic “two of the same kind” theme of the piece).

Accompanying these recitations are ambient ocean-sounds as well as a rhythmical electronic score by German musicians Alva Noto (well-known for his work on the soundtrack of *The Revenant*) and Bernd Jesträm of the No-Wave/Post-Rock formation Tarwater. While functioning mostly as a meditative background-layer in the radio play, these pieces have now been republished in slightly remixed versions as an EP titled *Leaves of Grass*. Devoid of any of Grehn’s translations, *Leaves of Grass* features seven Whitman recitations by Pop (six from “Children of Adam”) with musical accompaniment transposed from other tracks of *Kinder Adams*: a piece that accompanied a “As Adam, Early in the Morning” in the radio play, for instance, now joins “Come, said my Soul” on Vinyl. What was originally subdued ambience is now amplified to equal Pop’s crackling voice: waves of electric guitar, synthesizer, drums, and crisp electronic glitches create a blend of smooth and psychedelic that vies with his recitations for our attention. The moments when music and voice really work together are rare but when they occur—for example when Pop’s consciously monotone reading of the line “Of the wet of woods, of the lapping of waves” is perfectly echoed by Alva Noto’s beats—we can at least hear a hint of what a post-Techno Whitman might sound like. Although we are still far removed from a musical “Body Electronic” that could do justice to the poet, one still hopes this release heralds more to come: a Whitman whose inter-line rhymes and poetic percussiveness find a comrade rather than an antagonist in the complex beats of modern electronic music.

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