SWEET CARESS

FRANCO AMBROSETTI
& Strings

John Scofield
Peter Erskine
Scott Colley
Sara Caswell

Arranged by
Alan Broadbent

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Franco Ambrosetti
Sweet Caress

Ballads have a way of comforting us. When imbued with real emotive powers, they have the capacity to elevate and transport. We become lost in romance or reverie. This second orchestral collaboration between iconic Swiss trumpeter Franco Ambrosetti and two-time, Grammy-winning arranger Alan Broadbent takes us there.

The album title is an apt description of Franco's approach to each golden note he plays on flugelhorn. Backed by an all-star group of pianist Broadbent, guitarist John Scofield, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Peter Erskine, along with a 29-piece orchestra arranged and conducted by Broadbent, Ambrosetti pulls heartstrings on a program of four originals and four well-chosen covers.

"This is actually the third album that I did with strings," said Ambrosetti. "The first one was with Don Sebesky at the end of the '70s. Over the years, I decided that I wanted badly to do another album with strings, because the more you age, the more you have to focus on ballads. And now, at my young age of 82, it is an immense satisfaction to play ballads and interpret melodies like these."

As arranger for Sweet Caress, Broadbent proves a perfect partner, continuing his arranging-conducting role on Ambrosetti's previous orchestral project, 2022's Nora. A native of New Zealand, he wrote for Woody Herman's bands of the '70s and Charlie Haden's Quartet West during the '80s. He apprenticed under Nelson Riddle before serving as arranger-conductor on orchestral recordings for Natalie Cole, Diana Krall, Shirley Horn, Michael Bublé, Andrea Bocelli, Mel Torme and Paul McCartney. "One thing I love about music," said Broadbent, "is that through notes you can move people and be moved. Whether it's jazz, classical, popular music or standard songs, if it has that certain human quality to it, then that's what I am looking for."

Following their first encounter on Nora, Broadbent described collaborating with Franco as "two musical souls finding each other. We all know, within a few bars of playing together, whether we are feeling a bond. You resonate together like tuning forks, and from that comes the music. I am just fortunate that Franco heard something in me that he felt close to."

He continued, "I'm a passionate pianist, I like to translate that feeling as well into an orchestra, which I believe is the most beautiful thing on the face of the planet. It's a deep experience."

They go deep right out of the gate on the opening track, a rendition of Mal Waldron's profoundly heart-rending ballad "Soul Eyes," written in 1957. Broadbent's intro is sublime, as he sets the table with lush strings and a lone clarinet before Franco introduces the plaintive melody on flugelhorn. Buoyed by a gentle swell of violins, Ambrosetti gracefully builds to a volley of high, clear notes that suspend in mid air. Guitarist John Scofield enters at the 1:50 mark, playing simply but expressively in his signature string-bending manner. Franco returns at the 3:00 mark, echoing the mournful notes with which Sco ended his solo.

As Franco digs into his solo, Broadbent reaches into his Gordon Jenkins bag for some stirring old-school, string-and-flutes accompaniment. Scofield returns, at first sparsely embellishing the melody, then bursting loose with signature glissandi and blues-tinged phrasing, summoning thoughts of Wes Montgomery. Broadbent's string and woodwind filigrees, at the tag, add a delicious punctuation mark to the proceedings.

Fluttering strings and flutes greet the opening to J. Russel Robinson's "Portrait of Jennie," a serene nugget originally written for the 1948 movie of the same name, which became a hit song for Nat King Cole. Franco shifts into romantic mode, summoning thoughts of the classic rendition that appeared on the 1955 album, Clifford Brown with Strings (which inspired a young Franco Ambrosetti growing up in Lugano). While Clifford was all of 25 years old when he recorded that haunting melody, Franco's soulful version came a week shy of his 82nd birthday.

Given his decades of seasoning, Ambrosetti interprets the tune with a relaxed, behind-the-beat feel, conveying the debonair aesthetic of one who has savored the best things in life. Broadbent's cascading piano solo adds a virtuosic touch to this timeless melody while the luxurious coda bears his own personal harmonic stamp. As he said, "I tend to think closer towards the less commercial side of harmony. Gil Evans, Bob Brookmeyer, for example ... I want those tensions."

The beguiling title track, "Sweet Caress," does not feature Franco at all but instead spotlights world-class violinist Sara Caswell. Caswell, who returns as concertmaster (the same role she played during Nora), delivers a thrilling performance, capped by a dramatic, unaccompanied statement at the tag. And while Broadbent offers a dark undercurrent in his voicings, all resolve to a consonant ending.

The gentle and mysterious "Habanera," a restful Ambrosetti original written for his wife Silli commemorating her appearance in a stage production of Carmen, unfolds slowly and sensuously like night-blooming jasmine. A laid-back sigh of a melody volleyed between Franco and Scofield, its enchantment is augmented by Erskine's gentle touch of mallets on toms. This luxurious gem finds Broadbent's rich string arrangement complementing Ambrosetti's buttery flugelhorn. Scofield's patient solo here relies once again on warm, Wes-like octaves, as flutes and strings dance around him. Franco follows with a solo against Broadbent's deliberate yet sparse accompaniment. Sco returns with some signature string bending and liquid, over-the-bar phrasing before the strings again swell to the fore. At the tune's end, Ambrosetti and Scofield engage in a conversational call-and-response.

Their unhurried approach on the moody "Nightfall," a darkly beautiful Charlie Haden composition that was first recorded on the bassist's 2001 trio album Nocturne and later reprised orchestrally on his 2002 album American Dreams (arranged and conducted by Jeremy Lubbock), is reminiscent of the old-school Hollywood featured on Turner Classic Movies. (Haden, an old movie buff, shared his celluloid passion with Broadbent during their years together in Quartet West). Franco's muted trumpet playing here is magnificent in its understated glory, while Colley delivers one of his patented melodic bass solos.

Their take on "Old Friends," a mellifluous number by Broadbent, is another showcase for both Ambrosetti and the composer, with the pianist delivering his jazziest solo of the set. "Colors of the Wind," another Franco original, finds the trumpeter blowing a most resounding solo.

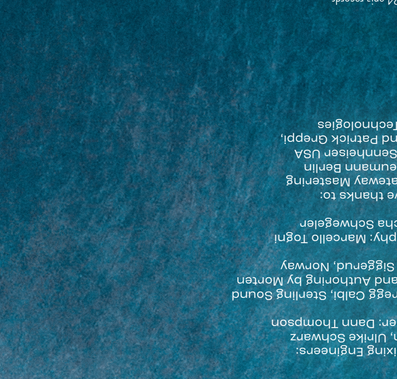
The collection closes with Franco's tender "When the Sun Never Sets." Placed against the backdrop of yet another richly expressive string arrangement, Franco's lines straddle that light-dark divide emblematic of Broadbent's stylistic canvasses.

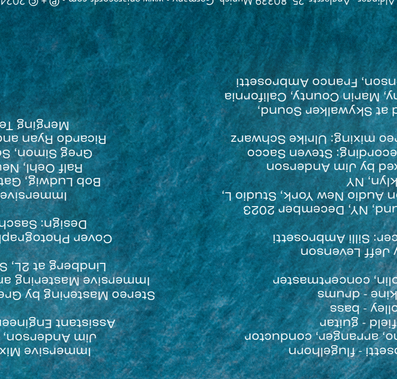
Ballads open the heart and welcome in listeners. On Sweet Caress, Ambrosetti and Broadbent cast a warm-glow spell that lingers. "I want to express the feelings that a ballad gives me," said Ambrosetti. "It's like Miles Davis, who started playing many notes with Charlie Parker. Long solos, too. Then later on he only played a few notes, but the most important ones. And that's how I want to handle a ballad now."

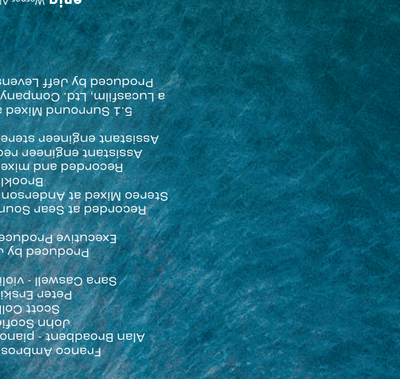
These lush numbers go down nicely with late night quietude and a sip of your favorite spirit (my preference is bourbon, neat, or a darkly alluring cabernet). And, while you're at it, kick back, place your feet on the nearest ottoman, dim the lights, and get lost in the reverie of Sweet Caress.

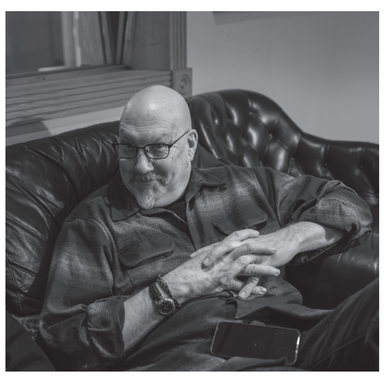
— Bill Milkowski

Bill Milkowski is a longtime contributor to Downbeat and author of biographies on Jaco Pastorius, Pat Martino and Michael Brecker.









Thank You

The dream continues... another record with strings.

Why? Because the sound of strings, woodwinds and brass, together, surround you completely. Like a caress, the waves of music go into your soul, leading you to a different approach and a different attitude, influencing what you play.

The sensation of being protected by the immersive sound of the orchestra, changes things, the aim now being to integrate one's lines with the waves – so, don't rush, just take a breath and enjoy.

After completing Nora, my last record, I felt like a motherless child. I missed the presence of that perfect musical world a string section offers. With two dear friends, I decided this would not be the last: my producer, the one and only Jeff Levenson, and arranger Alan Broadbent, who has the deepest knowledge of how to treat ballads, uncovering the soul of each tune.

We decided to focus on ballads written exclusively by jazz musicians, and to enlarge the string orchestra by adding woodwinds and brass.

Music is love. And ballad is a feminine word. It means love to me.

Thank you Silli, for always being by my side and my source of inspiration.

My Special thanks go to:

Alan Broadbent: One of the most astonishing and talented musicians I've had the luck to meet. His friendship is a great honor to me.

John Scofield: Magician of the guitar and dearest friend for more than 45 years.

Scott Colley: Strong like a rock and gentle like a butterfly.

Peter Erskine: A legend in the jazz world and a master percussionist.

Sara Caswell: With her sensitivity and talent, she'll make it anywhere.

Jim Anderson: Master of all sounds and master of immersive technology.

Ulrike Schwarz: Her presence is a must for a successful recording.

Greg Calbi: The third of a magic trio of recording engineers.

Roberta: Who owns the most imaginative of the NYC recording studios.

— Franco Ambrosetti

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Side One:
SOUL EYES
(Mal Waldron, BMI) 6:44
PORTRAIT OF JENNIE
(J. Russel Robinson, ASCAP) 5:43
SWEET CARESS
(Franco Ambrosetti) 5:05
HABANERA
(Franco Ambrosetti) 7:42

Side Two:
NIGHTFALL
(Charlie Haden, BMI) 7:00
OLD FRIENDS
(Alan Broadbent, Alan Broadbent Music, ASCAP) 5:41
COLORS OF THE WIND
(Franco Ambrosetti) 6:21
WHEN THE SUN NEVER SETS
(Franco Ambrosetti) 6:33

Franco Ambrosetti - Flügelhorn
Alan Broadbent - piano, arranger, conductor
John Scofield - guitar
Scott Colley - bass
Peter Erskine - drums
Sara Caswell - violin, concertmaster

Produced by Jeff Levenson
Executive Producer: Silli Ambrosetti

Recorded at Saar Sound, NY, December 2023
Stereo Mixed at Anderson Audio New York, Studio L,
Brooklyn, NY
Recorded and mixed by Jim Anderson
Assistant engineer recording: Steven Sacco
Assistant engineer stereo mixing: Ulrike Schwarz

5.1 Surround Mixed at Skywalker Sound,
a Lucasfilm, Ltd. Company, Marin County, California
Produced by Jeff Levenson, Franco Ambrosetti

Immersive Mixing Engineers:
Jim Anderson, Ulrike Schwarz
Assistant Engineer: Dann Thompson

Stereo Mastering by Gregg Calbi, Sterling Sound
Immersive Mastering and Authoring by Morten
Lindberg at 2L, Sigerud, Norway

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