

Portico Quartet - Art In The Age Of Automation (2017)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Endless* 2 *Objects To Place In A Tomb* 3 *Rushing* 4 *Art In The Age Of Automation*
5 *S/2000S5* 6 *A Luminous Beam* 7 *Beyond Dialogue* 8 *RGB* 9 *Current History* 10
Mercury Eyes 11 *Lines Glow* Duncan Bellamy: drums and electronics Milo Fitzpatrick:
bass Keir Vine: hangs and keys Jack Wyllie: saxophone and keys Francesca Ter-Burg and
Anisa Arslanagic: strings (1, 2, 4, 6, 11) Tom Herbert: extra bass (2, 7)

It's an inevitable rule that pretty much any piece of automated technology, especially digital technology, gets criticized for replacing something natural. The synthesizer invited a backlash when it was used (and yes, often misused) as a substitute for 'real' instruments—ditto the computerized tones and robotic timekeeping of MIDI and digital programming. Nonetheless, it's just as inevitable that after each seemingly soulless invention comes along, someone figures out how to use it in ways artistic and meaningful. Joe Zawinul made early synths dance and swing as skillfully as anyone with any other instrument out there; the computer world of Kraftwerk turned out to be more visceral and funky than anyone would have expected. Tools are only subordinate to the hands and minds behind them, after all.

The members of Portico Quartet represent this camp superbly with *Art in the Age of Automation*. From the fundamentally organic music to the cover (an in-the-moment scan of an image moving onscreen), they're most interested in making the automation serve the art. Their distinct tone comes partly from including the hang—a custom-built instrument that's sort of a combination of steel drum, resonant prayer bowl and postmodern art sculpture. Just as importantly, the sound also comes from how they use it and the rest of their tools (bass, drums, keys, saxophone and electronics). The band has made a remarkably natural transformation from largely-acoustic largely-jazz combo to minimalist-ambient-worldbeat-techno sound sculptors without losing that natural warmth underneath.

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Fittingly enough, this work was shaped by absence as much as presence. Hang/keyboard player Keir Vine left the group for what turned out to be a two-year stretch, during which the others dove into song-based electronica as a trio simply called Portico (which they consider a separate band rather than a mutation or offshoot, and rightly so). With his return bringing them to the older familiar lineup again, they happily take a step not backward but sideways. The quartet's previous emphasis on loops, programs and effects is combined with the temporary trio's new depths of intricate production and sonic detail. There's simply more going on here than on any previous PQ recording—beats come and go with an insistent pulse, samples and instruments get looped and layered, sax and drums might get filtered into odd tones—and they perform the tweaking in real time, without simply letting machines do the work, and make sure there are still spaces to stretch and improvise as well.

Melody and atmosphere are equally woven into vast, cool blue washes of sound without any arbitrary feeling of frontline or backline. Several pieces include violin and cello which tend toward slow, steady drones, all mingled with floating vocal samples or the often-processed sound of Jack Wyllie's saxophone, sometimes practically daring you to guess which is which. All of them can be no more or less busy than Duncan Bellamy's skittering drums or Vine's otherworldly hang notes. Art... is a fascinating blend that refuses to be pegged as jazz, ambient, minimalist, techno or anything else. Portico Quartet have excellently re-redefined themselves, both summarizing and outgrowing their past history to make their most gripping, immersive and unclassifiable experience yet. ---Geno Thackara, allaboutjazz.com

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