

Sea and Sky's Sassicaia is an auspicious debut

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Sea and Sky *Sassicaia (Redshift)*

The first of two nearly simultaneously released discs from the Sea and Sky duo of clarinetist François Houle and pianist Jane Hayes, *Sassicaia* is named for a rare and costly wine. And aptly so: the grapes used in this super-Tuscan blend are grown on miserly soil but result in a rich and intoxicating product. Similarly, many of the sounds here are austere or contemplative, but the excellence of the musicianship and Jeff Yellen's impeccable engineering make for heady listening.

Where the duo's second release, *Zarabandeo*, has a distinctly Hispanic flavour and includes works by historical figures Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, and Astor Piazzolla, *Sassicaia* concentrates on Canadian composers, all but one of whom are still around to enjoy Hayes and Houle's interpretive prowess. In turn, they've given the two plenty to work with; if you think the combination of clarinet and piano has limited potential, you've not taken into account Sea and Sky's willingness to experiment, or the genre-jumping options inherent in contemporary music. Gordon Fitzell's "Bliss Point", for example, finds Hayes delving into the electric guitarist's trick bag for some handheld eBows, electronic devices that coax sustained, overtone-heavy sonorities from the piano's metal strings. Atop these, Houle creates his own long, shimmering tones that pulse against the piano in suitably dreamy fashion. Even more entrancing is Paul Dolden's epic

“Eternal Return of a Ritual Form”, which uses prerecorded passages to simulate orchestral and prog-rock textures; these eventually come together in a long, ecstatic finale over which Hayes flings flurries of splintery notes. Sonically vivid and intellectually lively, *Sassicaia* is an auspicious debut.