

Brainwashed - Ian William Craig, "A Turn of Breath"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 12 August 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 12 August 2018 20:05



Recently reissued in expanded form, *A Turn of Breath* was Ian William Craig's 2014 formal debut, though it was predated by a handful of digital-only and cassette releases. In fact, I am quite fond of his first two Recital Program albums, even if they betray a strong Tim Hecker influence. With *A Turn of Breath*, however, Craig made a major creative leap forward, casting aside any lingering derivative touches to establish himself as one of the most talented and distinctive sound artists in recent memory. Using just his voice as his primary instrument, Craig employs an arsenal of tape players to transform his simple, naked melodies into swooning and warbling dream-like bliss. He later expanded considerably on that aesthetic with the more song-based and shoegaze-inspired

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, but that vision was already quite lovely and fully formed here—

A Turn of Breath

just happens to be a more fragmented, flickering, and hallucinatory incarnation of it.

[Recital Program](#)

For good reason, it is damn near impossible to find any description of *A Turn of Breath* that does not use the word "angelic." There is no word more apt for this album, so there is no point in going through linguistic contortions to find an alternative. Craig, a classically trained vocalist, certainly sings quite beautifully, yet the world is absolutely full of other classically trained vocalists and I generally have no interest in their recordings—a great voice is only a starting point. Fortunately, Craig had (and has) plenty of great ideas for how to use that voice. His work is special primarily because he has found an especially ingenious way to use tapes and has a singular compositional genius for transforming tape music into something warm, melodic, and lushly Romantic. At its best,

A Turn of Breath

sounds like the sublimely rapturous recordings of a heavenly choir...if a bumbling recording engineer tripped and the master tapes rolled off the cloud and fell to earth. That is only the first part, though, as it also seem like the tapes probably sat in the sun for a while before Craig found them. That last bit is especially crucial, as pieces like "Red Gate With Starling" and "Either Or" seems to retain a divine essence, yet transform that prettiness into something deeper, elegantly frayed, and vulnerable. While that summarizes the bulk of the album, Craig occasionally picks

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up his guitar as well, earning him several similarly deserved comparisons to a medieval troubadour (albeit one with access to some reverb effects). Admittedly, I am not quite as fond of that side of

Breath

, but pieces like "Rooms" and "A Forgetting Place" play an essential role in balancing out the vaporous and elusive nature of the more abstract pieces with some clear words and melodies. I am able to fully appreciate the gorgeous fog of this album precisely because there are occasional breaks in it.

The album's best pieces tend to be ones that blur the lines between those two poles, however. Only "A Slight Grip, A Gentle Hold" fully achieves that feat, but it is the album's two-part centerpiece and the two halves take achingly beautiful and divergent paths. For the first part, Craig weaves an unusually lush and layered backdrop of warbling, fluttering vocal loops that are quite gorgeous on their own. When the main vocals finally appear, it feels absolutely transcendent, like Craig is singing a simple and pure hymn as the heavens open up and cherubim flutter around the rafters. The second part boldly strips away all those underlying loops, reducing the piece to just the unadorned central melody, then adding layers of harmonies until Craig sounds like a one-man choir. It is great, of course, but it gets even better when it unexpectedly erupts into a shivering and lovely coda of lush organ chords and wobbly tapes. Speaking of the latter, I am also quite fond of "Second Lens," which sounds like the tape machine itself has become possessed with the divine spirit. There are still some lovely slow-moving clouds of harmonized vocals, but the real magic of the piece lies in the textural details, as it feels like all of the smallest mechanical sounds have been amplified to become a symphony of hiss, crackle, straining wheels, and flapping tape.

Curiously, it was only with the gift of hindsight that I was able to appreciate what a unique and wonderful album this is: Craig was great when he was just using self-built instruments (*Heretic Surface*)

, then he was great when he started singing into tape recorders. It did not seem like a big deal to me at the time, though it is now baffling to think that there was once a time when Craig conspicuously avoided singing. I needed the added context of

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to grasp that a seismic shift had occurred. I suppose part of that slow realization was because *Breath*

was still primarily composed of soundscapes rather than songs, though "A Slight Grip" is a dazzling exception. This album is far more like a beautiful mosaic rather than a collection of individual highlights—a structure that makes the expanded edition's inclusion of two additional EPs quite interesting. The

Short of Breath

EP is the less striking of the two, as it simply feels like a seamless extension of the parent album (there is even a third variation of "A Slight Grip"). It is all good, but it is so clearly cut from the exact same cloth as

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that it just feels like the album got a little longer. The

Fresh Breath

EP, on the other hand, offers a glimpse of a slightly darker, starker, and more experimental album that might have been. It seems like it would have been a good one, but Craig's instincts were infallible enough to leave me with no regrets about the path he chose. To go back to my mosaic metaphor, what Craig left out of the album is just as important as what he left in:

A Turn of Breath

is not great solely because he had plenty of wonderful new material—it is also great because he distilled it all to its simplest essence and avoided diluting that by paring away absolutely everything that was not necessary. The extra material is nice, but

A Turn of Breath

was already an essential release without it.

Samples:

- [Red Gate With Starling](#)
- [A Slight Grip, A Gentle Hold \(Part 2\)](#)
- [6 Years, 33 Million \(For Bo\) \(from *Fresh Breath* \)](#)