

June 2012

**Devin Gray/Ellery
Eskelin/Dave Ballou/
Michael Formanek**

Dirigo Rataplan

Skirl 019 | ★★★

**Devin Gray (d), Ellery Eskelin (ts), Dave Ballou (t), and
Dirigo Rataplan | Michael Formanek (b). Rec. 2011**

Although just 28-years-old, Gray is mature enough to see himself as a “musician-drummer

rather than a drummer-drummer”, and in this impressive debut he is true to his word. The eight original compositions make a virtue of very precise structures where bold, lyrical, often swinging unison horn lines segue into more harmonically open passages where the interplay and resulting textures are prickly and sweet. If Gray is adept at driving his very experienced ensemble by way of staggered, stop-start but nonetheless rousing, bustling meters then it is his very careful creation of textures – the breath-like swoosh of cymbals and the rustlings of snare on ‘Prospect Park’ draw a discreetly patterned blanket around the horns – that is also worthy of note. As with several previous generations of pathfinders – Lester Bowie, Herb Robertson and above all, Don Cherry, if we take trumpeters alone – Gray is interested in creating music that is deeply evocative, if not pastoral on occasion, but also shaped by a fizzing, often restless push-pull energy. The explosions of collective improvisation are an essential element of this approach, but they are mapped by tight narratives that steer clear of overplaying, which is a trap into which many a young player falls. If Gray can keep this quartet together and tour more extensively, then it has the potential to be a key small group in contemporary jazz. **Kevin Le Gendre**