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Pop/Rock CD Reviews



Apokalypse Now – Polkastra – Ancalagon

Lara St. John and company take you where you fear to tread—but you'll be a far happier person when you return.



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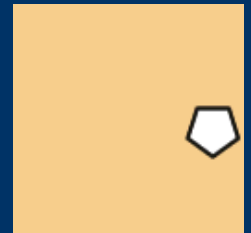
Apokalypse Now – Polkastra – Ancalagon AHC 135, 55:18 ** [www.polkastra.com]:**

I can think of far duller things than following Lara St. John's career over the years. We're not playing the Berg Concerto here, honey. Those who have been swept away by the perceptive and emotional vibrancy of her Bach playing, or thrust into exotic rapture in her Piazzolla might just feel as if they have been dunked head first into a barrel of St. Pauli Girl. The surprise and stunning effect of a head full of cold beer is not too far off for those coming to this album. St. John is here one of the

guys, so to speak—well, they are all guys, except for one unnamed wife who makes a cameo vocal appearance—was this intentional Lara? I am sure she won't say, but she does look very comfortable in the picture on the back of the cover surrounded by the fellows. Okay, okay, she is the Executive Producer after all, and this is her record label.

I do have to mention the names of these dudes, for their willingness to embark on such a comparatively outrageous project deserves such an outing: Daniel Lapp (trumpet, fiddle, guitar vocals); Andy Doe (French horn); Ron Yesinia (accordion); Mark Timmerman (contrabassoon, bassoon); Jack Campbell (electric bass); Yuval Depot (percussion, vibraphone); and William Barton playing the didgeridoo, an ancient Australian instrument like a wooden Alpine horn that has an indescribable sound.

But why the polka, of all things? Today this might surprise most of us, unless you are part of a church group or local ethnic assembly where the music has never died out. Lawrence Welk used to feature them all of the time on his television show, though I think I would need a lot of Geritol to dance at some of these tempos. Anyone even remotely familiar with the music of the Strauss family knows that the dance was very popular in those mid-nineteenth



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century years and remained so well into the twentieth. But I suppose that the generation that heard Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, and The Beatles on up to today's hip-hop might think that this Czech-originated dance form is too banal for the needs of the current moment. They could not be more wrong.


Aside from the fact that there are many forms of the dance (Chicago was a large center of specific polka-flavored activity), the music opens itself to all sorts of influences, from classical to Yiddish, to Celtic to Central European, to folk and country, and makes a perfect vehicle for serious fun and elaborate parody. Just spend an hour dancing around the room to this disc and you are in for one intense cardiovascular benefit! However, I doubt that an exercise CD was the intention of the artists on this album, seeing as the project itself began as St. John terms it, "a lark". But larks often morph into more serious projects, and here we have an intense, enjoyable, and madcap foray into the world of the international polka. The playing is virtuosic and energetic, but not too disciplined that it falls into the "stuffy" category and not too ragged that we feel the musicians are creating a phony atmosphere. After all, a few beers relax but a keg quickly dissipates into chaos! No such chance of that here as all involved are recreating a genre that has itself dissipated somewhat, and the players want to be sure that we get the highest standards of performance owed to this once-great and still-viable art form.

We get 20 well-conceived and stylistically varied songs. The sound is extremely clear but recorded at a much louder level than Ancalagon's other releases, so be sure to turn it down a notch when you begin. Production values are very high, as we have come to expect from Ancalagon. When I first found out about this project I shuddered a bit. I shouldn't have. This is great fun.

TrackList:

Apolkalyse Now; Budapest Polka; Light as Feather Polka; American Polka; Clarinet Polka; Anta, Romnyej, Mure Roula; Victoria Commonwealth Polka; Sirba; Ludwig van Polka; Meanwhile, Somewhere in France; Corageasca, Celtic Kalkadunga Polka; Caribou Shuffle/ Julie Ann Polka; Flying Gypsy Polka; Knife, Fork, and Spoon; Allegro a la Polka; Four String Polkanini; The Hora! The Hora!; Polkayereyeout; Araber Tanz

-- Steven Ritter

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