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TODAY MUSIC

Class violinist a polka power

Mon, August 10, 2009

MUSIC: Lara St. John ventures into Walter Ostanek territory with the release of *Apokalypse Now*, the debut release by Polkastra

By [JAMES REANEY](#), COLUMNIST

The Grammys may have cancelled its category -- but Lara St. John's polka record is still the dance album of the year.

Apokalypse Now is the sweet and stomping debut from Polkastra, the merry and melodious side project the former London violinist co-leads with B.C.-based roots ace Daniel Lapp. *Apokalypse Now* is due for what St. John calls its "physical release" as a CD tomorrow.

The album's 19 polka-fired tracks -- plus a non-polka bonus item -- have had me jumping around as if Walter Ostanek was hot-wired to my toes.

Try sitting still to Canadian fiddle ace King Ganam's *Four String Polkanini* or Quebec master Ti-Jean Carignan's *American Polka*.

Impossible. Can't be done.

Polka music can't be more fun than this -- even if the Grammys decided to cancel the category after the 2009 trophies were handed out. It is possible

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Classical violin star Lara St. John of London is trying a new direction -- for fun. (Sharon Gunderson photo)

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Grammy organizers were annoyed to learn that U.S. star Jimmy Sturr, with 18 Grammys in the category, was trailing rock icon Bruce Springsteen by only one trophy overall.

Not fair. Apokalypse Now would rule in the polka category. Maybe it was even conceived as a surestepping way to romp in a category where there are sometimes just 20 albums in a year.

So there's no polka Grammy now for Apokalypse Now.

That's the bad news. The good news is this record is a winner anyway. You'll jump. You'll laugh. You'll polka.

I can't polka, not to save my life. Apokalypse Now makes me believe by all that is polka-worthy to Golden Horseshoe polka emperor and multi-Grammy winner Ostanek that I need to learn. In the wurst way.

Apokalypse Now is cheerfully billed as "the wurst album of the year."

It's not. It might be the best in any one of several categories.

New York-based St. John is the classical violin star who already put out a brilliant album of her playing Vivaldi and Piazzolla on her Ancalagon label in 2009. It was recorded in Venezuela where St. John was matched with brilliant young players.

Recorded at sessions in New Jersey, the polka album matches her with an amazing assortment of roots, classical and world musicians. Lapp plays fiddle, trumpet, guitar and sings a First World War ballad St. John found in a Wisconsin antique store. He also contributes "apolkalypsic" tunes, including one he wrote for the 1994 Commonwealth Games, and arrangements.

Horn player Andy Doe, a Californian, came up with the concept of HD polka fun. Israeli-born accordionist Ronn Yedidia won composition prizes at Juilliard. Also born in Israel is percussionist and vibes player Yuval Edoot who wowed Hef and the Bunnies at the Playboy mansion and has played with Oscar Peterson and Diana Krall.

Contrabassoonist and bassoonist Mark Timmerman's other bands include the New York Met orchestra. Timmerman turns Clarinet Polka into a joyful "bassoon polka," one of the album's many sprightly mini-masterpieces. It doesn't hurt that the tune is beloved by Canadians of a certain generation as the jaunty theme to the old CBC Radio show Rawhide, starring former Londoner Max Ferguson.

Bassist Jack Campbell keeps Astragang moving as if he's just really excited to have heard SCTV's Schmenge Brothers are on the dance floor, looking for a new bassmaster to join the Happy Wanderers and rock Lutonia.

Polkastra guest William Barton is Australia's foremost didgeridoo player -- and therefore likely the world's No. 1 on the big instrument. The Outback sounds completely at home on a polka from Eastern Europe and the non-polka bonus track, Araber Tanz, an ancient klezmer-flavoured tune.

Over its hour or so of pure polka joy and a little melancholy, Apokalypse Now finds its melodies from Beethoven, Johann Strauss, Smetana and in Canada, the U.S., Bohemia, Romania, Moldava and other soulful, happy places.

Just weeks after the Grammys organizers killed the polka category in June, Polkastra could celebrate their music being No. 1 in the world music category. It started with an iTunes global exclusive on June 23.

Now, the album is ready for release, with sales most likely via the Internet.

"As you will surely find, there are quite a lot of Canadian tunes herein, and one-quarter of us are Canadian," St. John says. "Also, (Apokalypse Now) was mastered

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in Montreal, so we feel as though that's practically half, if you count all the tunes."

Juno, I think? That a Canadian recording industry trophy might just have the category for Apokalypse Now, now that the Grammys don't wanna have polka fun.

Dance album of the year? Group roots and traditional album of the year? Classical album of the year (chamber group)? Instrumental album of the year?

Surely, it is going to be Juno time for Apokalypse Now somewhere.

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