

and the result is quite embarrassing. A similar thing happens with the word "journey" on the next line. (And why did she decide to ornament the word 'is' anyway?)

Of the second song, Tamasha the liner notes inform us, "Inspired by the grandson of Bahá'u'lláh who loved to go on outings with his grandfather. His death at the age of four was commemorated by a Tablet[3] in which Bahá'u'lláh described him as sightseeing in the next world." As I was unaware of this story, this song was especially memorable. Lucid lyrics commemorate this little known member of the holy household. The music is dreamily effective, with a sensitive use of guitars, but again the singing causes aural problems.

A further concern relates to the liner notes. A short note explaining the inspiration for the song often accompanies the lyrics. The fact that Tamasha was explained is very helpful, but in other cases, such as The Whole Me, the explanations are unnecessary and lack subtlety. Consider this explanation of I Believe in You, "I was blessed by a dream in which I was held in an enormous hand, cradled and told that everything would be all right." (Incidentally, in the chorus of this song the backing vocals intone the name of Bahá'u'lláh, but the resulting effect lacks taste.) Another example reads, "We are all born with potential talents, capacities and virtues that are deep within us like jewels in a mine. Shouldn't the goal of education be to bring these gems to the surface?" Of course, everyone agrees with this sentiment, which is as much common sense as "new" Bahá'í teaching, but it is quite unnecessary as an appendix to the song lyrics. It is rather like the Bahá'í T-Shirts which the public find so off-putting.

Interlude is a pseudo-Pink Floyd instrumental track which contains apparently sampled Sheila Chandra-style Indian singing. Now, we Bahá'ís are all world-embracing believers with multi-cultural families, but, once again, I must draw attention to the fact that stealing timbre and line (or plain sampling) from selected exotic cultures is orientalism of doubtful ethics.[4] It seems odd that people forget that the music of different civilisations has taken thousands of years to evolve separately. The inevitable connections between world musics as globalization continues cannot simply involve juxtaposition, but must occur at deeper structural levels.

Little Eyes was inspired by the death of James Bulger, a child from Liverpool who was murdered by two children a few years ago. This is a sincere effort but it sounds like an advertisement soundtrack. (As are the final tracks, Tree of Unity and the happy-clappy One People One Planet which features a children's chorus – wonderfully microtonal!)

The problem with this album is that the songs are well-written, but the singing is unsatisfactory. (Perhaps, like Dolly Parton's I Will Always Love You these songs will find their true expression in the future?)[5]

Chris Ruhe's Chartreuse Blues

Artist: Chris Ruhe

Nine Partners Music BMI, 1996, NPM 5870

This is a quintessentially American work, with a very specific audience in mind. For those who are not interested in blues, or country, this album will prove rather difficult to like. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the recording is the liner notes:

Thank you for buying my new album. My labor of love. Here it is, a musical pastiche, some paint upon the canvas...bright splashes of color...two colors predominate...chartreuse...brilliant green of parrots wings, of mountain moss and secret wild Honduran callings of loud, raucous, muscley, rowdy life...mix it then with cobalt blue, of cold Magellanic ocean deeps, of nearnight skies, of gliding jays wings, of my love's eyes, of yon supine Appalachians, and there we sort of have it...my music, my chartreuse blues, (for youse). (yeah)

Many wonderful musicians, all my friends, have contributed to this album ... they range from 17 to 75 years old, and come in all shapes, sizes, and hues ... all members of the ancient, noble tribe of music-makers ... and, it is undeniable ... we are products of history ... all music comes from deep well-springs of human experience, from that age-old and unutterably profound drama that is our struggle upward ... as we remember throbbing night drums, and slender flute trills in the high desert dawn ...

It is quite a Terence Trent D'Arby-style piece of writing, rich with signification. It is difficult, however, to determine the connections between this vivid meandering prose and the staid music which accompanies it.

The opening track, Life's a Highway, demonstrates a typically unimaginative bass line which ruins the music. However, the bluesy track which follows, Going Down to the River, is quite evocative. Ruhe has used the word "neurosis" in his description of this track, and the use of a droning keyboard part helps reinforce this mood. The lyrics are strangely interesting: "Well I see four wasps dying on a window, but I don't lift a finger to help them. I know you won't understand." I was encouraged to hear a Bahá'í artist embracing negativity and dissonance – vital aspects of any healthy art.

The greatest difficulty with this music is the quality of the singing, the colour of the voice. The enunciation of lyrics is admittedly clear, but there is a distinct lack of strength or charisma. After a few tracks it becomes difficult to listen any further. Here is yet another example where guest singers would really help demonstrate the strengths of the song-writer.

Ultimately I couldn't help wondering why blues is so popular. It is bland and harmonically effete. There is no structural ambiguity, just fulfilled expectation. If you take one of these songs out of context maybe it will not do much harm. But if you try to listen to the whole album at one sitting, you quickly tire. The artist has written that "two colours predominate." That is the crux of the problem. **

Masnavi: Improvisations on Spiritual Themes

Artists: Kamran, Khodjasteh, Averill

IST, 1996, IST 0219

Reviewing a recording of Persian/Arabic chant is extremely difficult for a listener who does not understand the original languages. Fortunately, the recording is produced with the intention of reaching those who rely on translations. Detailed liner notes provide an avenue for approaching the chants, which are correctly identified as an "experience rather than a performance."

What you hear is very standard, such as you will have heard on numerous occasions. However, it is pleasing to be able to hear the textured verbal intricacy of the writings any time you wish. I was a little confused by the backing vocals which appear on some of the tracks. As far as I am aware, this rather distracting addition does not stem from middle eastern practice. It may be a potentially radical innovation, but I found it a little melodramatic. However, it underlines some key issues in this area of endeavour. As this form of chant evolved, it was not considered music, but a recitation of the text. It was not designed for mass marketing, nor for repeated listening. Therefore we cannot listen to it with musical ears. However, westerners find it nearly impossible to listen to a CD of "singing" in an unfamiliar language without a concept of "music" coming into play. I am fascinated by the challenges and difficulties brought about by this paradox.[6]

Reliance

Artists: Ben Koen and the Unity Ensemble

Qing Shan Music, 1997

When I observed that the group here was called "The Unity Ensemble," I was a little suspicious that their music would reveal itself to be emotion-driven. However, I was pleased to find that my prejudices had been completely misplaced. Reliance turns out to be an accomplished piece of music making.

The initial track, Preparation, which is based on a single drone, immediately propels us into a unique soundworld. Bathsheba provides us with our first taste of their jazz style. It is an eclectic mix which suggests not only musicians such as John Coltrane, but also the European Quartet of Keith Jarrett, while the piano solos (with fistfuls of chords and inelegant spiky rhythms) are reminiscent of some McCoy Tyner.

Two of the tracks include sung extracts from The Hidden Words. These are wonderfully melodic settings in English. The singer, Destan Owen, has an attractive warm voice. The moving Temple of Being is a case in point. The music is very relaxed in all parameters (check out the stylistic parallels here with an album such as Jarrett's

Personal Mountains). A particularly effective technique is the overlapping of solos which occurs at 1'44". It is not an original technique of course, but the context in which it is employed is very successful.

The recording is dedicated to Bahá'u'lláh. When we consider that earlier in the century jazz was roundly maligned for its decadence (for example by the Sufi musician Inayat Khan), it is fascinating to observe this musical language evolving to become of the vehicle of adoration.

Merz[7]

Artist: Merz

Epic, 1999, 495500 2

Recently attracting a wave of media praise, Merz (aka Conrad Lambert) has been described as "one of the country's more original talents" with "a sound that is like no other." [8] This recently released album is a strikingly important contribution to the development of the Bahá'í Faith in the British Isles. Merz is potentially a prominent ambassador for the Faith, which must place him in a difficult position as he decides just how much (if at all) he should broadcast his religious adherence. If it is completely concealed that may be a lost opportunity. But if anyone caught even the faintest hint that his efforts are an attempt to "teach," then it would all come to nothing.

In producing this album, Merz is to be congratulated on getting the balance right.

He has produced an album designed for public consumption. There is no explicit ecstatic celebration of Bahá'í identity. [9] His concern with musical expression, rather than proselytising, is very welcome. And yet, he does provide the URL of a Bahá'í website. [10]

Further, his lyrics are replete with indirect references to his religious ideals. It might be tempting to discuss this music purely from the perspective of the artist as a Bahá'í. I feel such thinking would lack integrity, for it is important to discuss this album from a musical point of view. After all, it is on the musical level that Merz's public career will continue. It is a great pleasure to report that the purely musical response is for me a positive one. The songs are all well-written, both as music and text. The

recording itself
is attractively produced and mixed.

To describe the music is rather difficult, as the influences are so varied.

Conrad

Lambert's influences range across the gamut of contemporary music from Bob Dylan to

Nine Inch Nails[11] – a range that has earned him the moniker "the British Beck."

Moreover, his Bahá'í influences are apparent throughout. This comes across not only in

the "unity in diversity" of the eclectic range of musical styles found on the album or the

upbeat and positive message found in lyrics like "the world is gonna be better" repeated

ad infinitum on Am (good morning) but most interestingly in the almost subconscious

influence of Shoghi Effendi's prose style on Conrad's poetry. We find echoes of Bahá'í

prayers in "I'm alive, I was hopelessly dead" (cf. "I was as one dead, Thou didst quicken

me with the water of life"[12]) on Many weathers apart and "never dwell on your wrongs"

(cf. "I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life"[13]) on Am (good morning). Who

other than a Bahá'í would pen lines such as "we could do much better than being so

fettered"? – Shoghi Effendisms such as "fettered" are scattered throughout Conrad's

work. There is a strong element of dance in many of the tracks (as well as the overall

timbre), but this overall characterisation is somewhat belied by the ballads.

With a high

degree of electronic programming, Merz is no guitar band (for which I am grateful.) For

more detailed information on Merz's style and influences it is worth looking at his

website, www.merz.co.uk (where the Bahá'í mentions are sensitive and mature.)

The most refreshing aspect of Merz's music is the subject matter of his lyrics.

In a

medium foetid with paeans to loves lost, found and lost again, Merz contemplates such

esoteric themes as perseverance in a decaying world order ("I pray for strength in this

trashed world" in Engine heart) and the process of spiritual awakening and becoming a

Bahá'í (as heard on cc conscious and in particular the line "once they've got

your name
you're in wicked company"). Moreover, he makes comments that can surely only be fully appreciated by a Bahá'í audience with lines such as "dream of the Master, believe in the future" (Asleep) and the tongue-in-cheek take on Bahá'í marriages in Lovely daughter ("your father loves me your mother loves me you're very prestigious I've studied your family tree").

It remains to outline a few of the more interesting aspects of the album. Forsake is an example of a well-written, moving song – a three minute whisper whose elusiveness cannot be explained, notwithstanding the power of amplification. Merz's unusual voice has fascinated his listeners, and he uses its idiosyncrasies to great effect here; an example is the subtle ornamentation on the word "worry" at 0'42". Later in the song electronic modification endows the voice with an echo-style effect as if in a huge acoustic. The music is vocalise at this point (the text has already been sung), but greatly aids the emotive strength of the composition. One of the great strengths of the entire album is the highly sensitive arrangements. Merz's attention to surface detail puts many other artists to shame.

Starlight night is a curious track. The string writing is notably adept, with its use of portamento, tremoli, and pizzicato bass. Note the use of portamento to highlight the words "grey lawns." It is an obvious idea to use a string orchestra to accompany a Romantic lyric, but here it could be interpreted as a sort of postmodern nostalgia. The pathos of the music, the sense of a lost idyllic era, is enriched by the electronic effects, which add a dystopian touch. Taken together, this song is a rather complex text. Merz's voice merely adds to the mystery.

As a listener, I am always interested in the second listening. Will repeated hearings of a piece of music continue to hold interest? To create enduring musical interest, it is

important not only to achieve a high degree of technical expertise; the compositions themselves must be sufficiently complex or ambiguous as to provide an endless network of structural/expressive revelations. It is a delight to confirm that these Merz tracks seem to hold this promise. The songs combine both an attractive surface detail with intricate musical construction. In engine heart, there is an intricate relationship between the lyrics and the musical construction. The lyrics have imagery of automated emotion, the engine heart. The imagery is welded to the processes of the music, which is constructed from a number of basic instrumental layers that overlap and interrelate with one another. The haunting effect of this song is due partly to its harmonic structure, which is centred around D minor. The modal nature of the melodic lines stimulates musical memories that extend through cultures and centuries. This track, perhaps more than any other in the album, demonstrates a compelling balance of simplicity, intricacy, and ambiguity. ****

Notes:

Quoted in Peter Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987) 5.

Throughout these reviews I have adopted a ratings chart, ***** (masterpiece) to * (poor), similar to that used in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 8.

If this CD has a "non-Bahá'í" audience, the word "Tablet" may be confusing.

There is a wealth of discourse on the subjects of orientalism and representation in music. A useful introduction to this debate is Nicholas Cook, *Music – A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Some will doubtless feel that such analysis is misplaced nitpicking. There may be some truth in this, but I continue to reassure myself that the reason for illustrating such defects stems from a passionate belief that there exists an urgent need for greater critical acuity among the public when consuming cultural artifacts. We cannot expect masterful, pure forms of artistic discourse until we create a demand for higher levels of technical accomplishment.

I can envisage an excellent way to present future recordings of this nature. CD-rom, or DVD-rom technology would make it possible to provide a recording which can also be 'viewed' through a computer or television screen. In addition

to the music the screen would provide the original Arabic text, plus a transliteration and a translation. In this manner listeners who do not understand the original language will be able to follow the words, and by reading transliteration and translation at once will get closer to an understanding of the chanted act. Besides, it will reward repeated listening.

This Merz review was written with Shamim Razavi.

The Guardian newspaper, 29 July 1999.

We know that he is capable of this, see his Heathrow Terminal 1 Revisited, Seventh Valley, 1994, AVC250.

This is www.warble.com/bahai. I checked out this site and must admit that I don't feel it is a particularly good place for people to find out about the Faith. For example, one of the first pictures you get is a photograph of a youth-gang, with the caption, "Warriors of the Covenant." This website also contains articles on Huququ'llah and jokes about Persians. Outsiders will not only fail to understand these things but will probably feel alarmed and alienated. www.bahai.org would have been a much better choice.

This range of influences poses an interesting question as to how the nihilism of Trent Reznor's Nine Inch Nails (as heard on Merz' "asleep") can possibly combine with the Bahá'í teachings. The theoretical possibility of presenting the Bahá'í message through such abused media is to be relished. However, in practice, the diversity of styles makes for a somewhat uncomfortable sound. While the whole project is kept together by Conrad's larger than life personality and voice, one can't help feeling that this is more a sampler of Merz's prodigious talents than a holistic album-experience. In producing such a range of sounds and styles Merz has undoubtedly enchanted critics and the more discerning listeners but disappointing album and single sales reflect a failure to strike a chord with the wider listening public. While this reluctance to "sell out" is in itself no bad thing, old Conrad anthems such as "Awake" show that he is capable of combining popularism and spirit with a deft artistic touch if he so chooses.

Bahá'í Prayers (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 20.

Ibid., 152

Quotations are from a personal interview by the reviewer with Thomas Vinterberg.

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