

JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - REVIEWS MARCH 2009



To give it its full title, **'Xystus featuring the US Concert Orchestra presents Equilibrio, A Rock Opera'** (Sensory) is pretty self-explanatory. This is Xystus's third offering, following on from 'Receiving Tomorrow' (2004) and 'Surreal' (2006), but by far their most ambitious to date. The band hooked up with the Utrechtsch Studenten Concert – the oldest symphony orchestra in The Netherlands, apparently – in 2006 and 'Equilibrio' is the culmination of that collaboration. Conceived and performed as a stage production, 'Equilibrio' (like all rock operas) has a convoluted story running through it concerning good and evil, the quest for global domination and a struggle to save the world (so not unlike a James Bond movie really), but on CD the band have elected not to include the whole performance but just the edited highlights – presumably leaving out anything that's more visual than aural.

Aiding and abetting the band – founder members Bas Dolmans (guitar and vocals) and Ivo Van Dijk (drums), Mark Brekelmans (bass), Bob Wijtsma (guitars) and Joris van de Kerkhof (keyboards) – in this pretty exciting musical feast are Epica's Simone Simons as Lady Sophia and Orphanage's George Oosthoek (Death), as well as a couple of veterans of Dutch theatre Michelle Splietelhof and John Vooijs. 'Equilibrio' is a cleverly written progressive metal opus, exceptionally well

played and superbly produced, and as a body of work it hangs together beautifully – as a point of reference it's pretty much like Kamelot without the egos. 'Equilibrio' was performed several times last year and shot for DVD, and a friend who saw a recent production in Rotterdam (hiya, Astrid!) called it "magical". And you can't say fairer than that...

With 2007's 'The Last Sucker' bringing **Ministry's** recording career to a close, the industrial brutalists finally bow out with 'Adios...' (Premium/Soulfood). In equal parts sheer musical intensity and mindless acts of sonic violence, 'Adios...' was recorded live on last year's farewell tour and captures Al Jourgensen and his cohorts blazing a final trail across the industrial landscape. As with the rest of the band's catalogue, 'Adios...' is a 'Marmite' album – you either like it or hate it; there is no in-between, and you either hitch your wagon to the blasts of guitars and beats or hightail off the plain.

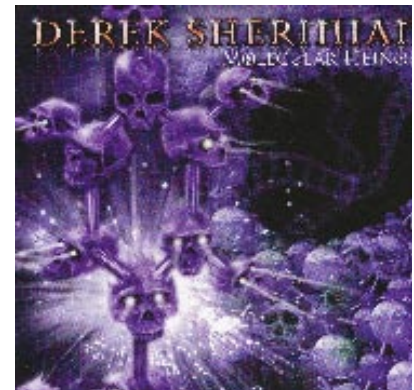
The opening five tracks are drawn directly from the last album and come up in sequence from 'Let's Go' to 'The Last Sucker' one-by-one – bam! bam! bam! – after which the band spiral off and do some digging into the past. The whole thing is as relentless as a panzer



division, with the Bush-baiting 'Rio Grande Blood' being possibly the most intense of a pretty frenetic clutch of material. A great souvenir if you were there,

and a piece of memorabilia if you weren't.

Derek Sherinian's 'Molecular Heinosity' (InsideOut) gets the thumbs-up for the quirkiest title this month. The one-time Dream Theater keyboard wizard's fifth solo outing features a 'who's who' with Zakk Wilde (guitar), Tony Franklin (bass), Brian Tichy (guitar and drums) and co-writer Virgil Donati (drums) featuring in the credits and Rusty Cooley, Brett Garsed and Taka Minamino all throwing their weight behind the guitars at one time or another. 'Molecular Heinosity' pootles along in a progressive instrumental kind of way pretty much as you'd expect it to, kicking things off with a sixteen-minute three-part epic entitled 'Antarctica'/Ascension'/Primal Eleven', but where it wins out over some other solo album showcases is

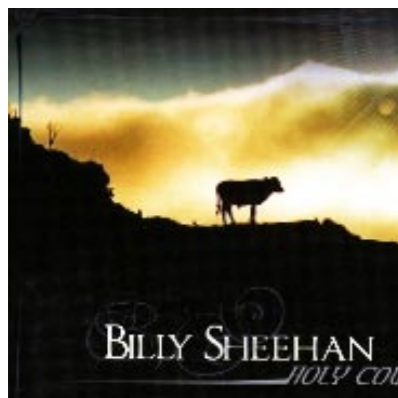


that the songs nimbly tread the fine line between out-and-out musical virtuosity and actually being tunes you can remember and hum along to.

The best of the nine cuts on offer for my money is the aptly-titled 'Wings Of Insanity', which ups the excitement quotient and goes for a spirited riff-led crash-and-burn. The really odd thing about the album though is that after thirty-two minutes of instrumentation, the final track 'So Far Gone' takes a real left-turn as Zakk Wilde serves up the only vocal track, a sub-Ozzy dirge (albeit one with some finely-orchestrated keyboards and a frenetic

mid-section workout). Incidentally, on the biog the bozo guitarist claims that "I'm usually passed out on the floor of his couch by the end of the sessions." So, nothing new there, then!

Also on the solo album trail is **Billy Sheehan**, probably the most famous bassist in metal. 'Holy Cow' (Mascot Records) is his third unaccompanied outing, and Sheehan does pretty much everything except make the tea. In fact, he probably did that as well while Ray Luzier was laying down the drum tracks. So although Billy Gibbons lobs in a some lead work on the not un-ZZ Top-ish boogie monster 'A



Lit'l Bit'l Do It To Ya Ev'ry Time', ex-Mr Big mate Paul Gilbert does the same on the more straightforward (and easier to type) pedal-to-the-metal instrumental 'Dynamic Exhilarator', album producer Simone Sello (a man whose credits stretch from here to Mars and back if you google him, including Hannah Montana!) burns the fretboard on 'Two People Can Keep A Secret (If One Of Them Is Dead)' and Dug Pinnock adds lead vocals to 'Turning Point', everything else – vox, guitars, bass and harmonica – is very much Sheehan on his lonesome. 'Holy Cow' is quite an eclectic offering which means that although there's something for everyone, not all of the fourteen tracks on offer may actually do it for you. That said, fans of out and out bass pyrotechnics will get off on the intro to 'Just Another Humanoid', the solo in the rather wacky 'Theme For An Imaginary Sci-Fi', and the fairly obvious 'Sweat

On An E String'; for the rest of us, the opening brace of Alice In Chains-y opener 'In A Week Or Two' and the aforementioned 'A Lit'l Bit'l...' and 'Dynamic Exhilarator', as well as the morbid instrumental 'Cell Towers' (another must for bass fans) make the album well worth having.

Two exciting offerings from Finland's Dynamic Arts Records extremely varied roster play us out... **Masterstroke** are at heart a power metal band through and through, as ably demonstrated on their excellent 2007 album 'Sleep'. For album #3 though, the Finnish five piece have infused their sound with touches that take things a little out of the ordinary – their biog nudges them towards Evergrey, and it's not hard to see why; the songs tend to be icebergs – what you can see (well, hear) on the surface appears quite straightforward, but there's so much more going on underneath. Title track 'As Days Grow Darker' is a prime example, as Nico Rauhakla's plaintiff vocals pile despair over a doom-laden chorus, and you'd



have to be pretty cold-hearted not to let it tug at your emotions. It's music with a message, but it's a message of hope from the very depths of darkness, bleak but kick-ass all the same. Right across the album, tasty lead and rhythm guitar runs courtesy of the aforementioned Rauhakla and Markus Kekoni dive and weave around a clutch of monster riffs driven by a powerhouse bass-drums combo of Marko Kolehmainen and Janne Juutinen, and the whole shooting match is embellished by Jussi Kulomaa's keyboards. With

eleven prime cuts on offer it's hard to pick any favourites, but if I was forced to choose I'd opt for the aptly-named 'Unstoppable', a true metal juggernaut with a middle eight as heavy as herd of buffalo but with a vocal hook that keeps you humming away for days on end.

And saving the best till last, **Silentium**'s 'Amortem' is a truly great album, and a real shot in the arm for anyone who was beginning to despair that



the metal female voices scene was running out of steam. With goth metal act Funeral being laid to rest in December 1995, keyboard player Sami Boman and vocalist Matti Aikio pulled together the first line-up of Silentium and the band released their first album 'Infinita Plango Vulnera' in 1999.

Over the years a few line-up changes have plagued them, but by the time the band signed to Dynamic Arts in 2005 to begin work on their fourth album 'Seducia' there was a solid line-up in place with vocalist Riina Rinkinen, guitarists Toni Lahtinen and Juha Lehtioksa and drummer Jari Ojala lining up alongside the aforementioned Aikio (now handling bass and male vocals) and Boman. Whereas 'Seducia' was a very good album, its successor 'Amortem' is a great album, a stunning piece of work, and an album of which the Finnish six-piece should be immensely and justifiably proud. This is female-fronted symphonic metal the way it should sound: fronted by the Rinkinen's breathtakingly beautiful voice, Silentium's music is equal

parts seductive and magical, hard-edged and exciting, and a great production job from Waltari's Kärtsy Hatakka puts the icing on the cake. Every song is a sure-fire hit, but they save the best till last, as 'La Fin Du Monde' – an epic in every sense of the word – builds and builds, with stunning orchestration and enchanting vocals, over seven-and-a-half minutes, leaving your senses stunned and overwhelmed as its dying notes fade away. I love this band; I think they're fabulous, and I think I have already found my album of the year: 'Amortem' is possibly one of the best albums I have ever heard; it really is as simple as that.