

Accordion Illusions – CD Review

I like this new CD by Stas Venglevski a lot. First of all, it's beautifully recorded with an accurate accordion sound. The interplay between the two musicians is happy and heartfelt and at times they mesh like a single player with four hands. Mike Alongi is brilliant and a perfect partner for Stas.

The pieces (excepting *Dark Eyes*) are original compositions by Stas; a majority of them French waltzes. What Stas accomplishes with this old genre is to inject freshness and enthusiasm into it. Usually when we hear musette waltzes they're either recordings from a bygone era or renditions by a performer looking through an accordion darkly. But on this CD Stas is playing his own stuff and makes us feel it's new again and not the ghosts of accordions past. Stas has a gift for melody and his interplay with Mike Alongi orchestrates the music nicely.

My reference to the CD's "accordion sound" wasn't idle; this CD is *fisarmonica pura* (maybe Italian will distinguish what I'm trying to say). The sound is without any of the harshness, reverb or would-be organ sonorities too often heard -- and the timbres and artistry goes straight to your heart the way only an accordion can when it's sounding its best and wedded to the music. The musette tonalities were so good that anyone who suffers fear and loathing of detuning will have a road to Damascus experience.

In the middle of the recording resides a nice Children's Suite - it comes as a break, giving the CD a structure. Stas and Mike play the suite beautifully — the mimetic movements representing birds, elephants, mice, cats, the circus, etc., emerge with humor, virtuosity and artistry. Stas' suite is not (nor does it intend to be) a giant-killer in child's clothing like we've heard from Semenyov, Schedrin, Solotajow and others. The suite is a delightful essay that uses the accordion to charmingly create mimetic miniatures. It's very enjoyable and I even thought of it as a weapon for ripping a few electric guitars from young people's sticky imaginations.

The only piece that isn't an original is *Dark Eyes*; here Stas performs a series of his own variations. His individual takes are excellent, but I thought a stronger overall form was needed, lest the variations seem like gymnastics - that's an eight, there's a nine; bravo: ten! Würthner's variations on the same tune pull the parts into a cohesive experience, which I think is necessary unless the variants are only harmonic cousins like Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. I felt Stas just needs some rearrangement and overall dramatic development.

At this point I may mention a problem — although on this CD it's less intrusive. Stas is a precise and exciting player with few peers; however, he tends to short-change notes. He does it so well that it's usually thrilling. Interestingly, when you see him play in person he creates an illusion of phrasing with his body. But a recording obviates kinesthetic aids and one-way *rubato* can undermine a sense of emotional depth. Such an impression would be unfortunate, because Stas has tremendous emotional resources. On *Accordion Illusions*, I'm glad to say his heartfelt qualities come across better than ever. I think the presence of Mike Alongi restrained Stas' *prestomania* and the restraint carried over into his solos; particularly *Fond Recollections* (a moving tribute to his father) — a piece that shows a fine sense of emotional phrasing. *Fond Recollections* is one of his best solos.

Running through the selections: *Lindy's Song* opens the CD with a bright, almost contrapuntal waltz that sets the tone of much that follows in Stas' dip into the demimonde of musette. *Lindy's Song* is dedicated to a deceased friend (Lindy Kao of Chicago), as is the next piece, *Always and Eternity*. The theme of *Always* is appropriately poignant, but I question the *basso continuo* throughout the first half. I know a dirge-like effect was intended, but the bass-chord 2/4 sustained notes seemed overstated. Later in the piece the bass line is played on a higher register and there are tempo changes. I wish such variations had appeared earlier. It's a lovely theme.

Let's Play Together is a delightful waltz where the performers romp along a neat melodic line and regularly tease it with a dissonant chord. It's instantly memorable, like many of this CD's tunes. Time and again Stas proves a fine melodist, which is an uncommon talent — one that many would-be composers pretend they could tap if they wanted (not true).

Latino Moment is a brief jazz *bossa nova* and Stas displays (solo) a solid command of rhythmic phrasing and impeccable timing. It's over too soon, but that only makes repeating it inevitable.

Short Visit is subtitled, "Two friends getting together, both eager to contribute to the conversation"; it's a waltz time dialectic that's as fresh and satisfying as a warm baguette.

Ecstasy Tango is a viejo tango (pre-Piazzolla) opening with clipped rhythm and proceeding along traditional lines. It could easily take its place with Rodriguez' *La Cumparsita* - no mean feat.

French Moment (solo) is a nice waltz and it's a good tune, but it shows Stas coming very close to cutting notes too short. On the positive side, his chromatic runs are clean, fast and thrilling; however, after awhile too much seems sacrificed for fireworks. The piece is well worth listening to repeatedly — but even at 2:18 there's nowhere to go and redundancy peeks over the horizon. When technique isn't the handmaiden of meaning, we may be in an arena more athletic than aesthetic.

Midnight Waltz is a complete contrast to *French Moment*; it's a slow, heartfelt and very ethnic Moldavan waltz with the two accordions weaving a spell of simplicity and sincerity. The piece almost sets a scene: it's late night in a peasant house on the Steppes with everyone a bit drunk and thinking of lost love. Two peasants pull out their instruments and fall into a fit of Slavic melancholy that will last the whole night and make the simplest things profound.

Autumn Illusions is another fine waltz with the accordions echoing each other and interweaving beautifully, the effect is almost orchestral, like we're in Paris hearing Joseph and Tito Colombo or Bras and Garrigoux and their orchestras, bringing off one of the album's strongest entries in the genre.

Musette Caprice (solo) is capricious and demonstrates Stas' technical prowess with runs and trills, but here I feel he's constantly threatening to overrun expression — even the trio seems rushed. I enjoyed it, I admired the technique, but I thought Stas should reconsider.

Coming again to *Fond Recollections* it's clear what an emotional impact Stas can deliver when he interiorizes the music and shapes his phrasing with feeling. Perhaps when Stas has a story to tell, he finds his deeper self. I can appreciate that his abundant technical skill can be a siren call, but it mustn't become a trap. In light of that, it was wise of Stas to play with Mike Alongi, a hugely talented player who in many ways centers him. Mike functions like the exquisite quartet did on the *STAS!* CD and adds his own deeply felt artistry.

Stas is an exciting player and someone who has shown himself with this CD to be a fine composer. I liked all of his compositions, finding them melodic and memorable. I liked, too, that this was a pure accordion CD; that is, no other instrument could assay these pieces as well — no violin, no cello, no piano - Itzhak, Yo Yo, Vladimir, nope, nope, nope. I often thought as I listened to his compositions that Stas could be a nascent Andre Astier (a great composer who Peter Soave terms the Chopin of the accordion). I liked the promise of that thought. It's a relief to hear music dedicated to the instrument on which it's played and that that instrument is an accordion. Free-reed enthusiasts are too often forced to do aesthetic somersaults — of loving the accordion and suppressing thoughts like, "This would be better on an organ or violin." *Accordion Illusions* is music that no one on any other instrument could usurp. Usually, this kind of aesthetic relief only occurs

when interlopers play Piazzolla, "Yo! Yo Yo, you did good, but a cello does not a bandoneon do, the shoe's on the other ear."

Well, do your other ear a favor and buy Stas' CD and let *fisarmonica pura* waltz over you knowing that Itzhak on a good day couldn't move you half as well. Minor point: I liked the design of the case a lot; I only wish it had a velcro tab to keep it closed.

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