

Confessions of a Convinced

About a year ago I pondered the idea of collecting materials for a new book, "Meeting Expectations: How to convincingly pretend you like Xmas music", in the counselling series "Success by Conformity". But before I actually could take arms against inundation by a flood of hackneyed sounds, unexpected events caused this enterprise to turn awry its currents, the events that eventually turned into the Cyberpluckers Christmas CD project.

Now it is November again, again the shops prematurely offer Xmas goods, again the myriads of little lights are appearing in the streets and the city gets blotted in silver and gold, in red and green and white, and again the Muzak has that sticky icing. But now I'm armed against these troubles. For now I can go home and recuperate by listening to the genuine, honest, deeply felt, at times even highly artistic, in a word: real, stuff, a real medicine, found in more than forty tracks on the 2 CD set "Strike the 'Harp — An Autoharp Celebration".

What may seem a dangerous or at least a strange idea to start with, namely the requirement that all contributors have to feature the autoharp in their pieces, actually furnishes the reliable string on which to thread all these wonderful pearls for a sparkingly brilliant necklace.

Well, honestly, not all the pearls are flashing with artistry as much as, for example, "I Saw Three Ships" (track 3 on CD 2) — some are just warming the heart with a cosy glow like, for example, "Away in a Manger" (track 15 on CD 1). But the mixture of music on these CDs has wide variety in more than just one dimension! Being an autoharper myself, I'm nevertheless amazed at the wide spectrum of playing styles presented on these CDs. The musical expressions range from the charmingly old-timey sound, reminding of the old black boxes, that can be heard on one of my favourite tracks, "Fuyu Geshiki" (track 17 on CD 2), surprisingly produced from a modern instrument, to the jazzy sounds of pieces like "The Christmas Song" (track 17 on CD 1) and "Sleigh Ride" (track 15 on CD 2) or the funky soul music in "Please Come Home for Christmas" (track 7 on CD 1) over different Country Music or folk style approaches as well as modern traditional and classic traditional ones in the majority of pieces, an example of the latter being, quite a feat, the "Christmas Concerto" part in track 24 on CD 1.

And then the singing! Christmas celebration is essentially celebration of a message, a message of liberation, hope and reassurance. Instrumental music conveys such message, I think, basically by recalling in the listener the words once sung or the feelings once felt at these occasions. Examples for the latter are provided by the contributions from Japan and, most strikingly, the original composition "Christmas Night" (track 22 on CD 1), which worked (for me, anyway) even without knowing Sue's words for her song, which are printed in the booklet that comes with the CDs. There seem to exist melodic patterns in occidental music that evoke these specific sentiments — an idea new to me but probably already well researched by music psychologists.

But the Christmas message can be told anew, or new aspects of it, only in the words of songs. It is interesting to note that most singers chose to present rather new songs, and quite a few even self-penned ones. Since not all the songs can be commented on, let me give as favourite examples for an old song "The Christ Child's Lullaby" (track 22 on CD 2), for a new song "Make My Present Small" (track 2 on CD 2) and for an own song, because of its musical originality, "Nativity" (track 20 on CD 2). I'm feeling a bit uneasy listing just these examples where there are so many gems to find here, so let me add as an example of beautiful harmony singing "Star Bright" (track 12 on CD 2) and, for its light-hearted spirit, "Christmastime in Oregon" (track 9 on CD 1).

However, being not a singer myself, the tracks appealing most to me are the solo autoharp pieces, of which quite a few are to be found on these CDs. It would be too hard to give just one example and so I confine myself to saying that all of the well-known names found in the solo department surpass the listener's expectation!

Finally, now, I cannot keep quiet about one weak point: the booklet that comes with the 2 CD set. Sure, it is put together with love and care, beautifully designed, easy to read, edited to give interesting information on each of the contributions and the contributors — but one important point is missing.

Initially I explained that these CDs are really a medicine. But the booklet, serving as its instruction leaflet, omits the side effect warnings, inexcusably. In order that other persons can avoid the incidents I suffered from, let me here add a few warnings of dangerous side effects:

- 1) Don't plan to have these CDs as background music while doing chores in the house. Sooner or later you will leave your work, being drawn irresistibly near to the speakers of your CD player, getting helplessly immersed into the music, while your household slowly decays.
- 2) Even if you manage for some time to prepare a meal while listening to the CDs, avoid mincing herbs and onions to the driving rhythm of "Winter Wonderland" (track 12 on CD 1), for even if you don't hurt yourself, when the CD player proceeds with the next track, "Blue Christmas", you'll never know whether the tears in your eyes come from the onions or from Neal's heartbreaking song.
- 3) Never go to bed when having just listened to the Caribbean sound of "Mary's Boy Child" (track 23 on CD 1). I did and I awoke next morning with this song still on my mind and feeling the urgent need to immediately learn to play it myself, risking arriving too late at the workplace! It took nearly insurmountable efforts to avoid disaster.
- 4) Never listen during breakfast to the haunting "Il Est Ne, Le Divin Enfant" (track 19 on CD 1). This is an "earworm" as persistent as can be, following one through all the day. (This earworm even survived listening to the mighty organ like sounds of "Adeste Fideles" (track 20 on CD 1)!)!

There may come reports from other patients as well. That is of course only to be expected with such a strong medicine. But carefully taken, it will certainly help you, very likely, moreover, restore your soul's health fully and delight your heart.

Cologne, November 2009
Siegfried Knöpfler

(Added [2009-11-28](#): Awoke this morning early, still too tired to begin work, not tired enough to fall asleep again; so I drew my comfortable chair into optimal position, started the CD player, closed my eyes and listened intensely to this collection: Well, I must beg pardon from everyone whose contribution I did not mention in my review from earlier this month, they all deserve being listed for providing such beautiful music in such a variety of skilful ways of bringing the autoharp, literally, into play!)