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## Syzygy - Cosmos & Chaos: 20th Anniversary Compendium

**Musical Style:** Progressive Rock

**Record Label:** Independent

**Year Released:** 2014

**Tracks:** 16

**Running Time:** 73:35

**Produced By:** Carl Baldassarre

**Country Of Origin:** USA

**Artist Website:** Syzygy

**Rating:** 80%



When you think of progressive rock, the first thought that jumps into your head may not be instrumental music. The fact is that most of the leading players within the progressive rock scene - regardless of era - have a signature vocalist that helps lend it a distinct and recognizable sound. Consider, for instance, how prime Kansas featured Steve Walsh and early Genesis Peter Gabriel. Likewise, many identify Rush with Geddy Lee, while Yes is best known for Jon Anderson and Emerson, Lake & Palmer for Greg Lake. The modern progressive metal scene follows a similar pattern, with Dream Theater and vocalist James LaBrie often mentioned in the same sentence and same applying to Symphony X and Fates Warning with Russell Allen and Ray Alder, respectively. Other recent progressive rock groups also manifest this, as Transatlantic and Spock's Beard attest from the presence of Neal Morse and The Flower Kings from Roine Stolt and Porcupine Tree from Steven Wilson.

But what about instrumental progressive music? You really have to dig deep to name names, but Planet X and Ozric Tentacles come to mind, as does the early material of The Enid and Sky. Other notable acts include Future Kings of England, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Scale the Summit and Fourth Estate. I am sure there are other bands worth noting, allowing for the fact I am not a connoisseur when it comes to the instrumental progressive side of things. Of course, none of said bands mentioned are household names either- at least in comparison to those better known from the previous paragraph. This lends to my credence that vocal based progressive rock allows for a 'best of both worlds' scenario when factoring how it places a high priority on a bands instrumental sound to begin with, which is in no way intended to denigrate those groups taking a specific instrumental progressive heading. Or perhaps the fact is that vocal based music provides the better fit for commercial success, keeping in mind artists that take an instrumental stance (regardless of genre) make no less the artistic and creative statement.

Enter Cleveland, Ohio based Syzygy and its (mostly) instrumental progressive rock release from 2014 entitled Cosmos & Chaos, The 20th Anniversary Compendium. Originally the groups full-length debut from 1993, Cosmos & Chaos has been 'gently re-mastered' with several of its original twelve tracks either re-interpreted or re-programmed in order to allow for a "(rediscovery and retrieval) of these first creative fruits (that have been) polished into what we believe is a delicious musical offering", as noted by guitarist Carl Baldassarre. Bonus material comes in the form of two songs recorded in the mid-eighties when the group went under the moniker Witsend Quartet and featured Baldassarre along with keyboardist Sam Giunta. Witsend Quartet later morphed into Witsend Trio when Paul Mihacevich took over on drums (it

was said core of musicians that performed the bulk of the original Cosmos & Chaos material). Final two bonus tracks are Syzygy live interpretations of Witsend Trio numbers with Mark Boals (Yngwie Malmsteen, Joshua Perahia) on lead vocals.

Musically, Cosmos & Chaos presents with a joining of lighter and heavier material that runs the gamut from slightly progressive to that over the top so, with majority of it instrumental. The groups press material sums things up best when suggesting that it “(draws) from their training in the romantic era school of the 19th century (but is) expressed through a highly-refined, 20th century rock dialect”. To better align with this objective, The 20th Anniversary Compendium track-listing has been re-ordered to arrange the “pieces from the smallest miniature solo works, to duets and on through the ensemble pieces by the Witsend Trio to create a satisfying collective composition with true coherence and unity which had been previously hidden” (as taken from the albums liner notes).

Accordingly, Cosmos & Chaos opens to four classically influenced guitar and piano solo ‘Miniatures’. The first, “Cosmos”, features acoustic guitar carrying its short (1:18) length, while second, “Poetry in B Minor”, is also abbreviated (1:13), but upheld by piano. Acoustic guitar returns to gently highlight “Guitar Etude No. 1” (2:21) and “Guitar Etude No. 2 (4:10). Impression left is relaxed and laid back but exquisitely done in allowing the individual instrumentation to stand out.

A pair of ‘Duets’ follow that flow with every bit the tact and grace. “Tautology” warmly maneuvers to a rich interweaving of bass and acoustic lacings with occasional hints of electric guitar. The jazzy piano at the start of “The Tone Rowe” soon gives way to symphonic keyboards, guitar feedback and ominous rhythm guitars. Similar to the “Miniatures’, I find the classical aspects to the ‘Duets” refreshing; those interested in a musical divergence outside the hard music scene would be well served by starting here.

‘Ensemble’ works featuring the Witsend Trio round out the final six tracks. “Voyager” comes across as a progressive rock fusion instrumental along the lines of Visual Cliff and Fourth Estate. You will encounter plenty of time signatures at hand, with distinguished and palatial upbeat moments trading off with those on the slower and contemplative side of things. Baldassarre rounds things out with his jazzy lead guitar abilities.

Progressive side to the group further manifests itself on seven minute “Closure”. The song starts to classical keyboards before morphing into an upbeat rocker, lively and mirthful as added keyboards play a highlighting role in aligning with fusion based guitars and pronounced groove underpinnings. I can see Neal Morse doing something like this. In similar fashion, aptly entitled “Chaos” runs its two minutes to a discordant cacophony of different bits and pieces of varied songs and sound effects strung together.

“Strange Loop II” takes a heavier rocking stance with rhythm guitars playing a forthright role and drums making every bit the pronounced statement. The catchy riffs and rhythms lend to the infectious basis at hand. Maintaining the heaviness is “Mount Ethereal, as guitars churn and storm in swarthy fashion, while keyboards give rive rise to an eerie if not disquiet milieu. The ethereal soloing is every bit captivating. What the two have in common is allowing the group to exhibit its choice musicianship, particularly that of air tight, assertive drummer Paul Mihacevich.

“Circadian Rhythm”, first of the vocal tracks, provides three and a half minutes of stately acoustic rock textured with keyboards. The layered melody cannot help but draw you in. Immediately standing out about the groups vocal material is how it gives rise to classical to renaissance medieval qualities but within a progressive framework. As a matter of fact, if members of the Fellowship of The Ring had gotten together to make music, the Cosmos & Chaos vocal tracks are a good indicator of what it might sound like.

Bonus material starts with “Opus No. 1”, a predominantly hard rocking instrumental in which heavysset guitars cement themselves to the front of the mix and drums are of the battering nature. At a moment’s notice, however, the song can descend into easygoing passages in which tranquil guitars hold sway. Taking the energy to the next level, “Opus No. 2” highlights a plethora of danceable groove - this one will have you tapping your toes in no time - in which explosive bass and quirky keyboards play lead roles. If these two are any indicator of what Witsend Quartet are capable then I want to hear more!

Closing things out are live vocal renderings of “Strange Loop II” and “Mount Ethereal”. Former still brings its recognizable at once melody (refrain is curt and to the point but catchy at the same time) while upholding the same “classical to renaissance medieval” qualities. Note how both drum and keyboard solos enhance the live feel at hand. “Mount Ethereal” also shines live, starting with its jam based two minute instrumental opening but also including the remaining six in which a sublime statement is made from its inherit darker qualities and second extended instrumental jam (this one improvisational and with jazzy bass and lead guitar). Earthy and mid-ranged vocalist Mark Boals perfectly aligns with the progressive setting at hand.

Of note is how in no way does production sound dated despite the age of the material, with re-mastering playing a key role in this regard in allowing instrumentation to shine accordingly. Packaging is a thing of beauty in including an immaculate six-panel digi-pak with riveting cover artwork. The enclosed two-page insert includes vintage band photos along with pertinent details about both the background to Cosmos & Chaos and the bands history.

Lyricaly, what I said in my review of the groups 2012 live album A Glorious Disturbance still holds true: “Lyrics, most often spiritually tinged but occasionally drawing upon medieval high fantasy themes, do a good job of reflecting the group’s faith”.

Cosmos & Chaos, 20th Anniversary Compendium cannot help but impress with its attention to detail in terms of song re-ordering and selection of bonus material, re-mastering and re-imagining of key tracks and packaging. Correspondingly, the album provides an insightful look into the musical history of one of the more overlooked and vastly underrated players - whether under the name Witsend Quartet, Witsend Trio or current moniker Syzygy - within the progressive rock scene. Those into progressive music with an instrumental flair (although not without its choice vocal moments) would do themselves a favor by checking out Cosmos & Chaos, The 20th Anniversary Compendium.

Review by Andrew Rockwell (Rating: 8 out of 10)

Track Listing: “Cosmos” (1:18), “Poetry In B Minor” (1:13), “Guitar Etude No. 1” (2:21), “Guitar Etude No. 2” (4:10), “Tautology” (3:33), “The Tone Row” (2:13), “Voyager” (3:25), “Circadian Rhythm” (3:36), “Closure” (7:14), “Strange Loop II” (6:22), “Mount Ethereal” (7:34), “Chaos” (1:47), “Opus No. 1” (3:46), “Opus No. 2” (6:01), “Strange Loop II” (6:58), ‘Mount Ethereal” (8:03)

Musicians: Carl Baldassarre - Guitars & Vocals, Sam Giunta – Keyboards, Paul Mihacevich - Drums & Percussions, Al Rolik - Bass Guitar & Vocals, Mark Boals - Guest Vocals, Gary Priebe – Bass, Roman Zmudzinski – Drums

<http://www.angelicwarlord.com/reviews/s/syzygy14.html>